



## Review

## Structure and mechanical properties of selected protective systems in marine organisms

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## ABSTRACT

Marine organisms have developed a wide variety of protective strategies to thrive in their native environments. These biological materials, although formed from simple biopolymer and biomineral constituents, take on many intricate and effective designs. The specific environmental conditions that shape all marine organisms have helped modify these materials into their current forms: complete hydration, and variation in hydrostatic pressure, temperature, salinity, as well as motion from currents and swells. These conditions vary throughout the ocean, being more consistent in the pelagic and deep benthic zones while experiencing more variability in the nearshore and shallows (e.g. intertidal zones, shallow bays and lagoons, salt marshes and mangrove forests). Of note, many marine organisms are capable of migrating between these zones. In this review, the basic building blocks of these structural biological materials and a variety of protective strategies in marine organisms are discussed with a focus on their structure and mechanical properties. Finally, the bioinspired potential of these biological materials is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The study of biological materials within materials science provides the nexus where the fields of physics, engineering, chemistry and biology converge to understand and harness the vast body of knowledge that can be learned from the natural world. The findings of this research provide for better biological understanding of the complex and unique organisms and structures in nature. In addition, this knowledge provides inspiration for the peripheral fields of bioinspired materials, where synthetic structures are inspired by nature, and biomaterials, where materials and structures are designed for optimum compatibility with biological systems.

While still bound by the same physical laws, biological materials are starkly different from synthetic ones. To succinctly describe the unique qualities of biological materials, seven interrelated features have been identified (inspired by Arzt [1] and expanded by Meyers et al. and Chen et al. [2–5]). These characteristics are: self-assembly, multifunctionality, hierarchical design, hydration effects, mild synthesis conditions, evolutionary design and environmental constraints, and self-healing capability. While they apply throughout biology, marine organisms face a number of specific environmental constraints not shared by their terrestrial counterparts. These marine specific conditions include: complete hydration, and variation in hydrostatic pressure (0.1–100 MPa), temperature (–2–38 °C), salinity (34–36 ppt), as well as motion from currents and swells. These conditions vary throughout the ocean, being more consistent in the pelagic and deep benthic zones while experiencing more variability in the nearshore and shallows (e.g. intertidal zones, shallow bays and lagoons, salt marshes and mangrove forests). Of note, many marine organisms are capable of migrating between these zones, forcing them to be dynamic through many environments. Through evolution, these environmental constraints have shaped the form of all structural marine biological materials.

The combination of these qualities provides for high levels of complexity and performance within marine biological materials. This is enacted through hierarchical structural design elements [6]. The toughness of biological materials and their constituents is plotted as a function of the elastic modulus in Fig. 1. The high toughness of biopolymers together with the high strength of biominerals is combined into many composite biological materials (e.g. bone and mollusk shell) [7]. When compared to engineered synthetic materials, metals and ceramics are capable of providing mechanical properties up to an order of magnitude higher than biological materials. However, biominerals (natural ceramics) and biopolymers (natural polymers) are mechanically comparable with many synthetic engineering composites and engineering polymers, respectively [5].

Biological materials can be systematized along different classification methods. Naleway et al. [6] recently proposed eight structural design elements as a new paradigm for identifying common features in different organisms. Using a similar methodology, the organisms and structures in this manuscript can be divided into four classes based upon their biomechanical function:

1. Crushing resistant structures: found within the exoskeletons of mollusks, crustaceans, diatoms and coccolithophores, and the skeletal armor of the seahorse.
2. Flexure resistant structures: found within sea sponge spicules, the spines of sea urchins and porcupine fish.
3. Piercing resistant structures: found within the scales and scutes of fish as well as marine skeletal armors.
4. Impact resistant structures: found in the dactyl clubs of the mantis shrimp.

There are protective structures that provide effective resistance to multiple forms of stress, however here we aim to highlight the most

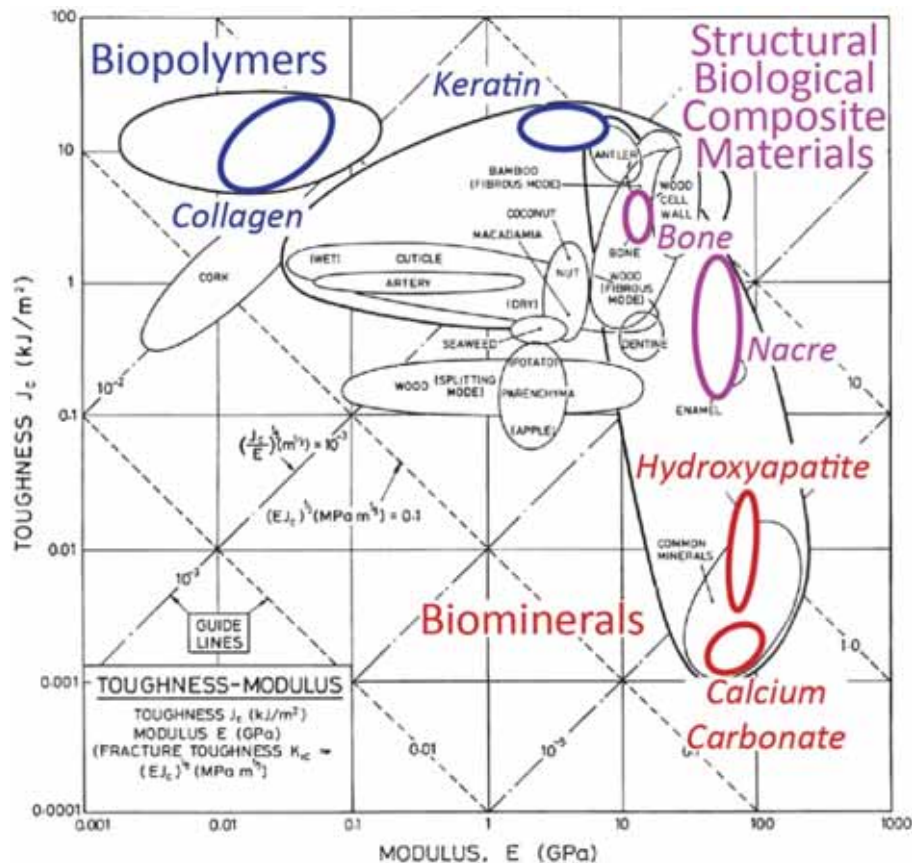
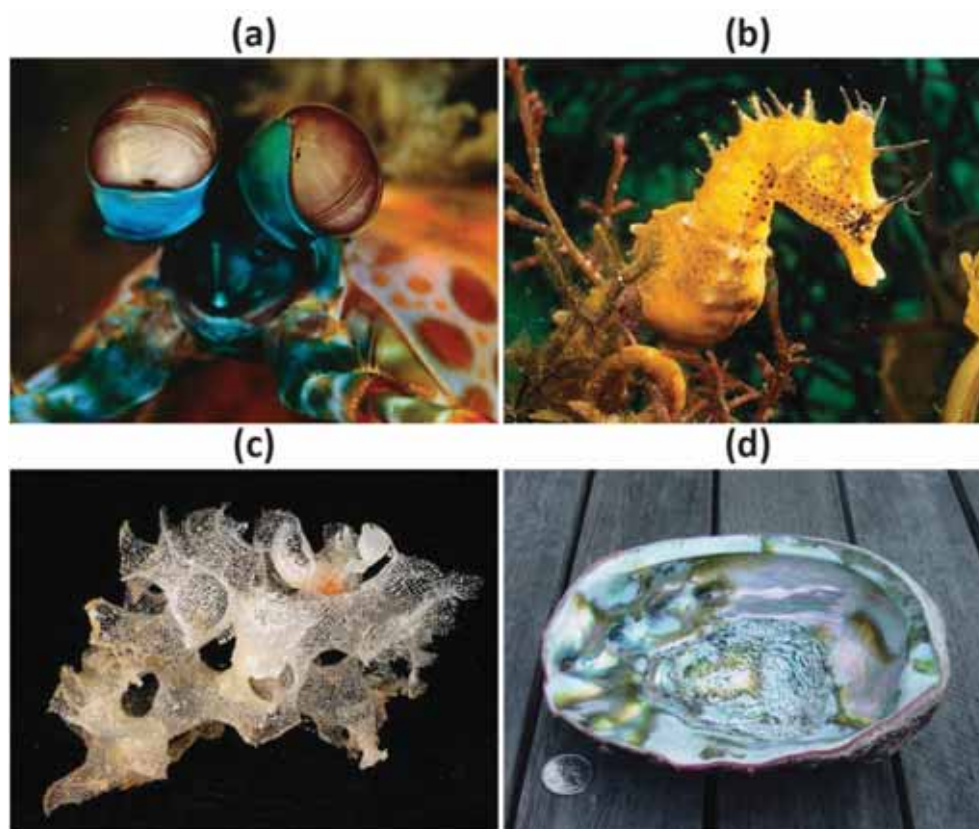


Fig. 1. Toughness as a function of elastic modulus for biological materials. Adapted from [7].



**Fig. 2.** Examples of some spectacular marine organisms. (a) *Odontodactylus* (mantis shrimp); (b) *Hippocampus* (seahorse); (c) *Farrea* (honeycomb glass sponge); (d) *Haliotis* (abalone). Adapted from: (a)–(c) [nationalgeographic.com](http://nationalgeographic.com), (d) [wikipedia.com](http://wikipedia.com).

remarkable defenses of individual organisms. We describe notable examples of organisms within each of these classes focusing primarily on systems that have a protective exoskeleton, or shell, that surrounds a soft body. The approach used here provides a valuable perspective on how the materials science methodology, connecting the structure (at various levels, from nano- to macro-) and mechanical properties, can enhance our understanding of nature and guide us to novel bio-inspired designs.

Recent analysis suggests that ~2.2 million of the world's ~8.7 million eukaryotic species reside within the oceans and that 91% of these marine species have yet to be discovered and catalogued [8]. These organisms (Fig. 2 shows some examples) offer an amazing array of traits and properties due to the design of their complex biological materials. The lessons learned from the structural biological materials of marine organisms have stimulated a number of bioinspired designs including high toughness materials inspired by abalone nacre [9], fiber optic

wires inspired by sea sponge spicules [10,11] and body armor inspired by fish scales [12,13]. Given the complex structures that have already been discovered and the immense number of organisms that have yet to be investigated, the study of structural biological materials of marine organisms offers much interest to the scientific community.

## 2. Basic building blocks of marine organisms

While there is a large variety of marine biological materials, the building blocks of these structures are quite simple. These consist of two basic classes: biopolymers (collagen, keratin and chitin) and biominerals (hydroxyapatite, calcium carbonate and amorphous silica being the principal ones). While these materials are simple, they are combined in a significant level of complexity. This can often allow for mechanical performance which exceeds that of the individual constituents [9]. Focusing on marine organisms, the mechanical properties of

**Table 1**  
Mechanical properties of marine biological material constituents.

Material	Elastic modulus ( $E$ ) (GPa)	UCS <sup>a</sup> (MPa)	UTS <sup>b</sup> (MPa)	Example biological organisms	Reference
<i>Biopolymer constituents</i>					
Type I collagen	0.05–1		20–100	Fish scales	[30,217,218]
Chitin	1–20		200	Mollusk and crab exoskeletons	[219]
Keratin	0.1–5		60–200	Hagfish slime, squid beaks	[30]
<i>Biomineral constituents</i>					
Hydroxyapatite	50–112	30–115		Fish scales	[217,218,220]
Calcium carbonate	50–150	100–200		Mollusk and crab exoskeletons, sea urchin spines	[7]
Amorphous silica	60–75		155–200 <sup>c</sup>	Sea sponge spicules, diatom exoskeletons	[221,222]
Magnetite	72			Chiton teeth	[223]

<sup>a</sup> Ultimate compressive strength.

<sup>b</sup> Ultimate tensile strength.

<sup>c</sup> Values taken in 3-point bending mode.

biological material constituents (Table 1) and a variety of biological materials (Table 2) are highlighted. The wide range of strengths and moduli that marine organisms employ in their biological materials in order to best thrive in their environment are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

In general, there are two basic forms of biological materials: (1) non-mineralized biological materials that consist of only biopolymers and usually take the form of directionally aligned fibers (e.g. aligned in parallel or helical patterns such as Bouligand configurations) and (2) mineralized biological materials which are composites composed of both biopolymers and biominerals arranged into hierarchical structures. In this review we focus upon protective and/or load bearing structural biological materials, most of which are mineralized.

The combination of high compressive strength of biominerals and high toughness of biopolymers is the key to incorporating these generally mutually exclusive properties (strength and toughness) [14] into many structural biological materials. The balance between these properties has been shown to relate to the mineral content where an increase relates to an increase in strength and elastic modulus with an accompanying decrease in toughness [15]. Table 3 displays the relative proportions of these phases in structural biological materials of marine organisms. Additionally, mammalian bone and human dentin are displayed for reference.

### 2.1. Biopolymers

Biopolymers make up the compliant phase in structural biological materials. In marine structural biological materials, the principal biopolymers are collagen, keratin and chitin. Collagen-based cartilage is also present in some marine organisms. Generally fibrous in nature, these structures can be highly anisotropic and tend to display varying mechanical properties depending upon their arrangement, alignment and organization. Additionally, they are generally stronger in tension than compression.

Collagen is one of the most important biopolymers found throughout the metazoan diversity and is the basic component in skin, tendon, bone and cartilage [2,16]. While there are no fewer than 29 different collagen types, the majority of collagen found in organisms (~90% of collagen found in the human body) is type I collagen [16]. Within marine organisms, type I collagen has been extracted from the tissue of sea urchins [17,18], octopus [19], starfish [20], jellyfish [21,22] and a number of fish species [23–25].

Type I collagen takes the form of fibers and displays four levels of hierarchy from the molecular- to macro-level (Fig. 3) [16]. At the molecular level, triple helix segments (Fig. 3a) assemble into tropocollagen molecules (Fig. 3b) that further assemble into collagen fibrils exhibiting

**Table 2**  
Mechanical properties of selected marine biological materials tested in a quasi-static, hydrated state.

Biological material	Elastic modulus ( $E$ ) (GPa)	UCS <sup>a</sup> (MPa)	UTS <sup>b</sup> (MPa)	Reference
Abalone shell (nacre)	60	235–540	140	[102,224]
Crab exoskeleton (leg)	0.47–0.52	57	30–31.5	[133,143,144]
Crab exoskeleton (claw)	4.9			[142]
Mantis shrimp dactyl club	75			[204]
Fish scale ( <i>Pagrus major</i> )	2.2		93	[64]
Diatom exoskeleton	22.4	330–680	155–560	[121]
Sea urchin spines	21	42–49		[163,168]
Conch shell	30	180–310		[104]
Hagfish slime	0.006		180	[225]
Sea sponge spicules	36–38		593–880 <sup>c</sup>	[221,222]

<sup>a</sup> Ultimate compressive strength.

<sup>b</sup> Ultimate tensile strength.

<sup>c</sup> Values taken in 3-point bending mode.

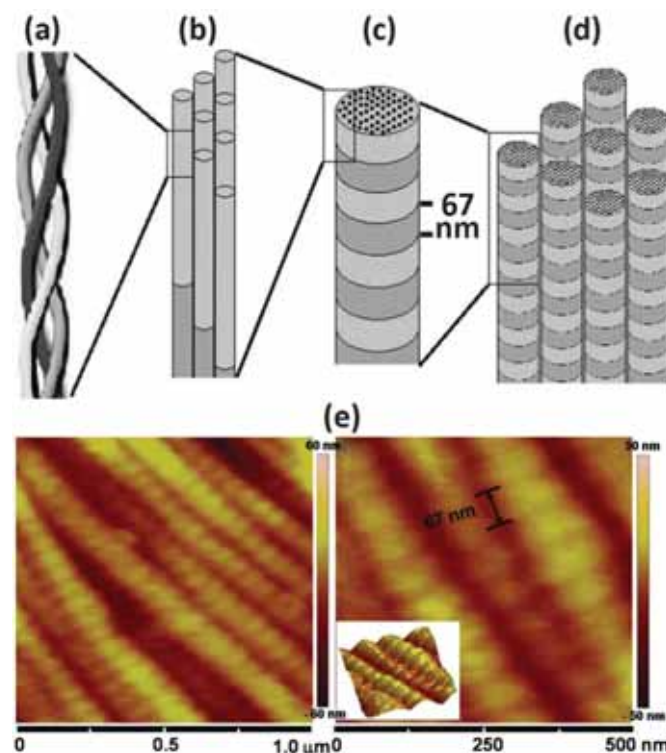
**Table 3**  
Relative weight proportions of biomineral and biopolymer constituents for marine organisms.

Organism (sample type)	Ratio of biomineral: biopolymer (by weight)	Reference
Snow crab (claw)	3.8:1	[133]
Snow crab (carapace)	1.6:1	[133]
American lobster (carapace)	1.7:1	[226]
Cod (clythrum bone)	6.4:1	[227]
Seahorse (bony plates)	1.5:1	[150]
Red abalone (shell)	19:1	[96]
Sea sponge (spicules)	3:1	[82]
Red seabream (fish scales)	1:1.2	[64]
Barramundi (fish scales)	1:1.5	[228]
Longhorn cowfish (fish scales)	1:2	[12]
Cow (femur bone)	2.6:1	[52]
Human (dentin)	1.8:1	[4]

diameters of 50–200 nm (Fig. 3c) [26] that finally agglomerate into collagen fibers with diameters of 0.5 to 3  $\mu\text{m}$  (Fig. 3d) [16]. The offset of the tropocollagen molecules, diagrammed in Fig. 3c and imaged on collagen fibrils from a fish scale through atomic force microscopy (AFM) in Fig. 3e, creates a characteristic banding, periodically spaced at 67 nm, on the collagen fibrils [3,26–29].

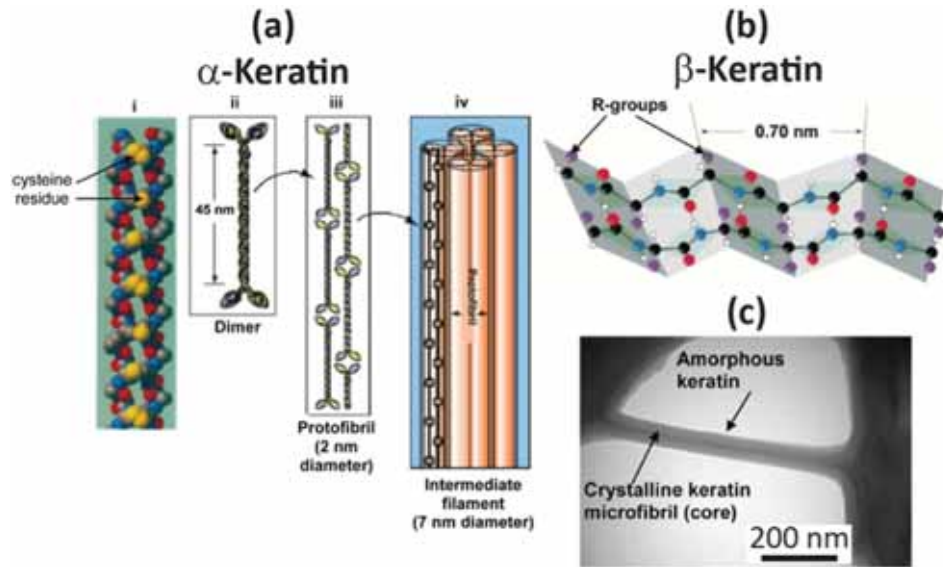
Given their fibrous nature, the mechanical properties of collagen-based materials are highly anisotropic. Collagen structures tend to be highly oriented in order to provide optimized strength and mechanical properties along specific directions [7]. Collagen also often serves as a basic structural template for biomineralization [28].

Keratin is an integral element in the outer covering of many vertebrates and is commonly found in skin, hair, nails, beaks, turtle shells and hagfish slime [30–32]. There are two types of keratin:  $\alpha$ -keratin (Fig. 4a) that forms in helices and  $\beta$ -keratin (Fig. 4b) that forms in

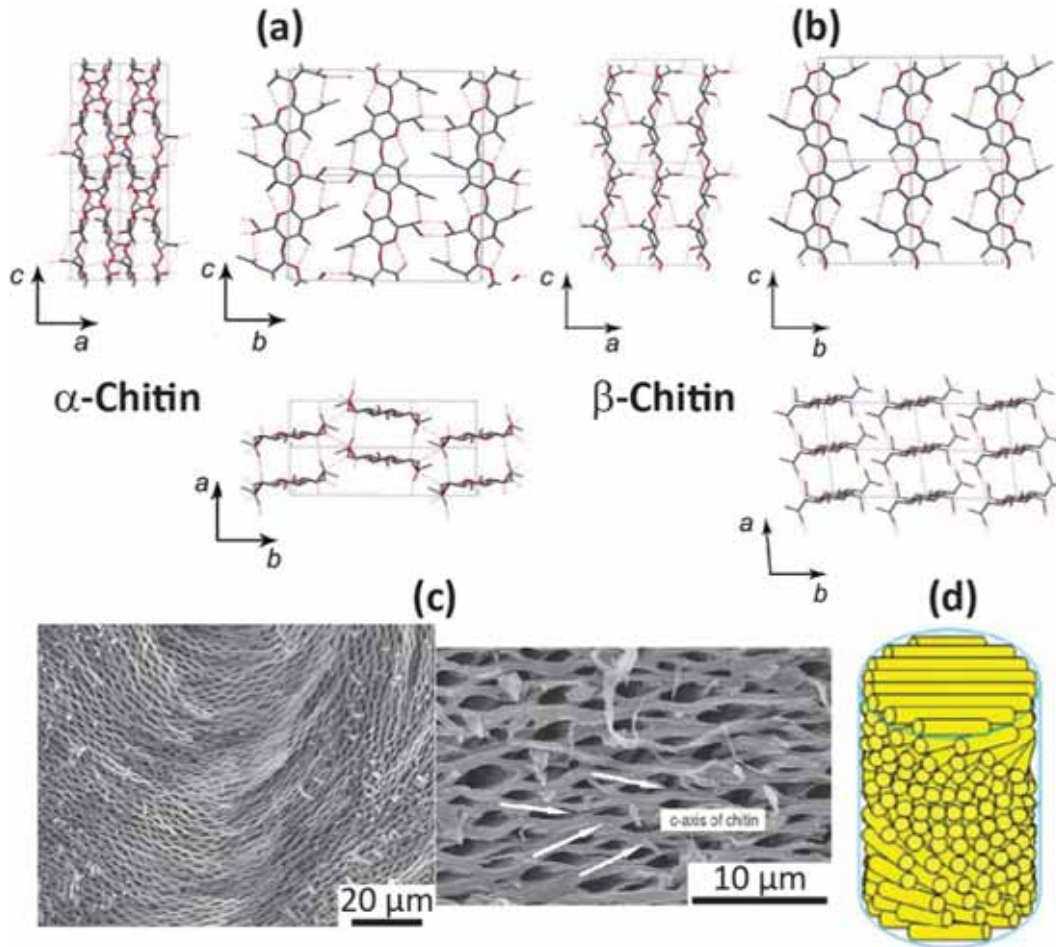


**Fig. 3.** Diagram of the hierarchical structure of collagen fibers. (a) Triple helix segments; (b) tropocollagen molecules; (c) assembled collagen fibrils with the characteristic periodic 67 nm spacing highlighted; (d) collagen fibers assembled from multiple collagen fibrils; (e) atomic force micrograph of a collagen fibril from fish scales with the characteristic spacing highlighted.

Adapted from: (a)–(d) [16], (e) [29].



**Fig. 4.** Structure of keratin. (a) Hierarchy of  $\alpha$ -keratin showing the assembly from two polypeptide chains (i) to a fibrous structure (iv); (b)  $\beta$ -keratin that shows a pleated sheet shape that consists of antiparallel chains with R-groups that extend between sheets; (c) TEM micrograph of  $\alpha$ -keratin from a sheep horn that displays the composite structure of a crystalline keratin core within an amorphous keratin matrix. Adapted from: (a) [30,209], (b) [30], (c) [30,210].



**Fig. 5.** Diagram of the structure of chitin. (a) The molecular structure of  $\alpha$ -chitin viewed from three different directions; (b) the molecular structure of  $\beta$ -chitin viewed from three different directions; (c) aligned microstructure of mineralized  $\alpha$ -chitin fibers from the exoskeleton of a lobster; (d) diagram of the helical Bouligand structure of many chitin materials, such as crustacean exoskeletons. Adapted from: (a) and (b) [41], (c) [211], (d) [4].

pleated sheets [30]. The fibrous structure of  $\alpha$ -keratin is similar to type I collagen as both consist of hierarchically assembled molecules, two polypeptide chains in  $\alpha$ -keratin (Fig. 4a) and three tropocollagen molecules for type I collagen (Fig. 3a). However, once the cells that produce keratin (keratinocytes) assemble, they die, resulting in a non-vascularized “dead” tissue that is in contrast to the extracellular “living” matrix of collagen, into which live cells are embedded [30]. Additionally, keratin can be considered a composite material, similar to synthetic semi-crystalline polymers, consisting of fibers of crystalline keratin reinforcing an amorphous keratin matrix (Fig. 4c) [33]. While they have different forms, both  $\alpha$ -keratin and  $\beta$ -keratin have similar numbers of polypeptide chains, suggesting that they both originate from the same microfibril structure [34]. Within marine biological materials  $\alpha$ -keratin is much more common than  $\beta$ -keratin.

Quite similar to type I collagen, the mechanical properties of fibrous  $\alpha$ -keratin are highly anisotropic [35,36]. Given this alignment,  $\alpha$ -keratin is capable of much higher mechanical properties parallel to the fiber direction than the more isotropic  $\beta$ -keratin [30]. Additionally, the composite nature of keratin results in a roughly inverse relationship between the stiffness (elastic modulus) and the volume fraction of amorphous matrix (less-crystalline composite) (i.e. as the content of the amorphous keratin increases, the bulk keratin's stiffness decreases) [30,37]. This relationship between crystallinity and elastic modulus is also common to semi-crystalline synthetic polymers [38,39].

Chitin is found throughout a number of organisms and is the most abundant natural polysaccharide [40]. In marine biological materials it is mainly associated with the exoskeletons of marine crustaceans and mollusks and the beaks of squids and octopuses [40–42]. In squid beaks, chitin is cross-linked (also known as sclerotization or tanning) with proteins, forming a tough material despite lacking biominerals [42]. Two main varieties of chitin,  $\alpha$ -chitin and  $\beta$ -chitin (Fig. 5a–b), are commonly present in organisms, with  $\alpha$ -chitin being the most abundant. Specifically,  $\alpha$ -chitin is characteristic of crustacean exoskeletons (Fig. 5c) [28] while  $\beta$ -chitin is found in the pens of squid (the internal rigid structural element that supports the squid's mantle) [43] and the spines of diatoms.  $\beta$ -Chitin is less crystalline than the more common  $\alpha$ -chitin and is metastable, being able to transform into stable  $\alpha$ -chitin

if induced by the intercalation of molecules into its lattice [28]. Chitin chains are hierarchically organized into fibers of more than 1  $\mu\text{m}$  in diameter [28].

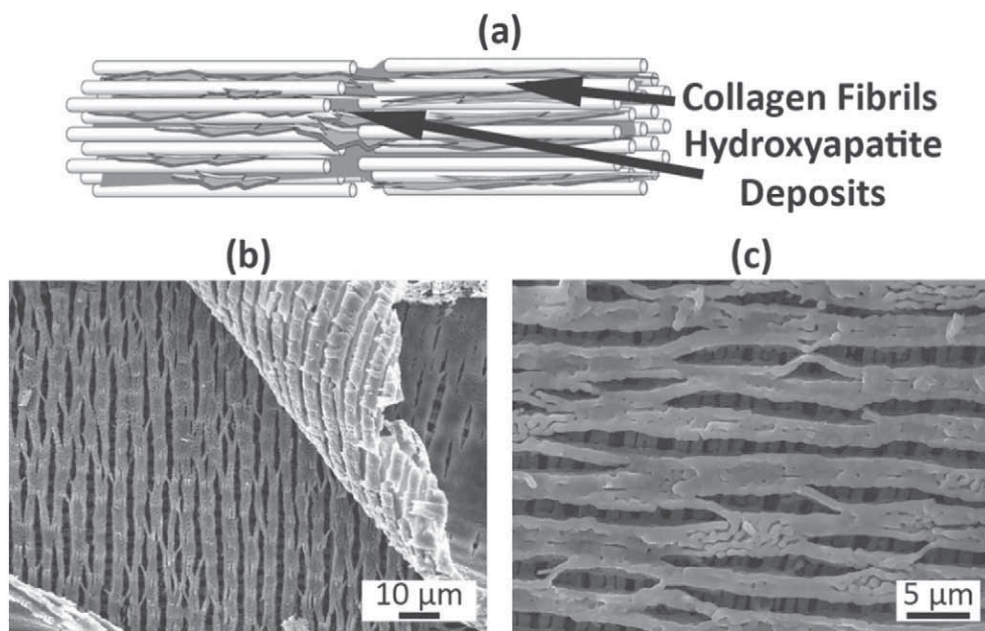
While chitin itself is often in a fibrous form, in most organisms it is aligned in helicoidal planes to form a twisted plywood or Bouligand structure (Fig. 5d) [4,44–47]. This structure provides for more in-plane isotropy, allowing for the use of relatively un-mineralized chitin in squid pens and crustacean exoskeletons while still maintaining strength and toughness [4].

Cartilage is generally an internal support structure in organisms and is comprised of a number of fibrous proteins (collagens) along with polysaccharides and peptides [48]. Cartilage can be either mineralized or non-mineralized and is most commonly associated with internal structures such as the skeletons of sharks, rays and chimaeras [49]. However, it is found within a number of mollusks, including cephalopods (e.g. squid) and gastropods (e.g. snails), generally within their fleshy tissues [50,51]. Mechanically, cartilage is a viscoelastic material that is highly variable in strength depending upon the level of mineralization [48].

## 2.2. Biominerals

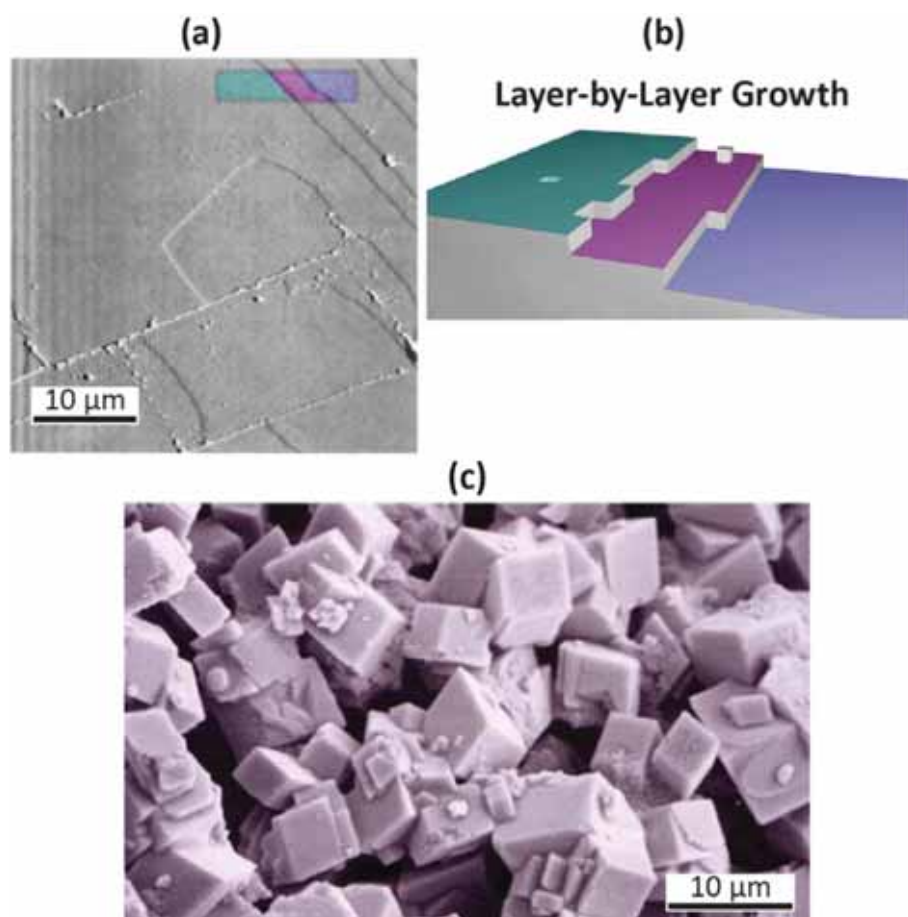
Biominerals compose the rigid phase of structural biological materials. Biological composites are generally formed through biomineralization of biopolymer templates with minerals, primarily hydroxyapatite, calcium carbonate and silica [28]. However, magnetite ( $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ) and iron sulfide ( $\text{FeS}$ ) are also found within a select number of organisms [3].

Non-stoichiometric hydroxyapatite ( $\text{Ca}_{10}(\text{PO}_4)_6(\text{OH})_2$ ), where 4–6% of the phosphate groups are replaced by carbonate groups [52], constitutes the biomineral phase of bone, teeth and most fish scales [13, 53–56]. Given its presence in the bones and teeth of humans, it has garnered a significant amount of research in the biomedical field, producing a number of bioinspired designs with a focus on biomedical materials and implants [9,57–61]. Biogenic hydroxyapatite often forms around a collagen scaffold that directs growth (Fig. 6a) [62]. As shown in Fig. 6b–c for fish scales, this causes the hydroxyapatite to take on



**Fig. 6.** Growth and structure of hydroxyapatite and, in the case of bone, carbonated hydroxyapatite. (a) A diagram of the biomineralization of hydroxyapatite where collagen (or other biopolymer) fibrils template hydroxyapatite crystal growth; deproteinized tissue (by heating at 1473 K, images of tissue from a sea bream (*Pagrus major*)) at (b) low and (c) high magnifications. While these samples consist of only mineral, they still show a preferential orientation to their original collagen template.

Adapted from: (a) [62], (b) and (c) [64].



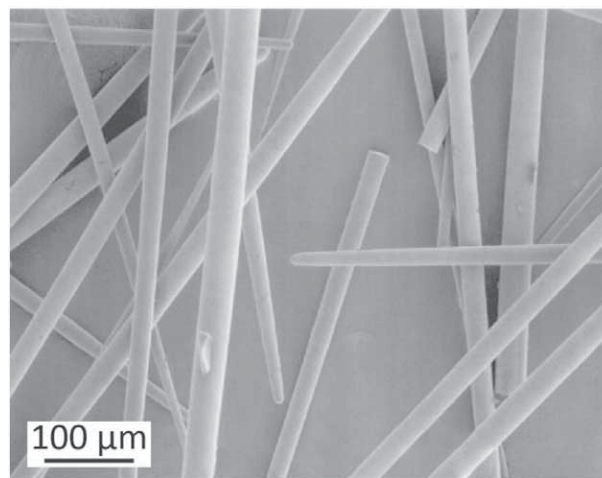
**Fig. 7.** Crystalline calcium carbonate structure. (a) Calcite showing the characteristic layered structure of crystallized calcium carbonate. Layers are color coordinated with (b); (b) this characteristic structure is caused by layer-by-layer growth as dictated by the diagrammed Kossel model; (c) particles of calcium carbonate (calcite) showing a faceted structure. Adapted from: (a) and (b) [68], (c) [212].

the structure of the templating constituent, in these cases type I collagen fibers [62–64]. As a result, the reactivity of the templating constituent has a significant effect on the adherence and structuring of hydroxyapatite in any biological material [65].

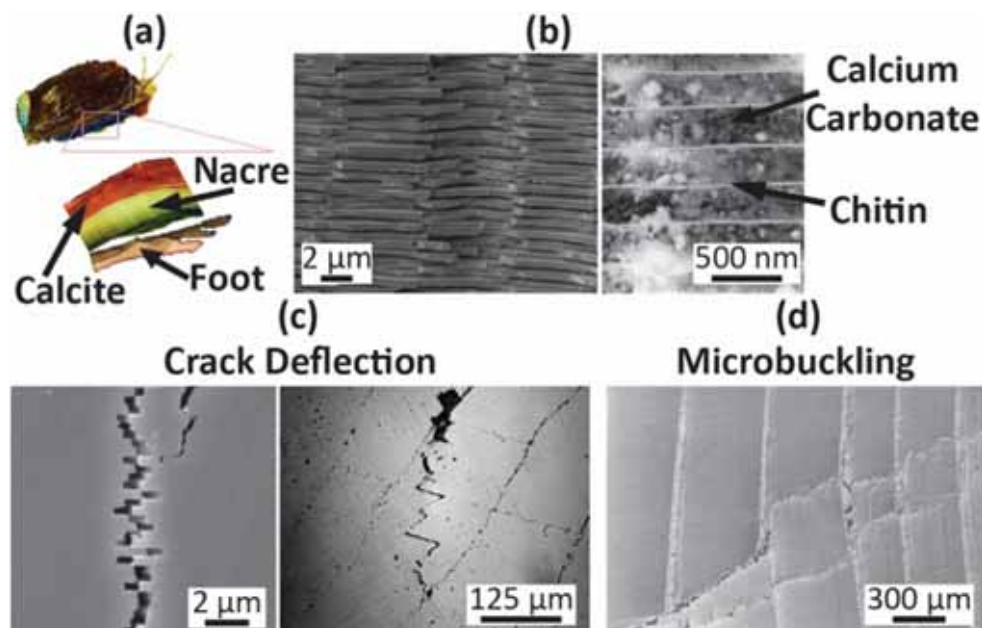
Calcium carbonate ( $\text{CaCO}_3$ ) is the biomineral phase in many of the highly rigid marine biological structural materials such as the nacre of abalone, conch and other marine mollusks as well as urchin spines and some crustacean exoskeletons [66–69]. Amorphous  $\text{CaCO}_3$  is employed as a precursor to crystalline structures that generally take the form of aragonite (orthorhombic) or calcite (rhombohedral) depending on the growth parameters [68]. Biologically this differentiation is realized through the use of biopolymers and macromolecules as templating agents [69–71]. In structures such as mollusk nacre and sea urchin spines these crystals develop according to Kossel's model that states that growth occurs in a layer-by-layer fashion where new layers are started from island nucleation that grows in a plane until a new surface is completed (imaged in Fig. 7a and diagrammed in Fig. 7b) [68], which results in faceted crystal structures (Fig. 7c). This is due to the fact that growth occurs preferentially along surfaces with steps where more than one attachment is ensured, thus lowering the total energy of each atomic attachment event. Additionally, in many marine organisms (e.g. sea urchins, corals and crabs) other minerals such as magnesium and bromine are incorporated into  $\text{CaCO}_3$  crystal structures to improve the mechanical strength [72–75].

Silica ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ) is most commonly expressed within the biological materials of sponges and diatoms [76–81], and is generally found in its amorphous form [76–79]. The biomineralization of  $\text{SiO}_2$  follows different processes in different organisms. In sponges and diatoms the

biomineralization of  $\text{SiO}_2$  occurs similarly to hydroxyapatite and  $\text{CaCO}_3$  by forming an essential skeleton to provide both structure and mechanical strength [4,79,82]. Given its amorphous nature, and unlike  $\text{CaCO}_3$  and hydroxyapatite, there is no dominant structure of biological  $\text{SiO}_2$  with it appearing in multiple forms (e.g. spicules, Fig. 8) in a single organism [76,83]. These silica structures are templated by biopolymers into the structural elements of many marine organisms.



**Fig. 8.** Example spicule structures of amorphous silica employed in sponges and diatoms. Adapted from [82].



**Fig. 9.** Structure and toughening mechanisms of marine mollusk nacre (imaged species: *Haliotis rufescens* and *Strombus gigas*). (a) Cross-section of the abalone shell displaying the calcitic and aragonitic (nacre) layers; (b) the brick-and-mortar structure of nacre displaying calcium carbonate plates with mortar-like chitin layers; (c) crack deflection toughening mechanism that causes a more tortuous crack path; (d) microbuckling toughening mechanism in compression of the calcium carbonate plates that creates significant additional surface area. Adapted from: (a) [213], (b) [93,102], (c) [96], (d) [102].

Magnetite ( $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ) is found within a number of marine bacteria [84, 85] as well as sea turtles [86,87] and some crustaceans [88].  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  is rarely employed as a broad structural material in organisms, but rather within individual organs for a specific function. However, it is present as a structural material in the teeth of chitons, where it is employed in order to increase hardness [89]. Given the magnetic properties of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , it is most often employed as a bio-compass allowing marine organisms such as lobsters and sea turtles to orient themselves to the earth's magnetic field and travel without other sensory cues [84,85,88, 90].

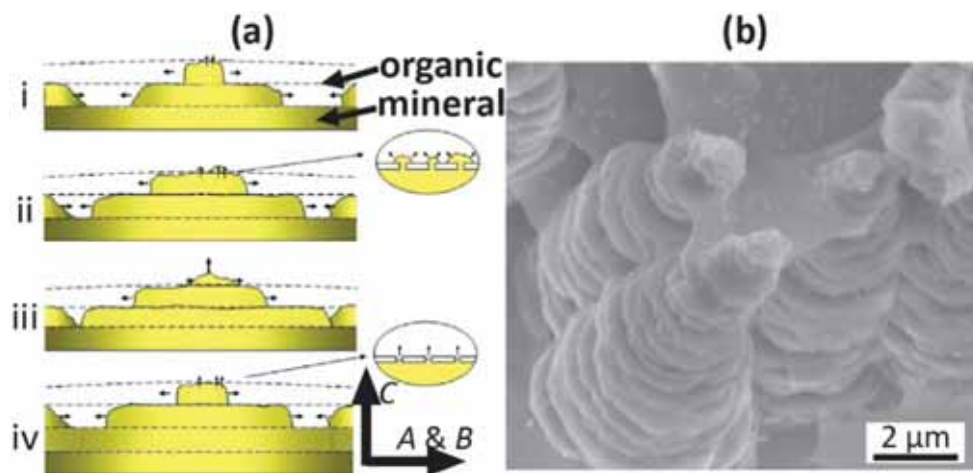
Though uncommon, iron sulfide ( $\text{FeS}$ ) is found within deep sea organisms: commonly bacteria, tube worms and a few gastropods, where the  $\text{FeS}$  is made available by deep sea vents [91,92]. It is often deposited on or absorbed into organisms and incorporated into their dermis to create an outer  $\text{FeS}$  shell [92].

While the biominerals described above are the most common, there are around sixty currently described minerals in biological materials. These include carbonates (e.g. vaterite), phosphates (e.g. struvite, francolite), halides (e.g. fluorite), sulfates (e.g. gypsum, barite), oxides and hydroxides (e.g. goethite, ferrihydrite) and sulfides (e.g. pyrite) [4].

### 3. Crushing resistant structures

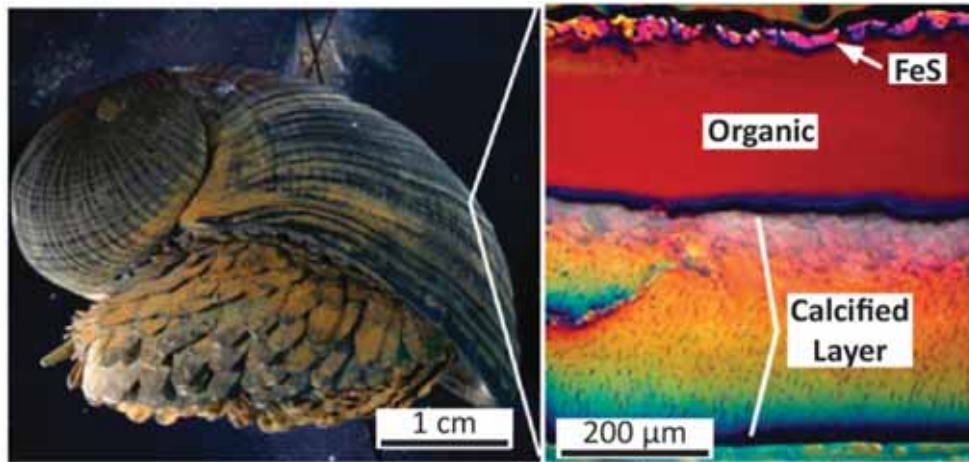
#### 3.1. Mollusk shells

Many mollusks protect themselves from predators with hard external shells composed of a brittle external calcite layer and a tough internal layer composed of aragonite, chitin and proteins, also known as nacre or mother-of-pearl (shown in Fig. 9a for the example case of abalone) [67,93–95]. These shells forfeit all flexibility in favor of high



**Fig. 10.** Process of nacre growth in the shell of abalone (*Haliotis rufescens*). (a) Diagram of the process of nacre growth (progressing from top to bottom) where calcium carbonate mineral shelves assemble through an organic membrane. Growth occurs laterally (A and B directions) while it is retarded longitudinally (C direction) by deposition of a porous organic layer (dashed lines); (b) SEM image of nacre displaying the growth peaks. Adapted from: (a) [97], (b) [99].





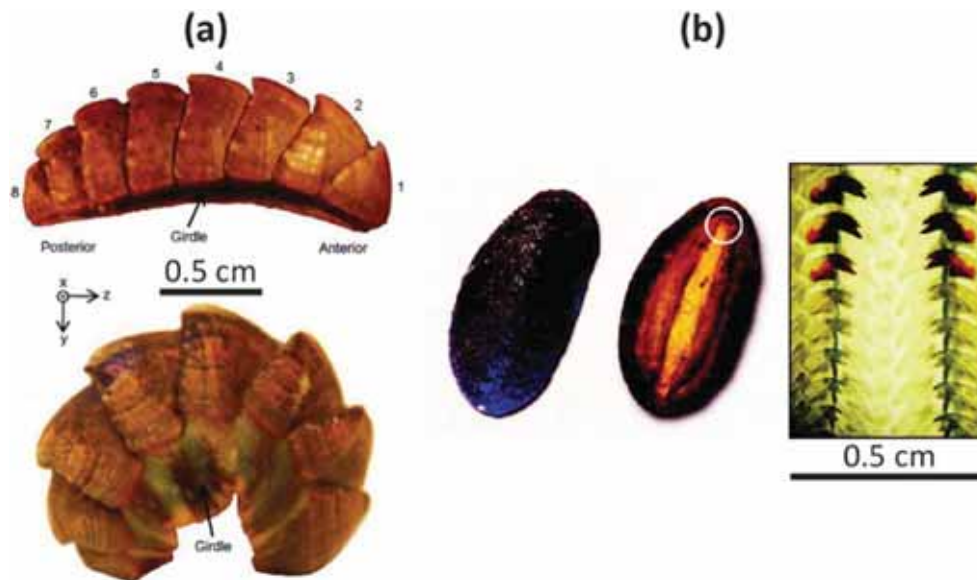
**Fig. 11.** Deep sea scaly-foot gastropod (*Cryosmallon squamiferum*) that employs a three part shell with an iron-sulfide based outer layer (FeS), an organic intermediate layer (Organic) and an aragonite inner layer (Calcified Layer). Adapted from [109].

strength, which is reflected in the relative proportions of rigid biomineral to ductile biopolymer found in the shells of red abalone (19:1) [96], where biomineral severely outweighs biopolymer. In spite of this, many of these shells manage to provide optimized toughness, much higher than pure calcium carbonate [7,67,93]. This is realized through the brick-and-mortar structure of nacre (Fig. 9b) [67,93,94].

In order to grow this tough microstructure, mollusks employ complex assembly techniques. In the example case of abalone, growth is mediated by an organic interlayer comprised of chitin, an organic silk and acidic proteins in such a manner that successive layers of calcium carbonate (aragonite) tablets are deposited (Fig. 10a) [95,97–100]. Naturally, the growth of aragonite crystals is highly anisotropic, with the C direction in the orthorhombic cell (normal to the largest surface) having a much greater velocity than either of the orthogonal A or B directions. This would lead to the formation of needle-like structures without mediation. In order to regulate the growth, the epithelial layer of the organism generates a porous chitin-based membrane and deposits it on the growth surface. The sequence shown in Fig. 10a (progressing from top to bottom) shows the deposition of one such layer and the manner by which it alters the growth. The C-growth direction is slowed down,

while growth in directions A and B proceeds normally as the  $\text{Ca}^{+2}$  and  $\text{CO}_3^{-2}$  ions traverse the membrane. The resulting shape of the crystal is changed from a needle to a hexagonal prism. Lateral growth continues until the tablets (tiles) abut each other. In this manner, terraced cones (also called “Christmas trees”) are created. Fig. 10b shows a scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image of the growth surface. This results in growth of a lamellar, brick-and-mortar structure with  $\text{CaCO}_3$  tablets held together by an organic mortar and mineral bridges [95,97]. This growth has been shown to depend strongly on both nutrient availability and ambient environmental conditions [101].

At quasi-static loading rates in compression, the shells of abalone [66,97,102,103], conch [104,105] and giant clam [96] employ a variety of toughening mechanisms, realized through the brick-and-mortar structure of their nacre, including crack deflection and microbuckling of the calcium carbonate plates to induce a gradual “graceful failure.” These toughening mechanisms are imaged in Fig. 9c–d. Within brittle materials, where there is limited plastic deformation to absorb energy, fracture toughness is increased by toughening mechanisms such as the ones listed above that force a crack to propagate through a long and tortuous path [106,107]. A more tortuous crack path requires that



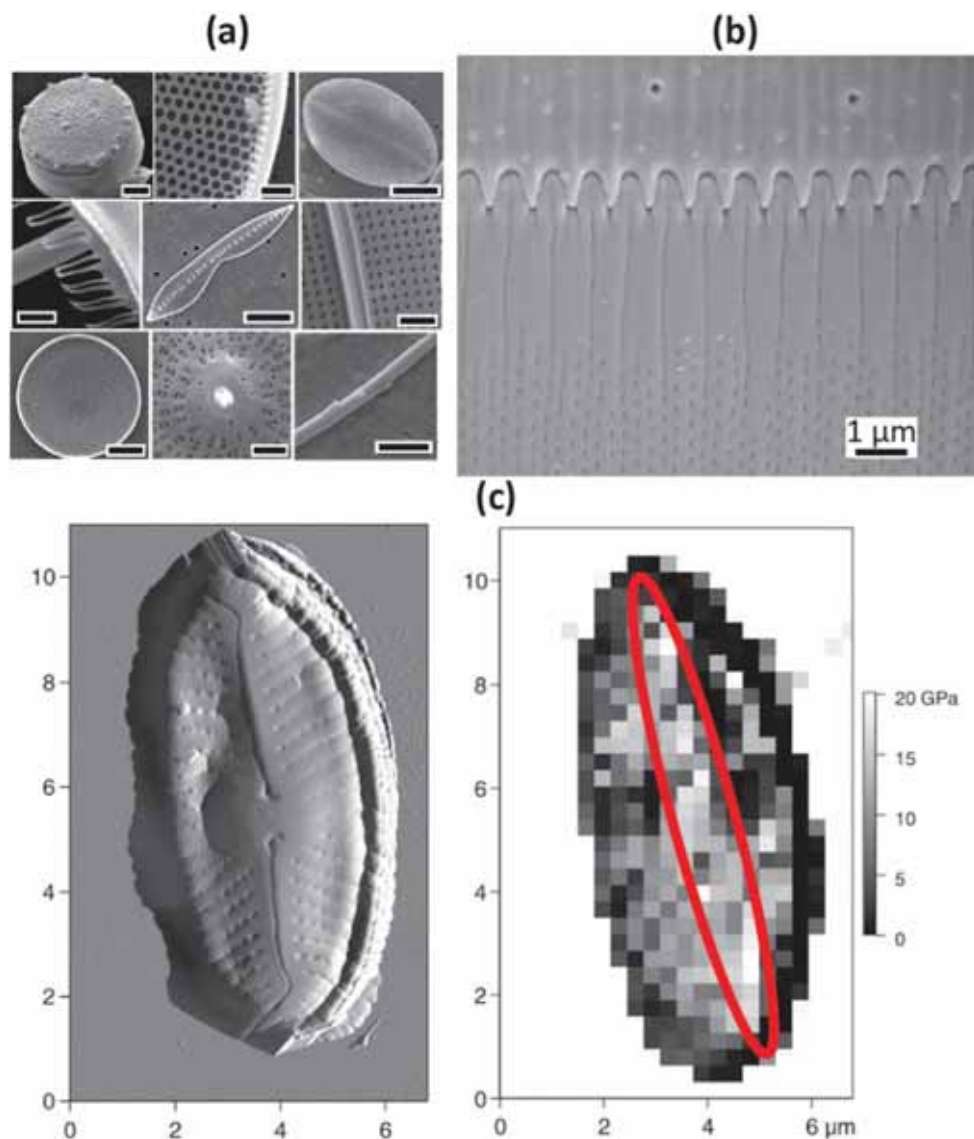
**Fig. 12.** (a) Lateral-view photographs of a chiton (*Tonicella marmorea*) showing the eight plates that can curl up into a defensive position; (b) another chiton species (*Cryptochiton stelleri*) displaying their characteristic mineralized teeth that are made of magnetite at the leading and trailing edges and iron-phosphate in the core. Adapted from: (a) [113], (b) [89].

additional surface area is created to induce catastrophic failure, thereby increasing the toughness.

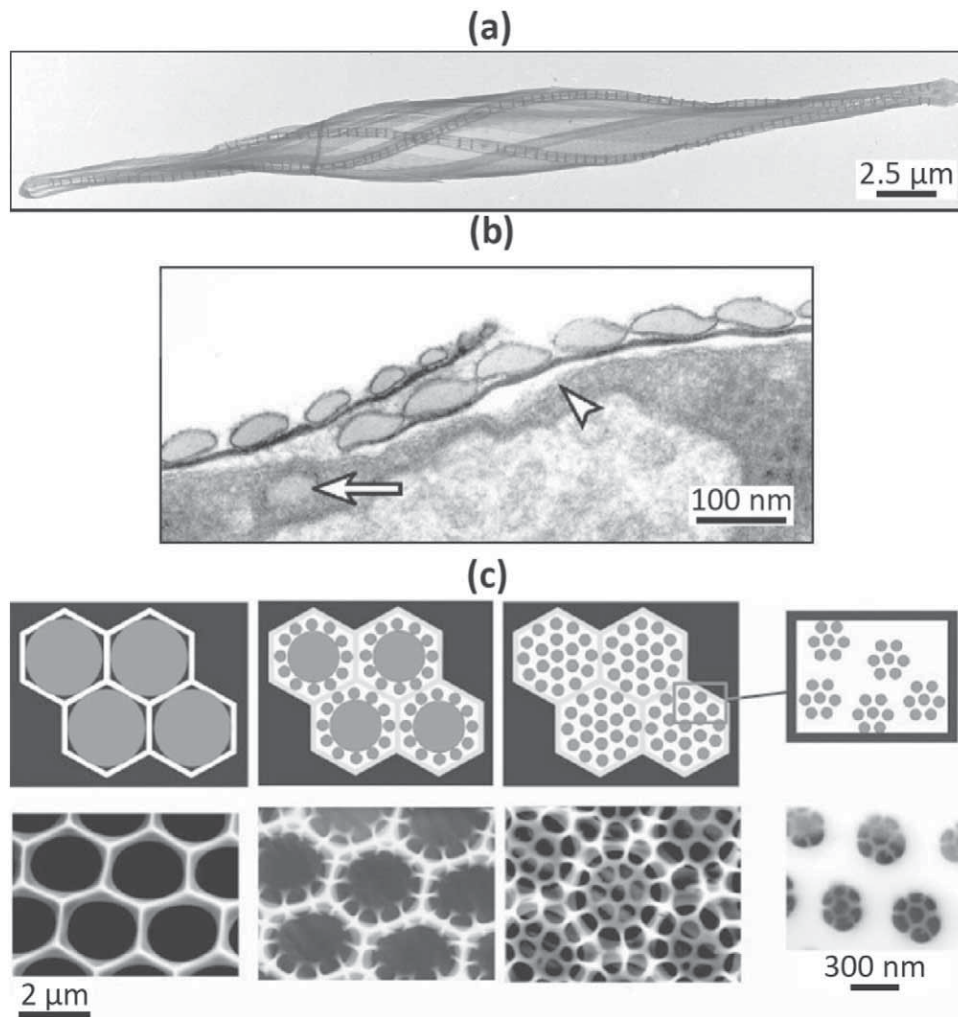
The brick-and-mortar structure of nacre provides a highly tortuous crack path, redirecting the crack front at angles near  $90^\circ$  (as shown in Fig. 9c). Of additional importance, the cases of abalone and conch both show an increase in strength of  $\sim 50\%$  at high strain rates that are more representative of the crushing bites of predators [102,104]. Given the success of this system in the natural world, it has led to bioinspired designs of ceramics with toughness that surpasses that of their monolithic equivalents [9,108].

Beyond the toughened shells of abalone, conch and clams, there are a number of other marine mollusks that provide intriguing mechanical properties and bioinspired potential. An example is the deep sea scaly-foot gastropod *Cryosomallon squamiferum* (Fig. 11), which employs an outer layer of FeS and a calcified inner layer that are separated by a relatively thick organic layer [92,109,110]. FeS is deposited on the surface of the mollusk by the deep sea vents in its natural habitat and incorporated into its structure [92,110]. These FeS deposits are referred to as “sclerites,” or elements of deposited mineral that are held together by a matrix (in this case the thick organic layer) in order to form a protective coating [92].

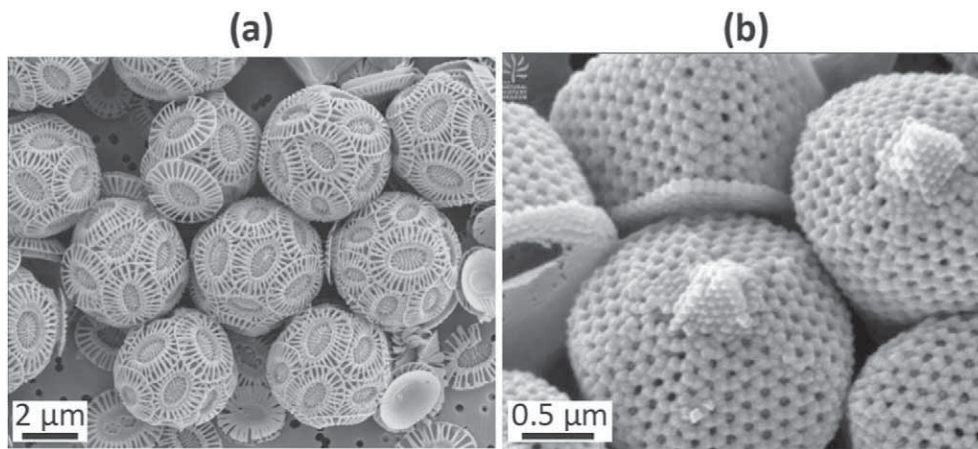
Another intriguing marine mollusk is the chiton. Chitons have one of the more complicated shell structures of any mollusk despite being reported to be the most phylogenetically primitive. They are often referred to as “living fossils,” since their appearance has not changed much in over 500 million years [111]. There are eight overlapping plates (valves) on their dorsal surface that are surrounded by a tough, leathery organic substance called a girdle, which often has mineralized scales or spicules [112]. This configuration allows the animal considerable flexibility compared to other mollusks. They can bend either upward for movement or downward to curl up into a ball for defensive purposes. Fig. 12a shows photographs of the valves and of the animal curled up. From the dorsal to ventral surfaces, six layers in mid-section valves were identified that have granular, prismatic or crossed-lamellar microstructures of aragonite crystals [113]. The interconnection between the valves was described as an actuating sandwich structure consisting of two valves separated by compliant muscles that operate to provide motion [113]. Of additional interest, the chiton *Cryptochiton stelleri* has adapted to produce extremely hard and wear-resistant teeth of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\alpha$ -chitin to scrape algae off of rocks (Fig. 12b) [89,114,115]. The teeth themselves mineralize in a four-step process: (1) forming a pure chitin scaffold tooth, (2) precipitating crystals of an intermediate and



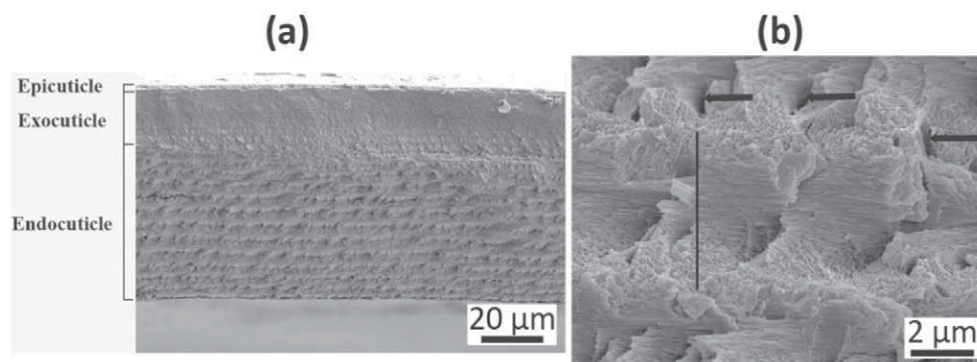
**Fig. 13.** (a) Diatoms displaying a wide variety in exoskeleton shape (scale bars range from 1–50 μm); (b) example of the intricate designs of diatom frustules; (c) elastic modulus results of atomic force microscopy mapping of a diatom exoskeleton showing the beam-like formation of stronger material (circled) that runs along the center of the body. Adapted from: (a) [118], (b) [79], (c) [124].



**Fig. 14.** (a) Diatom (*Cylindrotheca fusiformis*); (b) cross-section of the diatom showing the silica spheres (marked with arrows) being deposited on the surface of the diatom; (c) the proposed mechanism for the formation of the frustule of diatoms through continuous segregation of a silica phase (light gray) from a water phase (dark gray), steps diagrammed (top) and in scanning electron imagery (bottom). Adapted from: (a) and (b) [127], (c) [128].



**Fig. 15.** Scanning electron microscopy images of coccolithophores. (a) Heterococcolith (*Emiliania huxleyi*). The unicellular organism is surrounded by calcite plates whose elements are composed of single crystals; (b) holococcolith (*Syracosphaera pulchra*). The unicellular organism is surrounded by a shell composed of small, uniform single crystals. Adapted from [214].



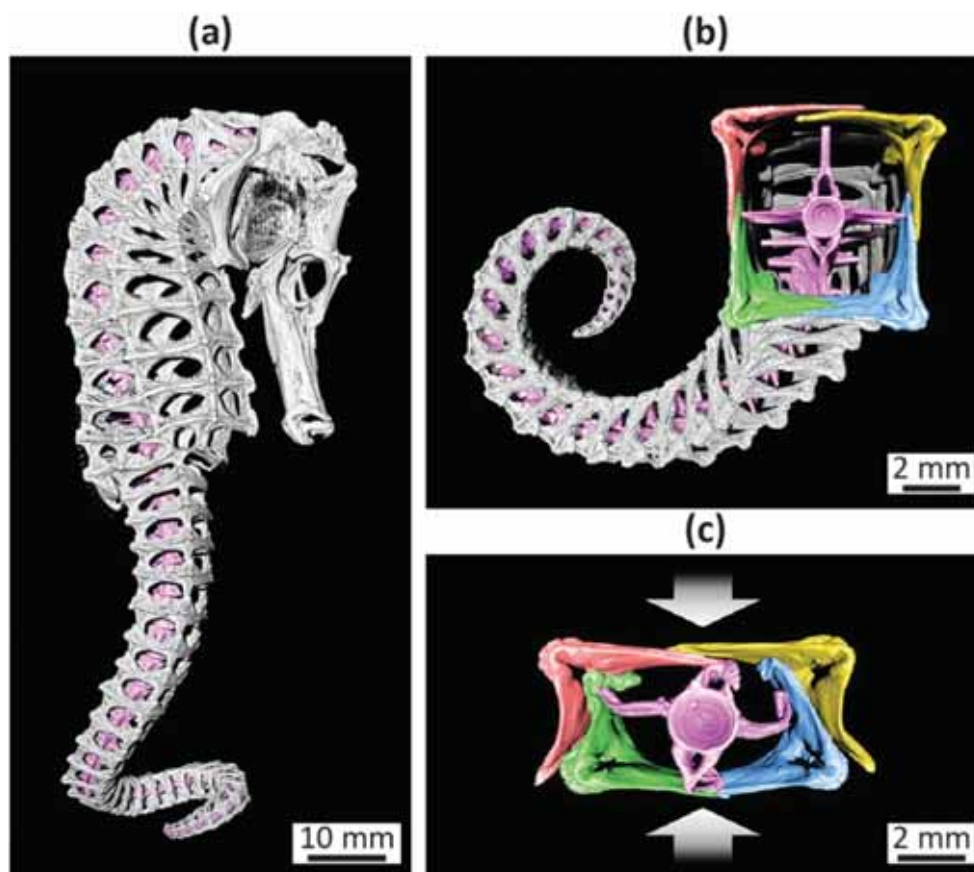
**Fig. 16.** Crustacean exoskeleton (*Pachygrapsus crassipes*). Images are scanning electron microscopy micrographs showing fractured cross-sections of crab cuticle: (a) the epicuticle, exocuticle and endocuticle of the cross section. There is a change in stacking density of the Bouligand layer at the interface between the exocuticle and endocuticle. The exocuticle has a greater stacking density; (b) magnified view of Bouligand layer of the endocuticle. Vertical line depicts single Bouligand layer, black arrows indicate pore canals. Unpublished works provided by Jennifer Taylor.

metastable iron oxide (ferrihydrite), (3) transforming the ferrihydrite into  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and (4) allowing for  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  crystal growth [89,116]. This mineralization process is driven by acidic macromolecules that pattern the chitin scaffold [116].

### 3.2. Diatom and coccolithophore exoskeletons

Diatoms and coccolithophores are both unicellular phytoplankton (algae). Diatoms, commonly found throughout the ocean, produce rigid external cell walls (or exoskeletons) formed from hydrated amorphous silica and range in diameters from 10–150  $\mu\text{m}$  [117,118]. Despite

their often microscopic size, the sheer biomass of diatoms causes them to account for 40% of the primary production of carbon [119] and the majority of biogenic silica (silica transformed from dissolved silicate into skeletal material) [120] in the oceans. While diatoms often exhibit simple geometric profiles (Fig. 13a), their surfaces (called “frustules”) are adorned with complex structures (an example is shown in Fig. 13b). Both of these length scales provide structural protection. The geometric profiles provide strength against engulfing and crushing attacks from larger predators (e.g. crustacean zooplankton) while the frustule provides protection from the attacks of smaller predators (e.g. parasitoid and ingesting protists) [121]. As there is an immense number



**Fig. 17.** (a) A micro-computed tomography image of the skeletal system of a seahorse (imaged species: *Hippocampus reidi* and *Hippocampus kuda*); (b) a micro-computed tomography image of the square seahorse tail displaying four overlapping bony segments and the central vertebra; (c) the tail cross-section subjected to compression. The skeletal armor buckles and deforms to protect the central vertebral column. Adapted from [154].

of different profiles [122], it has been theorized that diatom species have evolved to defend against specific local predators [121]. The strength of the frustule itself varies by up to an order of magnitude along the diatom surface with the maximum strength approaching that of pure silica [123–125]. This variation has been associated with different regions of the exoskeleton's growth, with the highest strength region running along the center of the body, effectively creating a load-bearing beam of harder material (Fig. 13c) [124].

The frustules are often researched because diatoms manage to rapidly create complex structures of silica at or near room temperature [126]. This is achieved through the deposition of micro- and nano-spheres of amorphous silica by species-specific polyamines in a specialized membrane called the silica deposition vesicle (Fig. 14a–b) [126,127]. The complex structures themselves have been proposed to be the result of a continuous phase separation process where a silica phase is constantly deposited at the edges of a water phase in order to create increasingly smaller patterns (Fig. 14c) [128]. The structure of the diatom exoskeleton is controlled by the availability of the necessary nutrient: silicic acid (the naturally available silica precursor in the oceans), causing both the strength and structure to diminish when depleted [117].

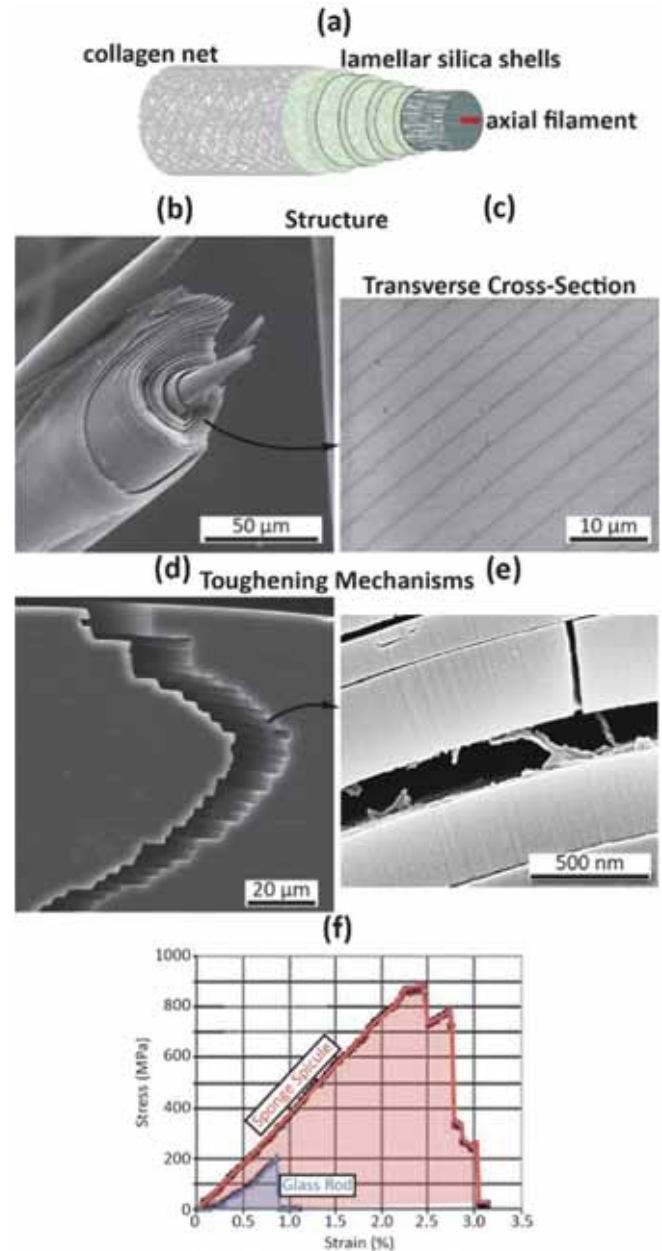
Coccolithophores have a spherical shell composed of over 30 calcium carbonate plates (diameters 2–10  $\mu\text{m}$ ) called coccoliths (Fig. 15a). Similar to diatoms in that they possess strikingly beautiful periodic shells, they tend to be smaller, having overall diameters between 5–100  $\mu\text{m}$ . The shells are thought to protect the cell from osmotic, chemical and physical shocks and from UV light [129]. There are over 100 species of coccolithophores and they are the only organisms that produce mineralized materials intracellularly [130]. There are two types: heterococcoliths, which have crystal elements with different sizes and morphologies (Fig. 15a), and the less common holococcoliths, which are composed of identical single crystal elements (Fig. 15b). In the heterococcoliths, most of the elements in the plate are single crystal rhombohedral calcite, which has a different morphology than inorganic calcite [131]. These organisms are thought to be an important indicator of ocean acidification, as they decrease the  $p\text{CO}_2$  in the upper euphotic zone through photosynthetic fixation of  $\text{CO}_2$  into organic molecules [132].

### 3.3. Crustacean exoskeletons

The crustacean exoskeleton is a multi-layered, multi-functional cuticle that affords favorable mechanical properties in a lightweight structure. The calcified cuticle is made up of chitin fibers mineralized with calcium carbonate [133], although some crustaceans employ other elements as reinforcing agents (e.g. magnesium, bromine). The cuticle is comprised of four distinct layers that differ in structure, composition, and mechanical properties. The outermost layer is the epicuticle, which is thin and mineralized [134]. As this is the outermost layer, one of its primary functions is a barrier to the external environment. Beneath the epicuticle lies the procuticle, subdivided into the exocuticle and endocuticle, which serve as the load bearing layers. Both the exocuticle and endocuticle are composed of a chitin–protein matrix embedded with mineral. The epicuticle, exocuticle and endocuticle are displayed in Fig. 16a. Chitin and protein bundles are arranged in horizontal planes, or lamellae, that are stacked into a helicoid, or Bouligand, structure (highlighted in Fig. 16b) [135]. A series of pore canals traverse the lamellae of both the exocuticle and endocuticle, creating a honeycomb-like structure that contributes to the strong, lightweight design [136]. Generally, the endocuticle is the thickest and most variable layer. The fourth, innermost membranous layer is a non-mineralized matrix, which is present in only some crustaceans and is not thought to contribute to the cuticle mechanical properties.

Although the load bearing layers have the same architecture, they differ in stacking density and crystallinity, affording a gradient of mechanical properties. Typically, the exocuticle lamellae are denser than

those of the endocuticle [133,137]. The crystallinity of the exocuticle not only differs from the endocuticle, but it also exhibits a gradient within it; amorphous calcium carbonate occurs in the proximal end, near the interface with the endocuticle, and transitions to calcite at the distal end [138,139]. In contrast, the endocuticle contains magnesium calcite and amorphous calcium carbonate [139]. These differences result in the exocuticle being both harder and stiffer than the endocuticle [133,137,140–142]. As the exocuticle increases in hardness toward the interface with the endocuticle, there is an



**Fig. 18.** (a) Diagram of the structure of a sea sponge (imaged species: *Euplectella aspergillum* and *Monorhaphis chuni*) spicule showing the axial filament (silicatein), the surrounding silica shells and exterior collagen net; (b) etched microstructure of a sea sponge spicule showing the concentric silica rings (shells); (c) transverse cross-section of a silica spicule showing the concentric tree-like rings; (d) fracture of a spicule showing significant deflection of a crack passing through the silica rings; (e) magnified fracture displaying the thin layer of silicatein (protein) between the silica rings; (f) mechanical data displaying the significant increase in toughness of a sponge spicule over a sample of similar geometry made up of the spicule's main constituent, silica glass. Adapted from: (a) [156], (b)–(d) [161], (e) [158] (f) [215].

abrupt change in both hardness and stiffness of more than an order of magnitude between these two layers [137].

Despite the cuticle being brittle and prone to delamination [133,143,144], the Bouligand structure of the procuticle layers affords some toughness by crack deflection and bridging, which force cracks to propagate in a tortuous, stepwise fashion [142]. The ductile pore canal tubules are also thought to enhance toughness, as necking is observed during tensile testing normal to the cuticle surface [133].

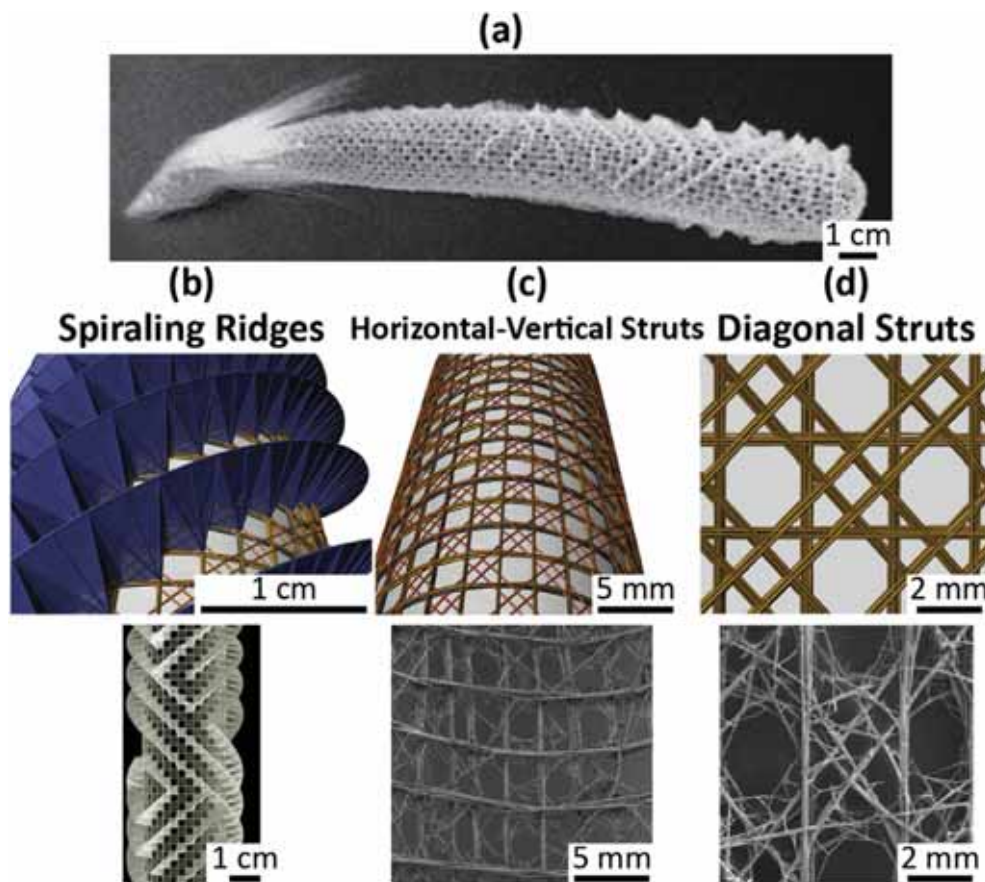
Crustaceans exhibit variation in cuticle mineralization and structure (e.g. layer thickness, stacking density) across species and across functional regions within an individual. For example, appendage joints contain non-calcified arthroal membranes that must remain soft and flexible to permit rotation [145]. There are also great differences between the cuticle of the carapace, which protects internal organs and resists compression, the walking legs, which primarily resist muscle contraction forces, and the claws, which function as weapons and prey capture devices. In crab claws, for example, the exocuticle is 3–4 times harder than the walking leg exocuticle, and this is primarily due to its greater mineral content [133]. The effectiveness of claws in securing prey depends not only on their hardness, but also on their resistance to cracking and abrasion. In some crabs, such as stone crabs, the claw tips are darkly pigmented and even harder and tougher than non-pigmented areas, possibly due to the increased cross-linking associated with tanning and reduced porosity [146]. Other crabs, such as shore crabs, enhance their claws by adding bromine rich tips that can afford an order of magnitude increase in fracture resistance compared to calcified tips [74,75].

The intricacy and variability of the crustacean cuticle is even more impressive considering that, unlike mollusk shells that form by

accretion, crustaceans repeatedly shed and secrete a whole new cuticle during the process of molting. The secretion of matrix to form the cuticle layers and the subsequent deposition of mineral occur rapidly, over the course of days, and as frequently as once per week in small juveniles. Cuticle formation is a conserved and intricate process, but can be affected by environmental conditions such as ocean carbon chemistry.

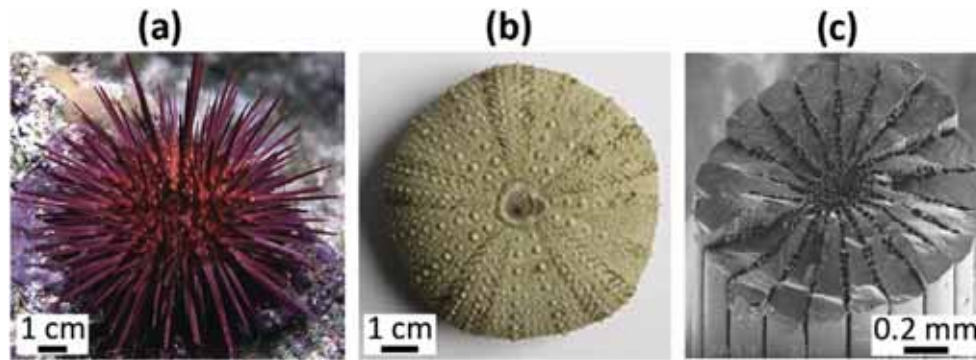
### 3.4. Seahorse skeleton

Seahorses (*Hippocampus*) have plated skeletons that cover their bodies and prehensile tails (Fig. 17a). Unlike most fish, seahorses swim upright, utilizing their dorsal fin for propulsion and two pectoral fins for maneuverability, resulting in slow swimming velocities [147–149]. Thus, they use their prehensile tails for stability, gripping and holding onto objects such as sea grasses, mangrove roots, and coral reefs [147]. The tail skeleton is composed of several articulating segments arranged into cross-sectional squares, each composed of four bony plates that surround a central vertebra (Fig. 17b) [147–154]. These plates are connected by overlapping joints that allow them sufficient flexibility for grasping as well as added strength for armored protection [154]. In grasping, the square structure of the tail provides more surface contact and a mechanism for maintaining organization of the articulating plates [154]. When the tail (of a deceased seahorse) is crushed, it can be compressed up to nearly 50% of its original width before fracture of the vertebral column (Fig. 17c) [150]. This unique energy absorption mechanism provides seahorses protection against predators, many of whom attack by crushing (e.g. claws of crabs, beaks of sea turtles and birds) [155].



**Fig. 19.** (a) Hierarchical skeleton macrostructure of the Venus' flower basket sponge (*Euplectella aspergillum*). Examples of the complex structure of struts that *Euplectella aspergillum* employs with diagrams, optical microscopy and scanning electron microscopy images: (b) exterior spiraling ridges; (c) horizontal and vertical struts where the horizontal struts are predominately on the interior of the lattice and the vertical struts are predominately on the exterior of the lattice; (d) diagonal struts.

Adapted from: (a) [158], (b)–(d) [157].



**Fig. 20.** (a) Photographs of a common sea urchin (*Paracentrotus lividus*); (b) the sea urchin test; (c) scanning electron microscope image of the fracture surface of a spine. Adapted from: (a) [www.puntacampanella.org](http://www.puntacampanella.org), (b) [www.aeonwebtechnology.com](http://www.aeonwebtechnology.com), (c) [216].

## 4. Flexure resistant structures

### 4.1. Sea sponge spicules

Sea sponges produce a rigid skeleton to provide both structure and protection from predators. This skeleton is made up of needle-like spicules of amorphous silica, templated by axial collagen fibers [10,11,82, 156–158] that are encased in a collagen net [10,156]. The structure is diagrammed in Fig. 18a. Of particular interest, silica is not necessary for growth of the sponge as it has been shown that, when deprived of silica, the silicatein (protein) axial filaments will continue to grow [159]. The structure (Fig. 18b–c) consists of concentric rings (similar to tree rings), which surround the axial filament. While not to the extent found in mollusk shells, sea sponge skeletons are highly mineralized (3:1 biomineral to biopolymer [82]). These rings are held together with a “mortar” of silicatein [2,82,157,158,160]. The sea sponge employs the toughening mechanism of crack deflection (Fig. 18d–e) to create an elongated and more tortuous crack path [161], thus increasing the fracture toughness significantly over that of its pure constituent, silica glass (Fig. 18f) [161].

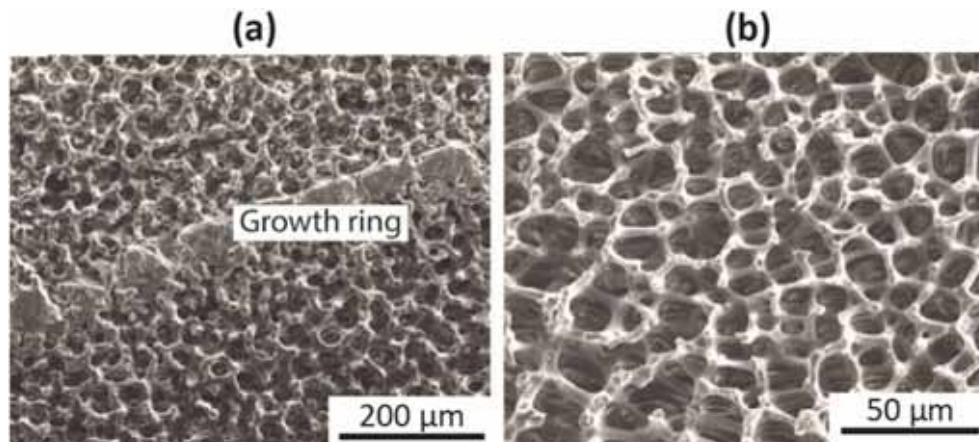
While the microstructural toughening mechanisms of sea sponges provide for a strong biological structural material, certain species employ additional hierarchical mechanisms as well. *Euplectella aspergillum* employs a complex macrostructure skeleton in order to provide high bending and flexural strength while minimizing material volume (Fig. 19a) [157,158]. It utilizes a lattice of longitudinal, transverse and diagonal struts (each comprised of a bundle of spicules) in order to resist forces in a wide range of directions (Fig. 19b–d). Around the

exterior, spiraling ridges are aligned at an angle of  $\sim 45^\circ$  in order to resist the maximum structural torsion and bending forces (Fig. 19b). Reinforcements such as these (set at  $45^\circ$ ) have been shown to best resist torsional forces in composite structures [162].

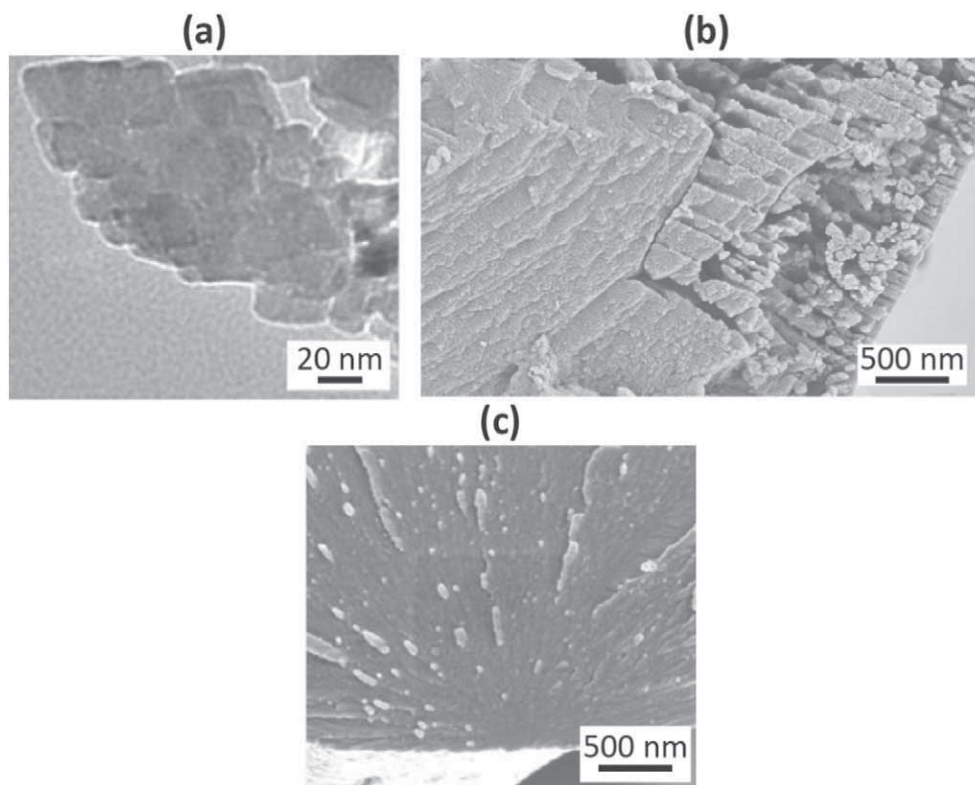
### 4.2. Sea urchin spines

Sea urchins belong to the phylum Echinodermata, which also include sea cucumbers, starfish and sand dollars. Urchins are characterized by having five-fold symmetry, a collagenous dermis overlying an endoskeleton (test) formed by fusion of calcite ossicles (plates) and spines that radiate from the test. An example of an urchin (*Paracentrotus lividus*) and its test are shown in Fig. 20a–b.

Urchins are highly diverse, ranging throughout every marine environment from polar to tropical temperatures and down to depths of 5000 m. Most of their spines are long and pointed, since they function as protection from predators. Spines can range up to 30 cm in length and up to 1 cm in diameter [163]. Fig. 20c shows a spine fracture surface imaged by SEM from *P. lividus*, illustrating 20 plates that radiate from a central core. The spines are porous crystals of a highly Mg-substituted calcite,  $\text{Mg}_x\text{Ca}_{1-x}\text{CO}_3$  ( $0.02 \leq x \leq 0.15$ ). Substitution of Mg into the calcite structure results in a harder material. Fig. 21 shows SEM micrographs of a *Heterocentrotus mammillatus* spine, revealing a radial sequence of porous and dense layers that are attributed to growth rings. There is a gradient in porosity, with porosity increasing substantially from  $\sim 10\%$  on the surface and in the growth rings to  $\sim 60\%$  in the medullary core. These spines are a model for biologically controlled crystal growth and consist of a mesocrystal [164,165]. Originally



**Fig. 21.** Scanning electron micrographs at varying magnifications of a cross-section from a spine of the sea urchin, *Heterocentrotus mammillatus*, displaying the porous bulk and dense growth rings. The growth rings likely result from former exoskeleton surfaces. Adapted from [163].

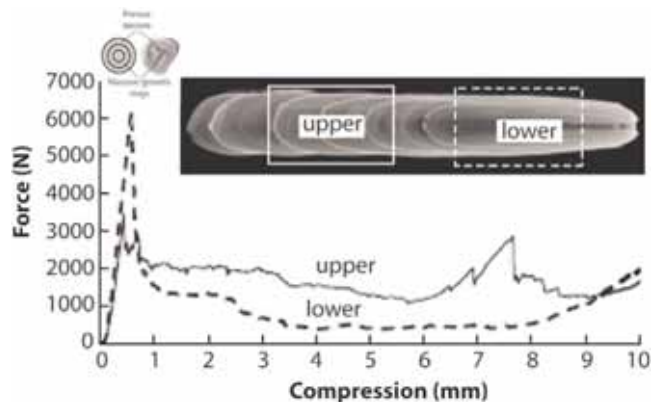


**Fig. 22.** Structural features of sea urchin (imaged species: *Echinometra mathaei*, *Anthocidaris crassispina* and *Anthocidaris erassispina*) spines. (a) Transmission electron microscopy image of the nanocrystals from spines; (b) etched transmission electron microscopy image of the mesocrystal structure of spines; (c) scanning electron microscopy image of the spine fracture surface displaying a similar structure to glass fracture surfaces. Adapted from: (a) and (c) [165], (b) [164].

thought to be a single crystal [166,167], it has recently been shown that the structure consists of periodic and uniform nanocrystals, 30–50 nm in diameter, with parallel crystallographic alignment (Fig. 22a–b) [68, 163–165]. These nanocrystals are held together with layers of amino acids (mainly aspartic and glutamic acid) with a thickness of several hundred nanometers [165–167]. This results in a structure that fractures in a manner similar to glass (Fig. 22c) but presents the diffraction pattern of a single crystal [164].

Mechanically, the spines have been shown to preferentially fail at the proximal end when tested in a bending mode, which was found to be associated with the relatively higher concentration of magnesium at the base of the spine [168]. This, coupled with the fact that sea urchins are capable of repairing and regenerating spines that have been damaged or completely severed [169,170], suggests that the spines themselves are designed to fracture when stressed, potentially remaining within a predator to deter further attack. Fig. 23 shows a sketch of the cross-section, an X-ray computer tomography micrograph along the length of a *H. mammillatus* spine and compressive force–displacement data [163]. The compressive force–displacement curve displays a graceful failure instead of the catastrophic failure typified by monolithic ceramics. The force–displacement curve resembles that of a classical cellular solid, as described by Gibson and Ashby [171]. The peak stress is related to the strength of the dense outer sheath, whereas the subsequent plateau region relates to the failure of the highly porous region, dependent on the density and other elastic properties of the solid material. This value is similar to the bending strength of spines of another species (*Heterocentrotus trigonarius*), which contain 80 nm protein inclusions [172]. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the strength to weight ratio of the spines is greater than that of mollusk shells and calcareous rocks, indicating that the animals use calcite with high efficiency [173].

Though not a protective structure, the teeth of the sea urchin have garnered a significant amount of interest for their complex self-sharpening and self-assembly mechanisms. These teeth, despite being composed primarily of calcite, are able to grind through rocks of a similar composition [174–176]. This is achieved by highly aligned and continuous growth of Mg-reinforced calcite that results in self-sharpening grinding tips [174,176]. The Mg concentration increases toward the distal end of the teeth resulting in strengthened tips that can grind away calcite rocks.



**Fig. 23.** Force–deflection curve for a spine from the slate pencil urchin (*Heterocentrotus mammillatus*) showing a graceful failure mode. Top left image is a diagram showing the growth rings and porous interior (stereom). Top right image is an X-ray computed tomography image showing higher (light grey) and lower (dark grey) density regions. Adapted from [163].





**Fig. 24.** Micro-computed tomography image of a porcupine fish (*Diodon holocanthus*) displaying the long spines embedded within the skin of the fish. Unpublished works provided by Frances Su (UCSD).

#### 4.3. Porcupine fish spines

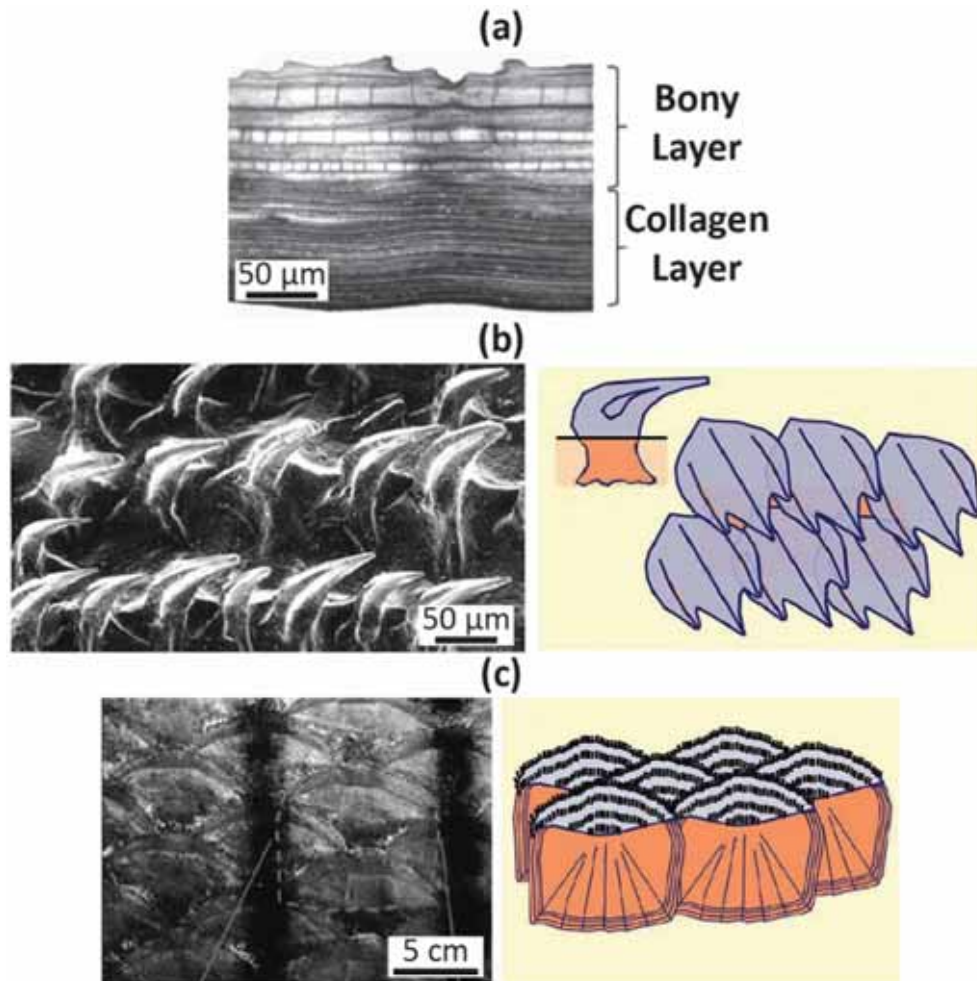
Within the order Tetraodontiformes [177], the spines of Diodontidae (porcupine fish) (Fig. 24) have developed to provide an active form of defense. These long spines are embedded within the skin of the fish and can, in many species, become erect as the fish inflates [178] and similar to the spines of the sea urchin, must be capable of resisting bending and flexure in order to provide effective defense. These spines are controlled by arrays of collagen fibers that wrap around the base [178]. In spite of this inventive protective mechanism, there is a current

lack of knowledge concerning the mechanical and material properties of these spines.

### 5. Piercing resistant structures

#### 5.1. Overlapping fish scales

Fish scales provide protection from a variety of predators by integrating highly ordered type I collagen fibers with hydroxyapatite biomineral [13,179,180]. Scales are composites that are composed of multiple layers. These generally include mineralized collagen and enamel-like (or bony) layers (example shown in Fig. 25a) [13, 180–182]. When a collagen layer is formed, it often has a Bouligand-like structure in order to provide increased toughness and strength in many directions [44,183]. Scales are most commonly arranged in overlapping sheets that allow for smooth motion of the body for locomotion while ensuring full coverage for protection from predators [13,180]. This overlapping pattern minimizes drag to ease swimming by regulating wave propagation about the body [184–186]. While scales can vary greatly in size, shape and arrangement from species to species, they have been classified into three relevant general groups: placoid, elasmoid (with two sub-groups: cycloid and ctenoid) and cosmoid [13, 180]. A fourth group, ganoid scales, is rare and only reported in predominantly freshwater fish such as gars [187] and bichirs [181] and, as a



**Fig. 25.** Marine fish scales. (a) Cross-section of an elasmoid scale (from a striped sea bass, *Morone saxatilis*) displaying bone and collagen layers. Major marine fish scale groups: (b) scanning electron microscopy image and diagram of a placoid scale (from a catshark, *Scyliorhinus canicula*); (c) image and diagram of an elasmoid scale (ctenoid, from a striped sea bass). Adapted from: (a) [180], (b) [13,188], (c) [13].

result, will not be discussed here. Finally, a fifth group, scutes, will be discussed later.

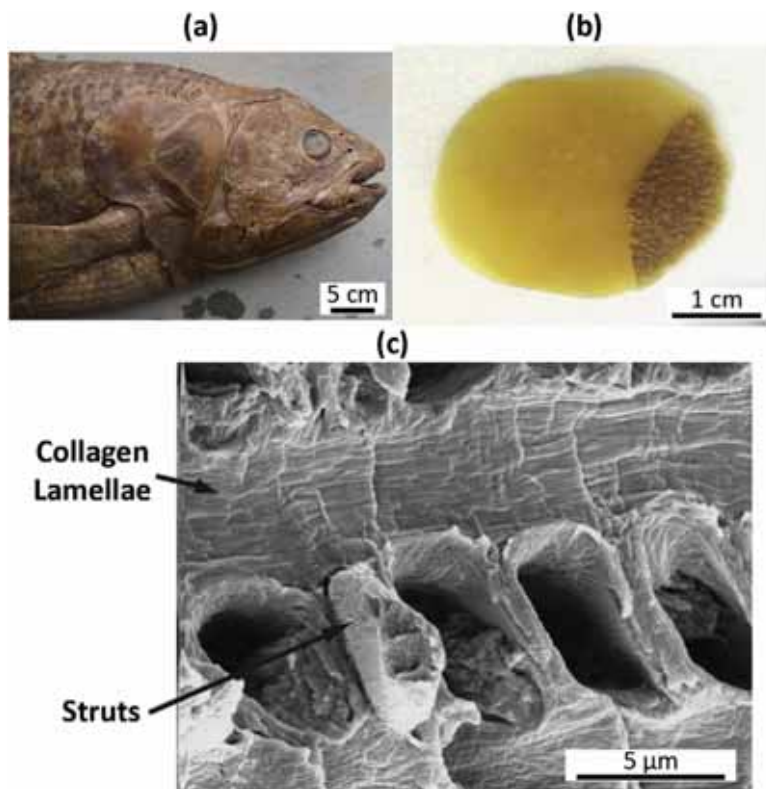
Placoid scales (Fig. 25b) are found on many cartilaginous fish, including sharks and rays. In shark species, they are specified as odontodes, where they display a “tooth-like” appearance [188]. They consist of an outer layer with large vascular spaces and a lamellar inner layer [189]. As these are cartilaginous fish and are without bone, the same applies to their scales. Placoid scales are specifically designed to have a surface structure that generates small-scale vorticities in water, thereby decreasing drag.

Elasmoid scales can be subdivided into cycloid and ctenoid scales (ctenoid scale imaged in Fig. 25c). They are found in teleosts, a major group of marine and freshwater fish that includes more than 26,000 species within 40 orders and 448 families; the majority of living fishes are members of this group, including the striped sea bass (*Morone saxatilis*) [180,190,191] and sea bream (*Pagrus major*) [64]. Cycloid scales, found mainly in soft fin ray fish, such as salmon, carp and eels, have a smooth margin. In contrast, ctenoid scales, found mostly in spiny fin ray fish, such as perch, grunion and swordfish, have a comb-like scale with teeth or serrations on the margin. Through the cross-section, the ctenoid scales of the striped sea bass have a bony outer layer and a collagen inner layer with the same thickness [180]. The collagen layer is formed from 4–5  $\mu\text{m}$  thick collagen lamellae, which are oriented in a Bouligand arrangement that varies from species to species [180]. These collagen fibrils are mineralized at the scale's smallest length-scale, forming a staggered array with nanoplatelets of hydroxyapatite between the heads and tails of the molecules.

*Latimeria* (coelacanth) (Fig. 26a) are one of very few extant species, others include certain *Neoceratodus* (lungfish), known to exhibit cosmoid scales (Fig. 26b). The first live coelacanth, long considered extinct, was caught on the east coast of South Africa in 1938. The scales consist

of isopedine (dense lamellar bone), spongy bone and cosmine (similar to dentin) layers [189,192–194]. Given their scarcity, the exact structure of cosmoid scales is of debate. Smith et al. [192] found that the isopedine layer consists of densely packed collagen fibers and only the most superficial portion of the scale is mineralized, while other investigators [193–195] contrarily held the opinion that the entire scale was mineralized. New research has been able to clarify this discrepancy and has shown that the scales consist of a highly mineralized surface and less mineralized base [196]. Similar to elasmoid scales, this collagen base is formed from lamellae of collagen fibers, however, these cosmoid scales also exhibit struts that connect adjacent lamellae and provide additional rigidity (Fig. 26c) [196].

Fish scales are generally designed to defend against the bites of piscivorous predators. Mechanically, this can be translated to piercing forces applied by sharp and/or jagged objects with a small surface area (i.e. teeth) [25,197,198]. This requires a composite with a surface strong enough and hard enough to withstand the high stresses and piercing nature of teeth without fracture and a base with enough toughness and ductility to absorb the compressive force of jaws and distribute it over a broader area. All fish scales achieve both of these goals with a heavily mineralized outer layer made of ganoid or hydroxyapatite-based coatings and a tough base usually made of bone or collagen fibers. This has been experimentally shown on the scales of the striped sea bass [191] where the hardness decreases through the thickness of the scale toward the proximal surface [181,198]. Of note, this collagen base has been shown to be amongst the toughest biological materials known [199]. In addition to the mechanical properties of the fish scale layers, there are specific design qualities that dictate the ability of scales to provide protection while still maintaining mobility and minimizing weight. These include the amount of overlap or imbrication, the ratio of the scale length to thickness and the ratio of the scale length to the overall fish length.



**Fig. 26.** Cosmoid scales from a coelacanth (*Latimeria chalumnae*). (a) Coelacanth; (b) cosmoid scale; (c) micrograph of the cross-section of the cosmoid scale displaying the distinctive struts that bridge between collagen lamellae and provide additional strength.

(a) is unpublished work provided by Haochan Quan (UCSD), (b) and (c) are adapted from [196].

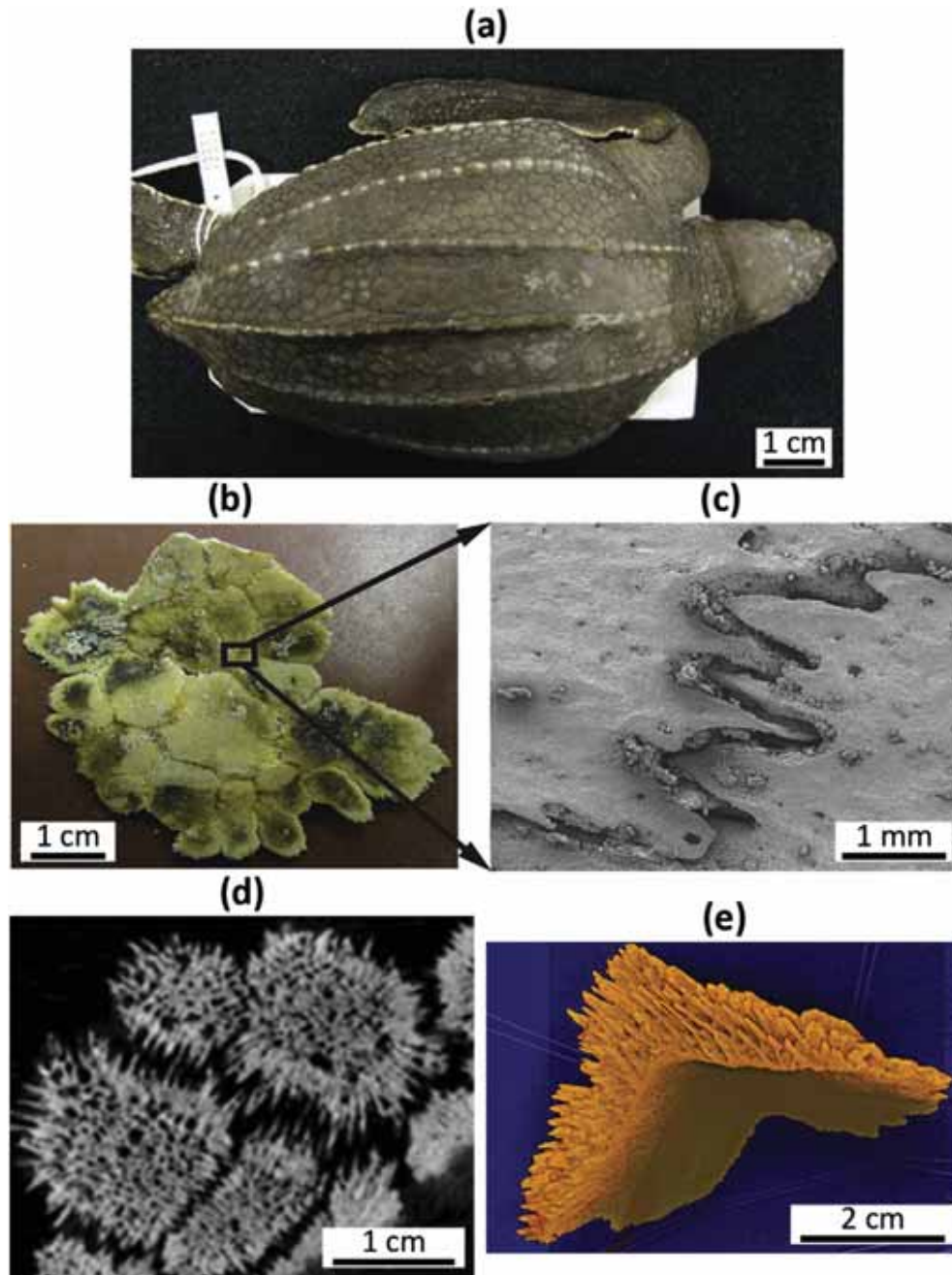
## 5.2. Marine scutes and skeletal armors

While most fish scales are overlapping, the examples of both fish scutes and marine skeletal armors provide alternative modes of protection. Similar to fish scales, both are composites that consist of hydroxyapatite and collagen. While still providing effective protection against predators, these armors do so in distinct ways.

Sea turtles employ plated skeletal armor, which is formed from individual osteoderms, the bone-like reptilian counterpart to scales [13,200]. These exhibit a cellular sandwich structure consisting of a porous interior and dense exterior allowing for weight savings while maintaining stiffness. The leatherback sea turtle (Fig. 27a,

*Dermochelys coriacea*) is of particular interest as it is capable of diving to depths in excess of 1200 m [201]. This is made possible by sutured interfaces between the osteoderms of its shell (Fig. 27b–c), allowing it some flexibility (up to  $\sim 15^\circ$  of rotation) in order to accommodate the severe hydrostatic pressures of the turtle's deep ocean environment, which can reach as high as  $\sim 10$  MPa (at 1200 m of depth) [13,200]. Specifically, the sutured interface employs a gap between the osteoderms (Fig. 27d) along with an array of tri-dimensional suture teeth (Fig. 27e) that enable this flexibility.

The scutes of boxfish (Ostraciidae) provide a very different mechanism for protection than fish with overlapping scales. These scutes are composed of a rigid mineral surface (hydroxyapatite-based) and a



**Fig. 27.** Leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). (a) Leatherback sea turtle; (b) a section of carapace displaying osteoderms connected by sutured interfaces; (c) scanning electron microscopy micrograph of the sutured interface of two osteoderms; (d) micro-computed tomography image displaying a highly random porous morphology and gap between osteoderms that enable flexing; (e) micro-computed tomography image of a single osteoderm showing a 3D arrangement of sutures. Adapted from: (a)–(c) [13], (d) and (e) [200].

compliant collagen base (type I collagen) (Fig. 28a) [12,202]. While these constituents are similar to other fish scales, the way that they are implemented is quite different, with non-overlapping scutes that connect with sutured interfaces. The ratio of biomineral to biopolymer in the scutes is 1:2 [12] which is in stark contrast to many other dermal armors such as the seahorse (~2:1) [150] and alligator (~2:1) [203]. This suggests an armor based primarily in collagen as opposed to more common mineral-based armor. Of additional interest, when mechanically tested, the mineral surface remains intact while the collagen base deforms significantly (Fig. 28b–c) [12]. While this likely lowers the overall strength, it ensures that failure occurs in a predictable and controlled manner.

## 6. Impact resistant structures

### 6.1. Mantis shrimp dactyl club

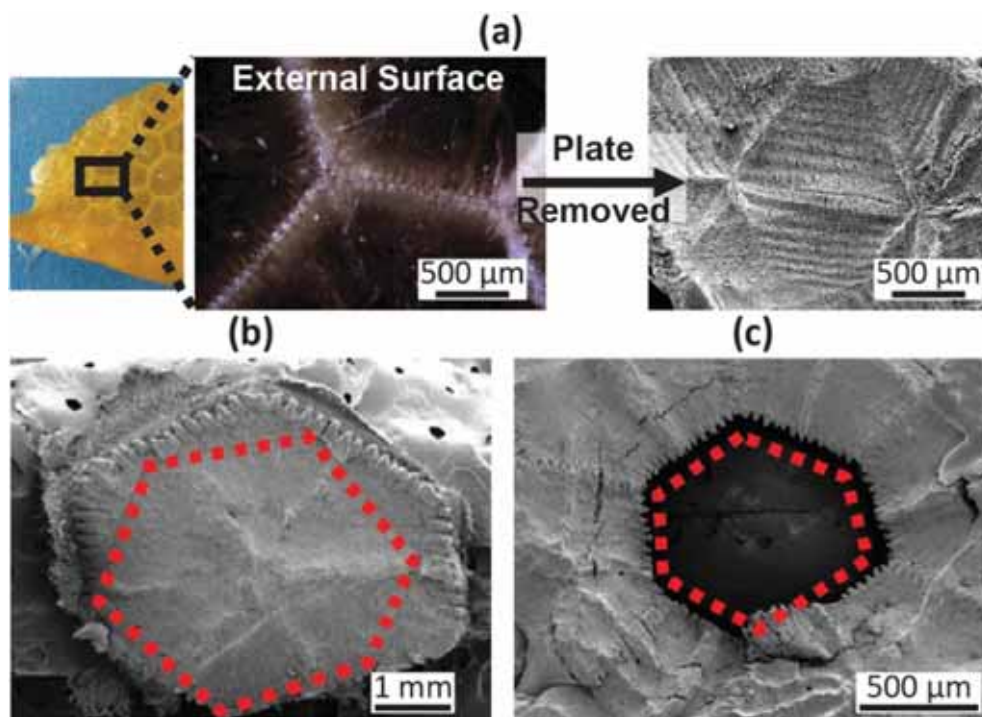
The mandible of the mantis shrimp (highlighted in Fig. 29a) is perhaps the most remarkable adaptation of the crustacean cuticle. It must resist tremendous impact forces as they rapidly unfurl to strike hard-shelled prey. The impacting surface of the smashing mantis shrimp species, the dactyl club, changes in structure from an inner bulk area of chitin fibers to an outer, heavily calcified surface, with the highest degree of crystallinity at the impact surface (Fig. 29b) [204,205]. The bulk area primarily contains amorphous calcium carbonate that transitions to amorphous calcium phosphate [205,206] and then ultimately a hyper-mineralized fluorapatite with calcium phosphate at the surface [204]. These changes in crystallinity and mineral result in increasing stiffness and hardness toward the impact surface, with hardness six times greater in the impact region [204–206]. Similar to other regions of cuticle, the impact region is toughened with chitin that absorbs energy and limits crack propagation. In the dactyl club, cracks typically nucleate in the bulk region and are deflected in the impact region due to a modulus

mismatch, which contains cracks mostly within the bulk region [205]. In this region, cracks propagate in a helicoidal pattern, creating a larger crack surface area, and are stopped quickly when traversing the helicoid trajectory by an oscillation in stiffness [205]. In addition, this structure has been shown to effectively disperse the stress pulse waves generated during impact [207]. Combining a hard outer layer with an inner, energy dispersive matrix is reminiscent of human-made impact resistant armor.

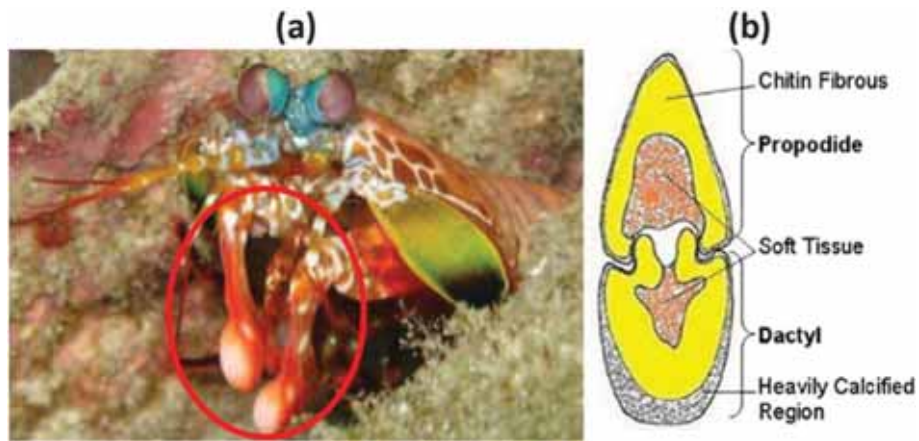
## 7. Bioinspired materials potential

The study of protective marine biological materials is leading to significant bioinspired materials and designs. These allow for the lessons learned from marine biological materials to affect and improve everyday life. Though not an extensive list, we provide a few examples here as an introduction to the materials and research provided by bioinspiration.

- Crush resistant, high toughness ceramics based upon the tough and highly mineralized shells of abalone [9,108]: the nacre-inspired brick-and-mortar structure of these ceramics are fabricated through an ice templating process called “freeze casting” [57] followed by compression and infiltration with a second phase. They can be infiltrated with polymers or metals to form composites whose toughness is significantly greater than that of their base constituents.
- Flexure resistant fiber optics based on strong and tough silica spicules of sponges [10,11]: the structure of the spicules is comprised of three sections: a core with a high refractive index, a low refractive index cylindrical tube and an outer portion with a progressively increasing refractive index [10]. These properties allow for effective light transmission. More importantly, the layered structure provides enhanced toughness.



**Fig. 28.** (a) Structure of the lateral scutes of the boxfish (*Lactoria cornuta*), the external surface is mineralized and rigid, but if removed, a base of aligned collagen fibers is revealed; (b) fracture of a scute tested in a punching mode by a hexagonal punch (highlighted); (c) fracture of the surrounding scutes. In both cases, the fracture occurs primarily within the collagen base while the mineral remains relatively intact. Adapted from [12].

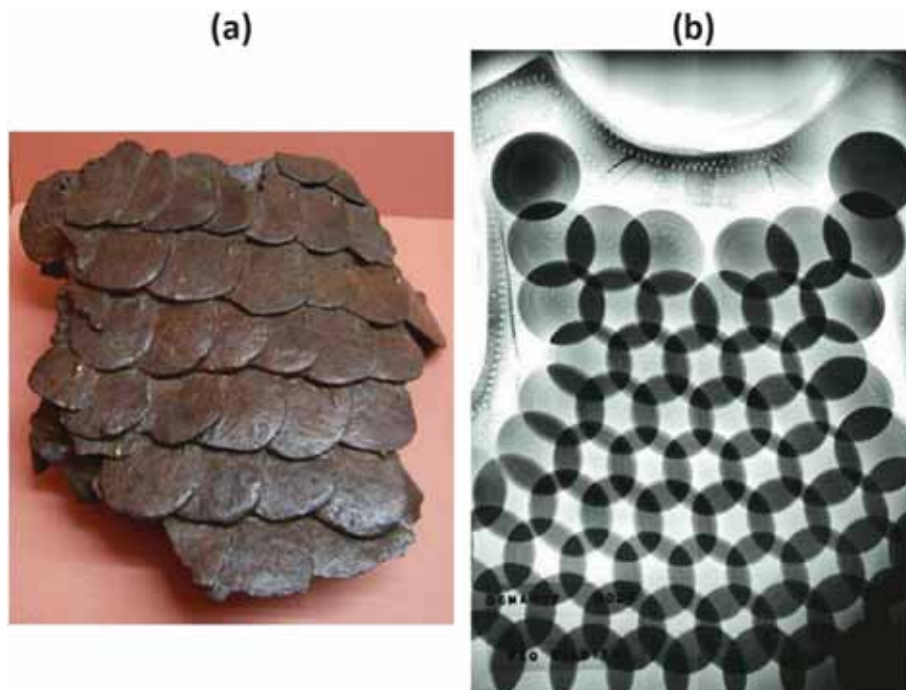


**Fig. 29.** Mantis shrimp (*Gonodactylus chiragra*) dactyl club. (a) A mantis shrimp with the dactyl clubs circled; (b) diagram of the cross-section of the dactyl club showing the heavily calcified surface, the fibrous chitin in the interior and soft tissue at the core. Adapted from: (a) [205], (b) [4].

- Pierce resistant body armor based upon the overlapping protection of fish scales [56]: perhaps the most common marine organism bioinspiration source, these armors date back to the scaled armor of the Roman Empire, the “Lorica Squamata” (Fig. 30a) [48]. This armor consisted of individual, overlapping metal scales (called “squamae”) set over a leather shirt, thus providing both a hard penetration resistant surface and a tough energy absorbent base. Modern examples of fish inspired armor include the recently developed “Dragon Skin” armor that consists of circular, ceramic, bulletproof plates oriented in overlapping arrays within a wearable vest (Fig. 30b) [13,48].
- Impact resistant fiber composites based upon the dactyl club of the mantis shrimp [208]: these carbon fiber-epoxy composites are

fabricated to mimic the helical structural design of the dactyl club. Similar to the mantis shrimp itself, when impacted, these bioinspired composites can reduce the through-thickness damage propagation.

Given the specific environments that marine organisms have evolved in, there is still much room for bioinspiration in fields such as high pressure applications (deep sea organisms), filtration (gills) and high strength wet-adhesives (organisms in tidal zones that must adhere and resist the force of waves). Additionally, with 91% of marine organisms yet to be discovered and classified [8], the wealth of knowledge to provide bioinspiration will only continue to grow.



**Fig. 30.** Bioinspired armor designs based upon fish scales. (a) Ancient Roman “Lorica Squamata” armor designed with metal overlapping scales over a leather shirt; (b) modern “Dragon Skin” armor designed with ceramic, bulletproof and overlapping plates. Adapted from [48].

## 8. Conclusions

From the wide range of marine organisms covered within this review, it is possible to make some conclusions on the qualities that contribute to specific forms of defense:

1. **Crushing resistant structures:** The majority of organisms that focus on crushing resistance opt for relatively high mineral content within their defenses in order to increase strength. Given this, ingenious methods are employed to increase ductility and/or toughness, including the brick-and-mortar structure of mollusk nacre, the helical fiber arrangement in crustacean exoskeletons, the geometric macrostructures of diatoms and the sliding plates of the seahorse.
2. **Flexure resistant structures:** Organisms that aim to provide flexure resistance tend to still require high strength and therefore often place a focus on strategic allocation of material, as is the case in the precisely aligned spicules of the sea sponge and the porous/dense layers in the spines of sea urchins.
3. **Piercing resistant structures:** Structures focused upon pierce resistance must provide both hardness to halt penetration and toughness to absorb the force of a bite. In most cases this is achieved through a layered structure, as is found in many fish scales, scutes and marine skeletal armors, with a rigid surface plate supported by a tough base.
4. **Impact resistant structures:** The impact resistant dactyl clubs of the mantis shrimp employ a rigid outer layer and a helical energy absorbent inner layer. The gradient in mechanical properties between these two layers is itself an effective mechanism to absorb energy and deflect cracks.

The oceans offer unique challenges to their inhabitants. From the inky darkness and extreme pressures of the ocean floor to the immense forces of crashing waves at the shorelines, organisms have evolved different strategies to survive and thrive under these extreme conditions. In contrast to terrestrial organisms, marine organisms have adapted different protective mechanisms, shaped by the specific effects of hydrostatic pressure, local temperature and salinity, motion from currents and swells and complete hydration. These defensive mechanisms take on many different forms with both passive (e.g. diatom exoskeletons and mollusk shells) and active (e.g. porcupine fish and sea urchin spines) mechanisms represented. As with all biological materials, the sheer complexity of structures that are formed from relatively simple constituents of biominerals (carbonated hydroxyapatite, calcium carbonate, amorphous silica, magnetite and iron sulfide) and biopolymers (collagen, keratin, chitin and cartilage) is astounding. Additionally, these complex structures provide for all manner of bioinspired designs, from fiber optics to body armor, which have real-world impact. While this review has served as an introduction to many marine biological materials that have been studied, there are still many material secrets of marine life yet to be cracked.

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