

# The Great Outdoors

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## A bit about abalone

### Divers' best bet: Coastal waters between Santa Cruz and Half Moon Bay

Fish & Game/Jeff Goyert

THERE ARE SEVERAL questions frequently asked in local restaurants serving abalone: What is an abalone? Where do they come from? How do you catch one? Why are they so expensive?

The abalone — referred to by divers simply as "abs" — is a gastropod, which is really a member of the snail family. It is a univalve, meaning it lives in a single, concave shell. Abalone live in the tidal zone, spending their lives clinging to rocks and slowly grazing for their favorite food — kelp.

Abs start their life free-floating in the ocean currents, later attaching themselves to tidal reefs where they grow for about seven years, protected by fish and game laws until they meet size requirements to be catchable. Because of the ever-pounding surf, abalone tend to seek protected rocks, overhanging ledges and other hard-to-reach areas. And that's a clue as to why they are so expensive: It takes a lot of time and effort to get a bag full of abs.

To get abalone on your own, you have to become an abalone diver. A free diver uses equipment like a wetsuit, mask, fins, snorkel buoyancy device, weight belt, game bag and abalone iron. The state of California also requires an ocean fishing license and a measuring device. (All of the equipment may be purchased or rented at local dive shops.)

April 1 marks the opening of the abalone season North of Monterey. The season will run through November, but is to remain closed during July, the top breeding month. The limit this year is four red abalone, each at least seven inches wide.

The general abalone population has been greatly reduced in the Monterey Bay area. Divers have not caused this as much



Sentinel Fish & Game writer Jeff Goyert, right, gets into his work, and shows off the catch — when the dive is successful.

as the sea otter. Since the sea otters have moved into the bay, the abalone stock has been reduced to zero. The sea otter, protected by wildlife regulations, may look cute when seen floating in the kelp, cracking shellfish with a rock on his chest. However, the sea otter has been a disaster for the Monterey abalone — not to mention the Pismo clam. There is a growing number of shellfish harvesters who maintain the attitude toward the sea otter that, "If you see it, shoot it." It may be okay to think that, but it's illegal to do it.

Divers seeking abalone must head up

the coast and, if you are willing to work for some abs, there are a lot of them between Santa Cruz and Half Moon Bay. The otters don't like the open rough ocean, which is why they came down the coast into Monterey Bay and steer clear of the waters North of here.

For the diver, it is all a matter of hiking into the hard-to-reach coves; indeed, the more difficult the spot is to reach, the better it usually is. A typical dive outing begins early in the morning, before the wind whips up the water. The best time to dive is at low tide, when more of the rocks

are exposed. Minus tides, calm seas and good visibility are an abalone diver's dream. But, more often than not, the water is murky and the ocean is rough.

Having hiked through meadows and along the cliffs, divers then put on their gear in preparation for their attack on the ocean. Constant attention must be paid to the crashing surf and powerful ocean surge; divers must keep in mind they are only "visitors" to the ocean. Once they make their way through the surf line, they can tie their floats up to a strong strands of kelp. This float will be returned to repeatedly for rest breaks and to stash the catch.

The hunt consists of repeated surface dives to the most concealed ledges, cracks and crevices of the rocks, in search of the lair of abalone. North of Monterey, the use of oxygen tanks is illegal; it's all free diving. Ab "irons" are used to pry the catch off the rocks.

Abalone diving is not easy, however the rewards are great. Although a limit is desired, in light of the declining population of abalone, a diver can't feel bad if he or she returns to shore with only one or two. A successful day of abalone diving is not one to be soon forgotten.

Following a successful dive, the cleaning process begins. This consists of using the ab iron to remove the "foot" from the shell. The entrails must then be pulled off the meat and the black membrane scraped from the edges. Once this is done, the meat is sliced thin and pounded and prepared. (Try dipping the meat in eggs, flour, basil and parsley; sautee in olive oil, lemon and garlic for no more than 30 seconds a side.)

Diving for abalone is not easy, but it's worth trying to find what the sea otters missed.