



AYUYU (coconut crab) *Birgus latro*

Native Species

Regulated Species

Coconut crab, or ayuyu as it is called in Chamorro, is a very popular dish at fiestas and family parties because of its delicious taste. It can grow quite large, with a legspan of up to three feet (90 cm), but most are captured by crab hunters before they get anywhere close to this size.

Ayuyu are basically giant hermit crabs which begin their life in the sea. Adult females lay their eggs in the sea. The eggs hatch into tiny larvae which drift with the currents for a few months before settling to the bottom where they transform into tiny crabs. They then climb into a seashell and crawl up on the beach. At this time, they look very much like hermit crabs. Soon they leave their seashells and depend on their own hard shells for protection.

The ayuyu digs holes in which they hide during the day. At night, they come out to look for food. They will eat almost anything, including fruits, plants and rotten wood. Their favorite food, of course, is coconut. Using their strong claws, they tear away the tough coconut husk and then, somehow, crack the nut inside. If you are not familiar with coconut crabs, do not try to capture one. They have incredibly strong claws which can grip and tear any object within reach.

Full grown ayuyu have no natural enemies other than humans. Young ayuyu may be eaten by some predators which people have brought to the island, such as rats, wild pigs, dogs, and monitor lizards. Ayuyu grow very slowly and are easily overharvested. On Guam, giant ayuyu are rare, and even small ones have become hard to find. In some places, they are no longer found. The ayuyu may be hunted year-round, but its carapace, or shell, must measure three (7.5 cm) or more inches across. Taking undersized crabs is illegal and carries a penalty of up to \$500 or 90 days in jail, or both.