

[From Fall 1997]

## **Ivory-nut Palm Seeds Found on Fisherman Island**

A kidney-shaped seed, mahogany colored, and the size of an old-fashioned watch, helped get Columbus off on his first voyage. The seed, known as the sea heart (*Entata gigas*), is still carried by ocean currents from the American tropics to landfalls in the U.S. and Europe.

A member of the bean family, it has a thick outer seed coat that is impervious to sea water and an internal air pocket that allows it to float. A number of other tropical seeds have similar properties, are found on beaches from Florida to Cape Hatteras, and occasionally appear on more northern beaches in the U.S. Aided by the Gulf Stream, many reach the coast of Western Europe.

Columbus had been given a sea heart found on a beach in the Azores. He regarded it as a clue that land lay to the west, since no European plants produced seeds that looked like this one.

Back in 1971, someone found a tropical drift seed on Kiptopeake Beach and gave it to Gary Williamson. It turned out to be from an ivory-nut palm (*Phytelephas macrocarpa*). Later, when Gary was with the Virginia Division of State Parks at Kiptopeake State Park, he and his wife Phyllis found two of these seeds on Kiptopeake Beach - one in 1991 and one in 1994. Phyllis found another one on Fisherman Island in 1996. I found one on Wise Beach, near Fisherman Island, in March of this year, and another on Fisherman Island in May. Brian Petty, from the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge, also found one in May. That's seven I personally know of.

The big question is how did these seeds reach beaches in a limited area on the eastern side of the Chesapeake Bay? None of these seeds had been previously found north of Florida, and no other tropical drift seeds have ever been found in the vicinity of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel area.

The likely answer may be that the seeds were lost from a vessel carrying the seeds to a button manufacturer. The vegetable "ivory" inside the seeds is used to make buttons and artifacts such as chessmen. The product is so like elephant ivory that it is used as a substitute for elephant ivory - whose trade is regulated by international agreements.

Most of the seeds found so far are empty shells without the "ivory." Those with the "ivory" are much heavier and soon sink in sea water. The heavy ones probably wash ashore during storms. We hope to find more of both kinds and get to the bottom of this riddle.

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