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Free-Diving for Abalone in Northern California

To harvest abalone off the California coast, you need lung power—and more than a little stealth



SHELLFISH GAME | Looking for abalone in the kelp

PABLO ABULIAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By James Sturz

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YOU'D THINK it would be easy to creep up on a dinner-plate-size mollusk that has barely any means of locomotion. But there I was, feeling as sleek and furtive as a circus clown as I tried to take an abalone by surprise, wearing a thick, hooded wetsuit and 18 pounds of weights strapped to my waist.

That wasn't even taking into account the foot-long iron I carried (for prying the creatures off rocks), which kept getting tangled in kelp. Or the fact that I was holding my breath.

In the U.S., abalone live along the Pacific Coast, where they are a pretty protected lot. With tasty meat and iridescent shells, the cold-water snails have been overfished around the world, and some species are on the federal endangered list. Washington state forbids any abalone harvesting. Oregon has very strict catch limits. California allows divers to collect 24 specimens a year—but only those that are more than 7 inches across and are found north of San



Divers make their way to the water in Salt Point State Park.

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Francisco Bay. The use of scuba gear or surface-supplied air is also prohibited, making harvesting a sport for the genuinely hardy. Hunters must free-dive among the kelp beds where the creatures hide, risking riptides, exhaustion and accidental entrapment in crevices. Indeed, several abalone-related deaths occur annually.

But that doesn't keep people out of the water—including me. Last August, I signed up for an abalone-diving class held off the coast of Salt Point State Park, about 100 miles north of San Francisco. My classmates included lawyers, software consultants, fundraisers, engineers and a winemaker. We each had to buy a state fishing license and an abalone report card, a long scroll upon which we were required to record our catches.

PHOTOS: ABALONE-DIVING CLASS



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On an overlook above the rocky shore, class began with a primer about how to find the mollusks in the pea-soup-hued water, whose temperature averages 55 degrees in August. (It's colder for the rest of the April-through-November season.) "If you're new to this sport, your body may tell you this isn't a good idea," warned Tom Stone, owner of Sonoma Coast Divers, which ran the class.

He said we would find the abalone tucked under ledges and inside cracks 10 to 20 feet below the ocean's surface—precisely where great snarls of kelp grow. Mr. Stone showed us three empty 10-inch-wide shells, "holy grails," as he called them, challenging to find. Their undersides glimmered with blue-and-green mother-of-pearl. He removed a frozen specimen from a cooler, so we would know what abalone look like intact. A tar-black mantle extended from its sides, along with tiny tentacles.

"Remember, everything looks bigger underwater with a mask," instructor Al Nulty chimed in. "You'll see what looks like a Rolls-Royce hubcap, but it will end up being small."

We finally descend a slippery path to the beach, carrying irons, measuring gauges, fins, snorkels, masks and floats—inner tubes that would allow us to rest

between dives and stash our catch inside their zippered covers. A couple of harbor seals, sunning themselves on a rock, watched us impassively. I heard one of Mr. Nulty's admonitions in my head—"Panic is not your friend"—as I stepped into the ocean and frigid water streamed up the wetsuit's legs. It reached my spine, but then I realized I was not getting any colder.

Teamed with buddies and accompanied by more experienced divers, we swam to the kelp beds that lay a hundred feet offshore. The seaweed blades resembled ribbons of pappardelle, and the bulbs at the surface looked like blown Venetian glass. The idea was to take a mighty breath, dive down a dozen or so feet, spot an abalone through the kelp stalks and pry it off its perch before you ran out of breath. Stealth is just as important as strong legs and lungs; the abalone has a foot that sucks onto rocks the moment it senses a predator coming.



Holding part of the day's catch

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My buddy and I took turns diving and resting. During my initial descents, all I saw on the seafloor were sponges, barnacles and algae. Then I figured out that I could use the kelp stalks as moorings; holding myself relatively still underwater, I started recognizing abalone camouflaged among the rocks. I spotted two or three of the mollusks on each dive—usually once I was out of breath and had to return to the surface.

Eventually, I managed to swim down to one, but, just as I was about to nab it, the abalone's body clamped down. I'd been warned that it's no use trying to budge them after that. I dived again, deeper this time, and managed to take another one by surprise. I pried it loose and came up grinning, only to discover it was too small, which meant my next dive was reserved for putting it back. After only half an hour, the number of divers in the water had begun to dwindle as cold, seasickness and frustration set in. I watched the rubbery figures kick to shore, clinging to their floats.

On my seventh try, I spotted another "ab." I was sure it was larger, but I couldn't wrest it free before running out of air. The current thwarted my efforts to get it on the next dive. I got to 17 feet and spotted another juvenile, wisely letting it be. The next several descents involved more intractable abalone, more exasperated searches through the kelp. I spotted starfish, anemones and a slithery wolf eel, but nothing I'd come for.

Bobbing in the surf and breathing heavily, I decided my 15th dive would be my last. I sucked a deep breath through my snorkel, tucked my legs and kicked. Following a groove between two rocks, I spotted a colossal abalone—and, miraculously, it didn't sense me. I moved my iron into place and started to pry. Thirty seconds later, I was shooting to the surface with a nine-inch abalone in my hands. It turned out to be the largest of the day.

Heading toward the beach, I felt the exhaustion of a long-distance swimmer, mixed with elation. On shore, we marked our report cards, carried our gear uphill and set to removing the abalone from their shells. They looked like massive slabs of foie gras. We sliced them up so we could bread and fry them over a camp stove. But first we pounded the slices with meat tenderizers in the back of a pickup, until the picnic grounds reverberated like a drum circle. As we prepared the feast, only the truly crazy skipped a taste of abalone sashimi.

The Lowdown: Abalone Diving in Northern California

Getting There: Salt Point State Park is 20 miles north of the town of Jenner, on Highway 1, and about a 2.5-hour drive north of San Francisco. An \$8 entry fee applies to vehicles.

Staying There: Salt Point State Park has campsites with toilets but no showers (parks.ca.gov). On the other end of the luxury spectrum, the 157-acre Calistoga Ranch in nearby Napa County has indoor and outdoor showers and a fleet of loaner Mercedes-Benzes (*from \$685 a night, calistogaranch.com*). The resort can arrange custom abalone excursions with Sonoma Coast Divers, as well as nonaquatic adventures.

Diving There: Abalone report cards (about \$22) and fishing licenses (from about \$15) can be purchased at state sporting-goods shops, hardware stores and pharmacies, as well as online (dfg.ca.gov). Sonoma Coast Divers holds abalone-diving classes and picnics in Salt Point State Park (*\$100 per person, plus gear rental, sonomacoastdivers.com*).

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