

SEA URCHIN FISHERY STARTS

Sus Kato of the NMFS Tiburon Fisheries Laboratory traveled to Avila Beach to help initiate the sea-urchin fishery. The first shipment of sea-urchin gonads, destined for the domestic market, was delivered from Avila Beach to Los Angeles on February 24. These gonads are considered a delicacy in some gourmet establishments, especially Japanese seafood restaurants. The fishery was expected to start several months earlier, but the absence of suitable packing material forced the long postponement.

Mr. Kato provided on-site indoctrination and instructions to the divers, "shuckers", cleaners, and packers. As a result of his visit, the yield rose from 25 pounds of gonads per day to 100 pounds. This yield is based on 800 to 1200 urchins collected daily by two divers in about four hours. Up to 11 other part-time workers have been employed in a single day's operation.

The immediate goal is to produce 200 pounds of gonads daily for U.S. consumption with about 15 full-time workers. Initial reaction of the wholesale and retail buyers was mixed. A meeting was held to discuss product quality. The problems appear minor. The fishery promises to be viable. It will aid in the economy of the little port town of Avila Beach.

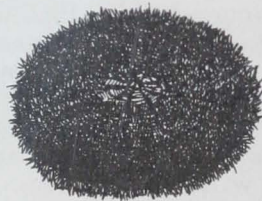
The San Diego Fishery

Several months ago, NMFS helped start a sea-urchin fishery in San Diego, Calif. On February 23, two tons of whole red urchins and 150 pounds of processed urchins were delivered frozen to Los Angeles for shipment to Yokohama and Kobe, Japan. Delivery was delayed because of the extended dock workers' strike.

The San Diego fishery is small, although up to six people have been employed by the processor. The potential for becoming a large export trade with Japan is uncertain. This is due primarily to the extremely large size of the gonads and because frozen urchin gonads are new to Japan.

Fishery Helps Environment

Besides economic benefits, many persons believe that the removal of sea urchins will lead to a better environment for fish and shellfish. For example, sea urchins are reported to compete directly with abalone for space and probably for food as well. Also, experiments have indicated that removal of urchins enhances the growth of kelp beds which, in turn, provides suitable habitats for many species of fish.



Sea urchin