

The Mendocino Beacon, 20180726: Urchin cleanup to help help held in Albion



Michelle

Blackwell - Contributed Divers preparing to shuttle.

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POSTED: 07/26/18, 9:43 AM PDT | UPDATED: 1 WEEK AGO

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Prediver

meeting.

The Albion River Campground was at full capacity. Schooners looked well-populated as well. The vacationers were there, of course, but many of the campers were the sports fishermen gathered together to remove purple urchins and help the kelp.

This was the second urchin cleanup organized by the Watermen's Alliance this summer. The first was held in Ocean Cove, south of Sea Ranch last May.

Many of the divers were repeats, but others were there for the first time. I spoke to divers from Rio Vista, Oakland, Valley Ford, South Caspar and Ukiah. Josh Russo, president of the Watermen's Alliance, was expecting 100 divers over the two-day clean-up at Albion. At 9 a.m. on Saturday, 69 divers had already signed in.

This clean-up was organized differently from the Ocean Cove event. Here sports divers were being shuttled out to the cove on private boats. Kayakers were deployed to take their bags of urchins to a flotilla of commercial boats waiting out in deep-water. The commercial boats with scuba divers were also collecting urchins.

The goal for this clean-up was to remove urchins in both the shallow and deep water surrounding the clean-up area in the hopes that this would reduce repopulation.

Jon Holcomb, a Fort Bragg commercial red urchin fisherman who has been working with the Noyo Center for Marine Science for months to clean up the purple urchins, says, "After three months you see the larger purple urchins moving back into the cleared areas. They are aggressive and will eat anything including fish or shell fish."

Dr. Cynthia Catton, environmental scientist, of California Department of Fish and Wildlife, says repopulation is dependent on the density of the urchins in the surrounding area.

Russo said, “Here [in Albion Cove] we are trying to create a big hole [purple urchin-free] to prevent easy repopulation. At Ocean Cove we created a bunch of little holes.”

That was partly due to the rough water at Ocean Cove and partly due to the logistics at the first event.

Tristin McHugh, North Coast regional manager for Reef Check, has not been able to resurvey Ocean Cove to determine the efficacy of the first clean-up due to rough water but plans to try again next week. Reef Check did pre-survey Albion Cove last Monday, July 16. McHugh said, “The kelp bed on the south side is in good shape and has reached the surface. There is also a kelp bed forming on the north.”

Both these beds are on sandbars. Purple urchins prefer rock beds. McHugh said, “The kelp may be doing better because Albion has been colder due to fresh water coming in and the geographical orientation of the cove.”

ECONOMIC IMPACT

The purple urchin clean-ups are an outgrowth of the decline in abalone along the North Coast. Abalone season was canceled in 2018 because the urchins have decimated the kelp forests that abalone feed on.

Purple urchins’ primary predator is the sunflower starfish which suffered a major setback in 2013, due to a wasting disease that wiped out starfish along the Pacific Coast.

Daryl Sherfey runs the Albion River Campground and says his business was down 20 percent in June.

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be,” Sherfey said. “However, we have been moving from a resource-based campground to a family campground.”

Family campgrounds require services for children like playgrounds. Sherfey says the July and August fishing seasons are his busiest months.

Russo from Watermen’s Alliance pointed out that the urchin clean-ups help the kelp and help local businesses that are suffering from the canceled abalone season.