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### **Accusations of theft at Elliston**

By Billie Harrison  
Thursday, 5 January 2006

ABALONE baskets found washed up on the coast around Elliston may have been stolen and planted along the shore, according to operators of the abalone farm located near Waldegrave Island at Elliston.

Environmental group the Friends of Elliston has said its members found the baskets washed up on the beach several weeks ago after wild weather.

Friends group members took photographs of five abalone baskets they found at Walker's Rocks and Locks Well.

However farm operators Australian Bight Abalone say it is impossible the baskets came from their farm.

Australian Bight Abalone chief executive officer Andrew Ferguson said if the baskets came from the abalone farm they must have been "stolen" months ago when some baskets broke free of the farm and washed up.

"It's nigh on impossible the baskets came out of our farm," he said.

Mr Ferguson viewed the photographs taken by the friends group and he did not believe rough weather two weeks ago could have dislodged more baskets.

"The (photos) are pretty damning actually, not against us but against whoever put (the baskets) there."

Mr Ferguson said the baskets from their farm were covered with algae and abalone at the moment and the baskets in the picture were clean.

Mr Ferguson said he had spoken to two farm employees who patrol the coast twice a week for baskets and they told him they had found the baskets in the photos last week.

"He said 'I don't know where they're from but they're not from our farm - certainly not recently,'" Mr Ferguson said.

Friends of Elliston spokesperson Ian Dudley found two of the baskets and said he had not stolen any baskets and did not believe any member of the friends group had either.

"We're pretty conscious of doing things right because we want to win this," he said.

He said the group had concerns about the threat the escaping baskets had on the local marine fauna.

"Of immediate concern is the significant threat the baskets and associated netting and rings pose to the nearby Australian sea lion breeding colony," he said.

"As a recognised vulnerable species, harmful interaction with the abalone development is sure to have negative and far reaching effects on the population of the species as a whole."

Mr Ferguson said the baskets were not causing any damage to the environment.

"If they could don't you think we would have heard about it by now?"

"It's a beat up."

The friends group asked all Eyre Peninsula coastal users to be aware of other debris that may wash up.

"It is disappointing that these events continue to occur given the company's repeated assurances that they are 'fine tuning' their operation," Mr Dudley said.

The group said Fishwatch had been notified of the baskets.

### **Tuna breeding infrastructure gains approval**

By Raffael Veldhuyzen

Thursday, 5 January 2006

CLEAN Seas Tuna Limited has received construction approval for tuna breeding infrastructure at its Arno Bay Hatchery.

Managing director Marcus Stehr has also announced the hatchery has successfully transferred 350,000 kingfish fingerlings to sea cages.

The 2005 season's production run of 350,000 kingfish fingerlings at the Clean Seas Arno Bay hatchery has been transferred for growout at Arno Bay.

The company has retained ownership of 150,000 of the fingerlings for its own growout and, in accordance with its undertaking in the company prospectus, has taken ownership of a further 65,000 juvenile kingfish and 150,000 juvenile mulloway.

"The successful breeding of 350,000 kingfish fingerlings from our own broodstock is a milestone in the implementation of our business plan," Mr Stehr said.

"Hatchery manager Morten Deichmann, feed manager Joe Caira and the at-sea transport teams are to be congratulated on Clean Seas successful production run of kingfish."

Along with this development comes the announcement the company has received construction approval for its in-ground tanks for the southern bluefin tuna hatchery breeding facilities.

"The Cleve District Council's construction approval of the in-ground 25m by 6.5m holding tanks is another positive step for shareholders," he said.

The in-ground 25m by 6.5m tanks will hold three megalitres of water housed in its own light and temperature controlled sheds.

Each tank will be supported by its own water treatment recirculation plant.

The SBT breeding facility at Arno Bay was designed by UNI-Aqua of Denmark, which has previously built reticulation systems for salmon, trout, turbot, sole, cod, halibut and abalone.

Construction is expected to begin early this year.

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World News



Abalone (Paua), as cooked by Michelin-starred chef Yeung Koon-yat in Hong Kong. Picture / Reuters

### **Poachers could drive paua to extinction**

29.12.05

By John Lichfield

Sylvain Huchette plunges his arm into a large plastic tank and plucks out a shellfish the size of a mobile telephone.

The creature has a shell which vaguely resembles a human ear. It is gnarled on the outside, brilliantly coloured inside and serially perforated along one edge. If this were truly an ear, it would have to be the ear of an ageing punk rocker.

Dr Huchette, a young Frenchman who speaks excellent English with a cheerful "no worries" Melbourne accent, turns over the strange shell, and reveals an even stranger creature inside. Dark, secretive and slimy-looking, this is the abalone, the most expensive and most endangered seafood in the world.

Here, in a nondescript, beige-coloured shed close to the seashore in Plouguerneau, Finistere, in western Brittany, baby and adolescent abalone are thriving, by the millions. Elsewhere, their outlook is grim.

The abalone - paua to New Zealanders, ormeau to the French, takabushi to the Japanese - is a delicacy which drives Asian, and especially Chinese, gourmets wild. In Japan and Korea, they are mythical beings, considered to be an unfailing male aphrodisiac.

To the marine biologist, the abalone is also a fascinating creature, a gastropod, or form of large, underwater snail, which "sits up" to graze on seaweed, hides under rocks and runs away from hungry crabs and starfish by modulating its single foot into four separate "legs".

Human predators are more difficult to shake off: they dive into coastal waters and prise abalone from their rocks with iron bars or hooks.

So intense is the appetite for abalone in Southeast Asia, and especially among the newly rich in China, that prices have increased 10-fold in the past 20 years. At €30 (\$35.40) a kilo wholesale - substantially more than lobster - the abalone is becoming big business.

In Japan, the retail price can rise to €100 a kilo, shells included.

Abalone, eaten cooked or raw, is said to have a haunting and subtle taste and texture, richer than scallops, chewier than octopus. It is one of the indispensable ingredients in a shark's fin soup called "Buddha Jumps over the Wall", which sells at Kai, the exclusive Chinese restaurant in London, at £120 (\$210) a dish.

Such is the Asian appetite for abalone, and the profits on offer, that the world's 130 different, edible species are being hoovered up - legally and illegally - at an alarming rate. Intensive diving for abalone is a lucrative trade in New Zealand, Australia, Africa, California - and increasingly in France.

The European form of abalone (*Haliotis tuberculata*) - claimed by some as the most delicious - was ignored for centuries by all but Bretons and the Channel Islanders. In recent years, it has been harvested in great numbers, many poached. The global abalone boom is part of a wider phenomenon. The insatiable Asian appetite for seafood, the scarcity of fish in Asian waters and improved air freight services are putting pressure on many depleted stocks worldwide, from tuna to sea-urchins.

Tuna stocks in the Atlantic and Mediterranean have fallen by 80 per cent in the last decade. The Japanese hunger for red tuna has encouraged elaborate methods of quota-busting. Large fish can fetch up to \$350,000 on the Japanese market.

Some French and Spanish fishermen catch them small, fatten them up in sea cages and fly them direct to Japan, evading quayside quota counts and inspections. Abalone is in similar, or even greater, demand.

The exquisite-tasting gastropod has already been nearly wiped out by over-fishing, pollution and disease along the western seaboard of the US. It is under intense pressure off southern and western Africa. A world conference of marine biologists forecast this year that it will be all but extinct in African waters by 2007 or 2008.

Australia and New Zealand supply 70 per cent of the world abalone market and impose stringent controls. Even they find it impossible to prevent massive poaching. Last year China imported twice as much Australian abalone as Australians are legally supposed to catch or farm.

This is modest cheating, compared with what is happening on the coasts of Africa. Chinese imports from South Africa are 3 times greater than the official national catch.

Korean boats queue up off west Africa to buy tonnes of abalone at relatively low prices from local divers and fishermen.

A renewed outbreak of a mysterious and mortal disease in native abalone in Normandy this summer has increased fears that the European species is also under serious threat. Spanish stocks have already been severely damaged by pollution and oil spills, so the fishery has virtually closed.

Enter Dr Huchette, 31, a young French engineer and marine biologist, who studied abalone in Australia for three years. He came home with a doctorate, an Edna Everage accent and a bright idea for making money and saving the native French "ormeau" or "ormel". Abalone used to be notoriously difficult to farm. They grew slowly and there was a high casualty rate in the young. A few years ago an Australian scientist devised a method for rearing them on elaborate mixtures of algae, reproducing their feeding habits in the wild. Abalone farming in Australia is now booming.

Dr Huchette and his partner have introduced Australian-rules abalone rearing to France. At Plouguerneau, 32km north of Brest in western Brittany, beside a large, beautiful, rocky sea inlet called the Aber Wrac'h, they have set up Europe's first advanced, large-scale abalone hatchery.

By the end of next year, Dr Huchette expects to have 15 tonnes of abalone a year to sell on to the Asian market. In other words, this one farm, in a shed about the size of a large country garage, would increase French (legal) exports of abalone by 25 per cent. In the longer run, Dr Huchette hopes to produce up to 50 tonnes of abalone a year (€1.5 million at current prices). But his real dream is to encourage the creation of dozens of abalone farms along the Breton coast. "The demand for abalone is there and will not go away," said Dr Huchette, who has also worked in China. "For the Chinese, abalone have become a symbol of wealth. If people have money, they are supposed to display it and, if they give a banquet for their friends and family, that means they are expected to have abalone on the menu."

Dr Huchette is also involved in scientific studies on the threats to the French abalone population. "In France, unlike Australia, there are no reliable statistics and no way of knowing who is taking what from where. All I can do as a scientist is observe what I observe, and hear what I hear, and point out what has happened elsewhere. Overfishing and lack of controls caused the collapse of the stocks in California.

"If we can farm abalone on a large scale, we can create a new industry which will help coastal communities. But we can also reduce the pressure on stocks and help to save wild abalone." In theory, none of Dr Huchette's abalone are ready to eat until the end of 2006. Has he taken a sneak preview? He looks, for a moment, like a child caught with his hand in the

biscuit jar. "Well, actually," he said, "I ate a few the other day." Did he, like Lewis Carroll's oyster-loving Walrus and Carpenter, take the little abalone by the hand before sorting out the ones of greatest size? Did he weep to eat his own children?

"No, of course not. I am French," he boomed. "I adore food of all kinds and I especially appreciate gourmet foods. Farming and then eating the creatures that I rear is no problem at all for me. And I can tell you that the abalone I ate were ... absolutely wonderful."

- INDEPENDENT



## Abalone Fishery Off Southland May Reopen

- Commercial divers convince state panel that they've learned from past overharvesting.

By Kenneth R. Weiss, Times Staff Writer

California Fish and Game commissioners have agreed with former abalone divers to reopen a commercial abalone fishery in Southern California, ignoring the advice of state biologists who warn it could thwart recovery of the delicious mollusk decimated by excessive harvesting.

The decision, which must first pass an extensive environmental review, could mean the return of large abalone steaks in upscale restaurants and markets and a lucrative catch for the abalone divers who have struggled since the commercial fishery was closed in 1997.

Full-size red abalone, poached from waters mostly off Northern California, routinely fetch \$100 apiece on the black market, wardens say. They worry that allowing the hunt for legal, full-size abalone in Southern California waters will make it more difficult to halt poachers who supply Asian markets here and abroad, where abalone is prized as an aphrodisiac — sometimes marketed as a natural Viagra in a shell.

State Fish and Game Department officials understand the powerful allure of reopening the legal harvest of the scarce and pricey commodity.

"It's like pulling \$100 bills from the bottom," said Pete Haaker, a longtime abalone expert and state Fish and Game biologist.

Commercial abalone divers, who earlier this month persuaded the commissioners to allow an experimental commercial catch around San Miguel Island off Santa Barbara County, said they would be vigilant in assessing abalone populations to avoid the mistakes of excessive hunting in the past.

"None of us want to operate a fishery the way we used to," said Jim Marshall, a former abalone diver from Carpinteria who now makes a living collecting sea urchins. "We want a sustainable fishery that can operate over a long time."

Commercial divers argue that Fish and Game managers are being too cautious at a time when red abalone around San Miguel Island have begun to rebound. State biologists said that data were skimpy. They need to do more underwater surveys to know if there are sufficient numbers to sustain a fishery.

The plan of Fish and Game managers "is to wait 30 years and then reopen the fishery," Marshall said. "We don't want to wait. We are going to slow the recovery" of abalone populations "by fishing a little bit. We are not going to stop recovery."

The commissioners' decision, made at a meeting Dec. 9, is likely to ignite another round of abalone wars, pitting recreational divers, biologists and conservationists against commercial divers.

"This is an unbelievable tragedy," said Stephen Benavides, a sports diver who has spent five years helping advise state officials in developing a long-term abalone management plan. The 361-page plan was also adopted at the Dec. 9 meeting, with a few extra pages added in final months at the urging of commercial divers to allow reopening a limited San Miguel Island fishery.

Benavides was incensed at the four of five governor-appointed citizen commissioners who approved the reopening of the abalone fishery. The commission's role is to set the state's fishing and hunting policies, which are then carried out by the Department of Fish and Game.

"The commissioners are failing their duty to protect the resources of California," Benavides said. "And they are ignoring the best informed opinions on abalone in the world — those in the Department of Fish and Game."

Commission President Jim Kellogg, a union leader appointed by former Gov. Gray Davis, didn't return phone calls for comment. At the December meeting, he reiterated his dim view of marine science, saying he would accept the word of fishermen who make their livelihood from the sea "over all of the science in the world."

Fisheries science, particularly the assessment of fish populations or stocks, has proved to be far from exact. For years, scientists who oversaw the abalone fishery have engaged in self-criticism for failing to predict — and halt — the collapse of Southern California abalone.

Beginning in 1942, commercial divers, and some sport divers, engaged in what scientists now consider a textbook case in a serial depletion of a bountiful marine resource. Fishermen first went after the most abundant pink abalone, then went after other types: green, red, white and black abalone.

As a result, most of Southern California's rocky seafloor has been picked clean. White abalone are so rare that they are protected as an endangered species. A disease wiped out nearly all of the remaining black abalone, which are smaller and have tougher flesh and thus were not as marketable.

With only a few remnant abalone populations alive today, some biologists question if abalone will ever rebound in Southern California. The problem, they now understand, is that abalone need to reach a certain critical population density to successfully reproduce. To produce offspring, abalone release eggs and sperm into the water column. The chances of success are small unless the number of spawning adults is high and they are packed closely together.

Red abalone are the most abundant of the species remaining in California. Most are in the cold waters off the North Coast, where the state allows a minimal recreational hunt. Divers cannot be aided by air tanks or other underwater breathing gear, so red abalone deeper than 25 feet remain out of reach.

Recreational divers are forbidden to sell their catch. Some red abalone can be purchased as imports or from one of the dozen or so farms that raise them in tanks along the state's coast. These are usually seen as silver-dollar-size hors d'oeuvres in high-end restaurants or purchased in some markets as small steaks for \$70 to \$100 a pound.

San Miguel Island is believed to have the highest concentration of red abalone in Southern California. Urchin fishermen say they see plenty of abalone that could be harvested, but state biologists want to verify this claim.

They also need a better understanding of how important it is to leave this population intact so that it can help repopulate other areas in Southern California waters.

John Ugoretz, a state Fish and Game official, said upcoming surveys may show there are enough abalone to allow a small "boutique" fishery. The details, he said, would take a year or more to work out, including compiling information needed for a full environmental review required by the California Environmental Quality Act.

Any reopening, he said, would allow some recreational fishing. It's possible, he said, that the department would also recommend following New Zealand's strategy of limiting any hunt to skin divers, forbidding scuba tanks or hookah hoses that deliver air to professional divers.