

Giants of the Deep

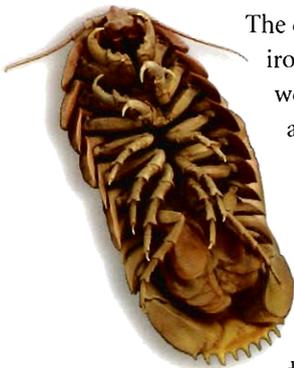
At Depth, the Pill-Bug-Like *Bathynomus* Takes on Colossal Proportions

BY JOEL W. MARTIN

In the deep sea, some animals grow to sizes that dwarf their shallow-water counterparts. The reasons for the size difference are still largely a mystery.

Among the Crustacea—ocean-dwellers with jointed shells such as crabs and lobsters—no deep-water giant is better known than *Bathynomus giganteus*. This enormous crustacean—some up to 18 inches long—is closely related to the common “pill bug” you may have seen in gardens around Southern California. Species of *Bathynomus* are found in most of the world’s oceans, with about 14 species worldwide. But, because of the depths in which they are found, we know very little about their natural history. They appear to both hunt and scavenge, feeding on other deep-sea invertebrates and fishes. The Museum’s collection of Crustacea contains several of these rare giants of the deep.

Bathynomus giganteus from above and underneath (below left).



The deep sea represents one of the last frontiers on our planet. Yet ironically, we know more about the surface of the moon than we do about the ocean floor. This is because extreme pressures and temperatures make exploring the ocean depths difficult and expensive. Still, we are learning more about this environment every day.

Although we once thought of the deep as a barren wasteland and shamelessly dumped pollutants into the ocean believing they would do no harm, we now know that the deep sea harbors untold numbers of species that we have yet to discover and study. How we treat the ocean floor affects not only the health of the world’s oceans and fisheries, but also our own health and well-being.

DR. JOEL W. MARTIN IS THE MUSEUM’S CURATOR OF CRUSTACEA AND CHIEF OF THE DIVISION OF INVERTEBRATE STUDIES. AN EXAMPLE OF THE GIANT “ISOPOD” *BATHYNOMUS* IS CURRENTLY ON DISPLAY IN THE MUSEUM’S SECOND-FLOOR DIRECTOR’S GALLERY.