

Sea Urchin Market

Signals Change in Japanese Seafood Industry



More and More Product Going Directly to Supermarkets and Restaurants

BY DAVID MCRAE, PACIFIC URCHIN HARVESTERS ASSOCIATION

In early November a delegation of eight, including representatives from the Pacific Urchin Harvesters Association, the West Coast green Urchin Harvesters Association and Juanita Rogers, management biologist from DFO, traveled to Japan to investigate the sea urchin market.

During our stay in Tokyo we visited the sea urchin auction at the Tsukiji fish market over three mornings. We learned the mechanics of the auction and the volume of sea urchin roe that is distributed through this market. The auction market has been in decline as a distribution source of sea urchin. More and more product is now being sold directly to supermarkets and sushi restaurant chains. Our delegation also met with 12 sea urchin wholesalers at the Canadian Embassy located in Tokyo. At this meeting each of the Japanese wholesalers expressed their views on the industry, the state sea urchin imports and their concerns for the future of the industry supply.

We then traveled to Sapporo, located on the northern Japanese Island of Hokkaido. There we visited the local fish wholesale warehouse to observe the imported supply of sea urchins. Our host and guide Mr. Hashimoto arranged a visit to a local sea urchin processing plant, Chitose Washo Company, located in Chitose Japan. The plant was in full production, processing green sea urchins from Russia. Most of this product originated from the disputed territory located

at the northern tip of Japan. Both Russia and Japan have laid claim to a few uninhabited islands in this area.

Currently the sea urchin market in Japan is in over-supply. This has caused deflation in the price for urchin roe. Another major concern is the rising Canadian dollar, making the Canadian product relatively more expensive to other nations. The over supply of sea urchins has moved sea urchins away from the classification of a luxury food and is now more of a commodity. Sea urchins are now widely available in most supermarkets and sushi restaurants. Even the lowest quality of sea urchin roe is available to consumers in the form of "cheap sushi", as described by one Japanese wholesaler.



David McRae at Tsukiji Fish Market Auction.

The last night in Tokyo four fishermen that supply Grand Hale Marine with sea urchins, were treated to dinner by Mr. Okazaki, wholesaler for the company in Japan. He reiterated his concerns about the rising dollar and the excess supply of sea urchins. He also described the consumer's desires to know who is catching their sea urchins and where they are coming from. Mr. Okazaki encouraged us to revisit Japan on a more frequent schedule.



For more information on sea urchins and sea urchin fishing in Canadian waters, visit: www.kuroshio.com David S. McRae, Director Pacific Urchin Harvesters Association, and urchin fisherman.



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