

Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 29 May 2007

What do the catspaw, square Turk's head and the lark's head have in common with Portuguese whipping, a fishermen's bend and an icicle hitch? Well, it's not a case of animal cruelty, nor some kind of weird ritualistic activity: these are, in fact, names of knots. Knots are so fundamental to everyday life that we hardly even notice that they're around. We can all remember learning to tie our shoelaces around the age of five, but there are so many other times a knot is needed. A knot holds the light pull in the bathroom, fixes the climbing rose to the arbour, turns a length of cloth into a smart tie, along with a multitude of varied functions.

Knots probably pre-date fire and the wheel. 300,000 year old perforated stones, beads and pendants suggest that they would have been used with a cord of some sort. Many archaeologists suggest that knot work is fundamental to human development. Without knowledge of knots and rope work there could be no cloth woven, no nets made, no craft could sail. Knots are probably man's first tools; they were used to construct bridges and houses, determine time, calculate business deals and keep tally.

Humans don't have exclusive rights to knot tying. Gorillas tie knots to hold creepers and saplings into their nests; mostly, they tie the dreaded granny knot, but sometimes manage a neat reef knot. The best of the weaverbirds can tie dozens of different shaped knots and loops in their nests, using feet as well as their beak.

Knots are commonly associated with ships and the sea; a fishing net is simply a series of knots arranged in an even pattern. Each knot locks onto the line so that the net doesn't pull out of shape under pressure. Sailors need to be able to fasten things down, hold things up, stop things slipping, join ropes, shorten ropes without cutting them, and, sometimes, trust their lives to a rope and a knot. Bends join two ropes together, a hitch is a knot tied to a post or ring – often used when mooring a boat – and a lashing holds poles together as an alternative to screws or nails. A monkey's fist is tied at the end of a rope to serve as a weight, making it easier to throw the line, and also as an ornamental knot. The emphasis in marine knots is reliability matched with the ability to be undone fairly easily.

Many knots are task specific, such as the climber's prussik knot, or the trucker's hitch; others, like the reef knot are widely used. They are all around us, from the knots in quality carpets, to the ones used to fasten a tarpaulin on a lorry, to the delicate knots used in surgery. Their origins are ancient, every civilisation has used them and they are just as important today as they were 300,000 years ago.

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