

**The balance of nature : a series of ecological subjects. 4, Portuguese
Man-of-War.**

Contributors

C.L. Bencard Ltd.

Publication/Creation

London : C.L. Bencard Ltd., [between 1955 and 1965?]

Persistent URL

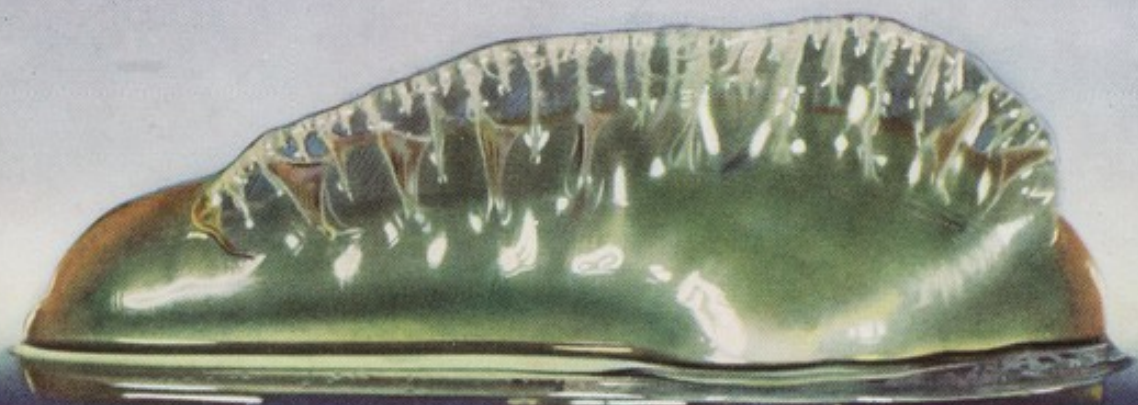
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The Balance of Nature: 4

A series of ecological subjects

The observation of sea life has, not unexpectedly, revealed the strangest examples of animal interdependence, but few are more curious than Physalia, the Portuguese Man-of-War. Its quaint name is a happy one for what is in fact an offensively and defensively equipped floating community.

For Physalia is no mere jellyfish. It is hardly a single animal at all. It is a social unit of different sorts of individuals (polyps) which work together in unison for the benefit of the unit, or "colony", as a whole.

There are other examples of "colonial animals", of which corals are the most familiar. But the Portuguese Man-of-War is almost exceptional in the extent of specialisation (polymorphism) achieved by its members, and the degree to which they have sacrificed their individuality to the needs of the "community".

Some of them have become tentacle-like weapons of attack and defence (the dactylozooids), some perform a nutritive function (gastrozooids) and others are reproductive (gonozooids).

One forms the float (pneumatophore), with an erectile crest or "sail", by which the colony is propelled by the wind, trailing below it the fiercely stinging tentacles for the capture of prey—the pelagic fishes of the open ocean.

Physalia must certainly be one of the most primitive and interesting examples of co-operation in the animal world.

Adapted from a photograph by Dr. D. P. Wilson, F.R.P.S.

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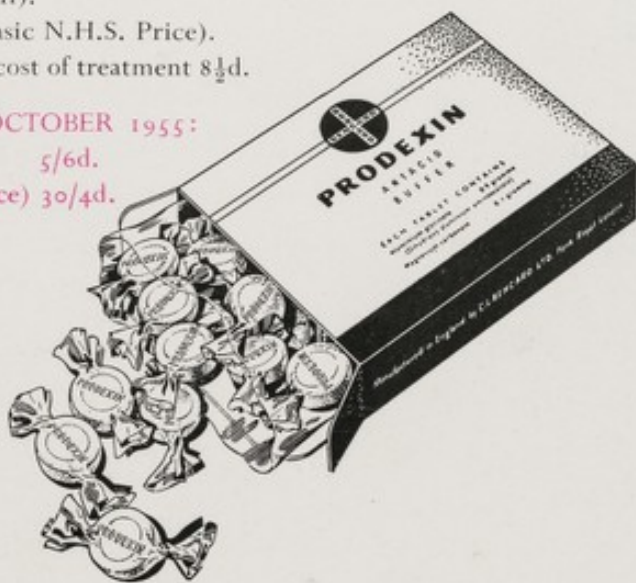
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Printed in England