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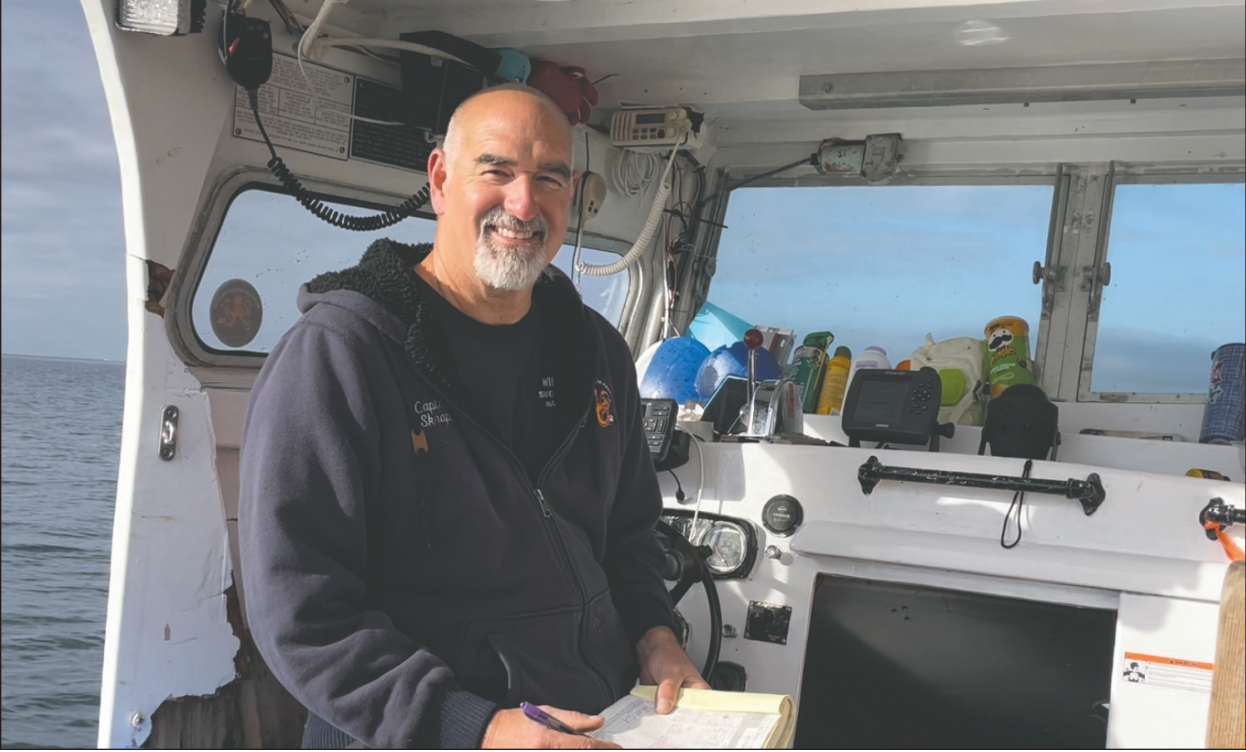
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HARVEST AT SEA



PHOTOS BY COLETTE WEEKS / ANACORTES AMERICAN

Commercial fisherman and diver Chris Sparks of Anacortes sits in his 24-foot Radon boat "office" to do a little paperwork before diving in to harvest sea cucumbers in the San Juan Islands on Labor Day, Sept. 6, 2021. Below, a net loaded with sea cucumbers is hoisted aboard, and Terra Johnson holds a healthy sea cucumber up for the camera before it is processed.

Sea cucumbers focus of local fishery serving niche market

BY COLETTE WEEKS
cweeks@skagitpublishing.com

It's Labor Day, and commercial diver and fisherman Chris Sparks is ready to go to work in "the greatest office in the world."

Much of the workday is spent in the field, or more literally, 20 to 80 feet underwater in the San Juan Islands — cold water that is 52 degrees on this day. The rest is on his 24-foot Radon boat, built specifically for diving fisheries.

The space is efficient. An entire processing center sits right behind the captain's wheel. Part of that setup is a large plastic cooler that will hold the day's catch — sea cucumbers. It doubles as Sparks' office chair.

He cruises out to a site he suspects might be a good place for sea cucumbers. Then he sits on the cooler a minute to



start on the paperwork — filling in a state of Washington log sheet used to monitor what's harvested from where and at what depths.

Like any other fishery, See *Sea*, page A8



Hospital warns of crisis risk with rise in COVID

BY RICHARD WALKER
rwalker@goanacortes.com

Suffering in this community from COVID-19 is real, and hospitals across this county are on the verge of a crisis, Island Hospital CEO Charles Hall said at a community briefing last week.

"We see it every day," he said during the virtual meeting held to address island residents. "We've seen the struggle of the family. We've seen the struggle of the individual coming in, chest discomfort in the lungs, difficult breathing, asking us after they've been diagnosed with COVID, 'Can I have the vaccine now?,' and unfortunately it's too late."

The number of COVID-19 illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths continue to climb locally, straining hospital resources and compelling health officials to again urge residents to get vaccinated.

Prior to August, Island Hospital diagnosed 25-30 positive cases per month. In August, the hospital diagnosed 182, Hall said. The hospital admitted up to five COVID-19 patients per month prior to July. In July and August, that number was 17 and 18, Hall said. Many of those patients were treated in intensive care, and some were placed on ventilators.

Prior to August, there were no deaths at Island Hospital. Then there were four in August and one in September. Countywide, Island

Oct. 18 vaccine deadline looms for health workers

Unvaccinated staff members at Island Hospital will be terminated on Oct. 19, the hospital's leadership team announced Tuesday, and services may need to be reduced if staffing levels do not allow for safe delivery of care.

Most staff and providers of Island Hospital are already vaccinated, but some have either not declared their vaccination intent or have not submitted vaccination records. Island Hospital leadership is working to determine each staff member's intentions as the governor's Oct. 18 vaccination deadline for healthcare workers.

Exemptions will be considered by an internal review committee upon written submission of a medical disability or religious request, the hospital stated. Approval does not guarantee an accommodation can be offered nor does it guarantee continued employment, as accommodations may create undue burden on the organization, the hospital stated.

Hospital, Skagit Valley Hospital in Mount Vernon and PeaceHealth

See *Virus*, page A7

Election 2021: Councilmen vie for mayor

Miller: Military, civilian service prepared him for mayor's office

BY RICHARD WALKER
rwalker@goanacortes.com

* City Council members Matt Miller and Ryan Walters will face off on the Nov. 2 ballot for the position of Anacortes mayor. Current Mayor Laurie Gere is not seeking re-election. The mayor is elected to a full-time, four-year term and serves as salaried chief executive officer of this city of about 18,000 people.

Matt Miller, a retired Navy commander and flight officer, once served

as executive officer of N A S Whidbey Island, a job he said was similar to serving as a mayor of a city. As executive officer, he oversaw 12 departments — among them police, fire, public works, recreation, and sanitation — serving an on-base community of 10,000.



Matt Miller

"I have real-world

experience and leadership in both the public and private sectors, in addition to my 10 years serving on the City Council and Planning Commission," said Miller, a candidate for mayor of Anacortes. "As a career naval officer, I have been in leadership positions and have managed people for most of my adult life."

For 15 years, he and his wife owned Tell Me a Story toy store, which he has said ultimately couldn't compete with

See *Miller*, page A9

Walters a lawyer, planner with goal to 'make some change'

BY RICHARD WALKER
rwalker@goanacortes.com

Ryan Walters has worked in local government for 14 years, but he began developing his public service skills several years before that — in the mid-1990s at Anacortes High School, where he served as president of the Associated Student Body.

Walters went on after graduation from AHS to earn a B.A. at the University of Rochester, studied for a summer at the London School of

Economics, earned a law degree at the University of California-Davis, and served as a civil deputy prosecuting attorney and as assistant planning director of Skagit County.



Ryan Walters

Walters, an Old Town resident, is now planning director for the Samish Indian Nation, a job he said he'll give up if elect-

ed the full-time, salaried, chief executive officer of this city.

Walters said he's tuned in to community needs because of his long history in Anacortes and his work with local organizations, neighborhoods and small businesses.

"I grew up here in Anacortes, my family is

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Sea

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the first trick is finding the product. But beyond that, this is no typical fishing trip, even among commercial fishers.

This is bare-handed fishing while swimming in a weighted wetsuit tied to an oxygen line. The search involves diving to find the cucumber-shaped creatures on the sea floor in poor visual conditions, plucking them up with one hand then putting each in a net sack carried in the other. One advantage: The sea cucumbers can move, but not very fast.

Not a vegetable

Sea cucumbers look a little like their namesake vegetable, at least in shape. But these orange and red bumpy-skinned tubes are actually animals, with many species in oceans all over the world. The ones harvested here are called California sea cucumbers.

Their role in nature is to move the sand around and recycle nutrients on the sea floor, which also helps other sea creatures and their habitat. Scientists call it “ecosystem services,” according to Taylor Frierson, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife sea cucumber fishery manager.

The sea cucumbers’ natural predators are few, but because of the growing appetite for them, they are endangered in some regions. A few decades ago, there was overfishing in Washington, too.

Not anymore. Fish and Wildlife manages sea cucumbers like any other fishery, and they have largely recovered here. The managers set a 200,000-pound limit on this harvest season, but it changes from year to year. Scientific dive surveys and the logs kept by commercial fishers help the state create maps and calculate the sea cucumber population.

The goal when setting the season limit is to only take 5% of the biomass, “leaving 95% there to maintain a sustainable fishery,” Frierson says.

Fast season, hard work

From mid-August through September, 20 boats split the state’s limited allotment of commercial sea cucumber permits. Years ago, there were about 100 permits in Washington until a buyback program reduced that by 3/4 as part of the change made to reduce the overfishing, according to Frierson. More than half of the state’s harvest happens around the San Juan Islands, according to Frierson.

Each permit is allowed 1,800 pounds a week over a seven-day period through the season.

Sparks, who owns Wildcatch Seafood Products, trades diving and driving duties with longtime fellow diver George Tollo.

It’s physically challenging and sometimes dangerous work.

The waters around the San Juans are always moving in various directions, sometimes with the ferocity of a raging river. Even an experienced diver can find trouble sometimes, and Sparks and Tollo can both describe memorable battles with currents.

Sometimes swimming against it isn’t enough, and they start looking for rocks or anything else to hold onto while they get their bearings.

“It’s like being in a Category 3 hurricane underwater,” Sparks says.



PHOTOS BY COLETTE WEEKS / ANACORTES AMERICAN

Chris Sparks of Anacortes prepares to dive near the San Juan Islands on Monday, Sept. 6, 2021, in search of sea cucumbers on the sea floor, with the help of fellow diver and fisherman George Tollo. Below, this photo from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife shows the sea cucumber in its natural habitat. At bottom, Sparks is photographed Saturday, Sept. 11, in front of the cannery in Anacortes that he and his wife bought along with Canadian partner Smokey Bay Seafood. Sparks has big plans for the cannery in coming years.



Harvesting sea cucumbers involves heavy labor both below and above the surface.

Sparks and Tollo take few breaks during the limited sea cucumber season.

Today, Sparks’ wife Terra Johnson will prepare the catch as it comes in, long before the boat returns to the marina.

Cut and toss

Sparks is diving deeper than 30 feet today, but it’s possible to follow him both by the long yellow oxygen line he’s pulling and bursts of bubbles that rise to the surface.

Johnson stands ready for Sparks to bring up the first net full of sea cucumbers. When he surfaces, he grabs a hook from a hoist and attaches the net sack. It holds over 100 pounds of what looks like a squishy, multicolored mess.

The net is lifted over a wooden box, and Tollo opens the bottom to let the sea cucumbers pour out.

Johnson smiles as she inspects the haul. Their skins are fairly thick, and most are plenty long enough to keep.

The state has no size limits, but Sparks, who

has a degree in biology, says sea cucumbers aren’t really mature enough to spawn until about 9 inches long. Sometimes it’s hard to judge the size while diving, but they throw back the smaller ones.

He wants to protect the fishery; it’s his livelihood. Harvesting small ones that haven’t had a chance to reproduce is a waste, he says.

As Sparks gets out of the water and Tollo prepares to dive in, Johnson is busy with a box cutter.

She holds each sea cucumber mouth-end downward over the wooden box. (It has no limbs or face, but it has both an input and output end.) She cuts its underside a couple inches and pulls out its guts.

“It’s mostly sand and mud in there,” Johnson says as she drops the now-flat cucumber into a PVC pipe leading to a bucket. Once full, the bucket is dumped into the large cooler.

Johnson deftly cleans hundreds of sea cucumbers from five net bags before the boat leaves its last dive spot to head home after a full day on the water.

There’s a buyer waiting back at the docks.

These will be sold straight off the boat.

A rolling market

The going price today is \$5 per pound. Not long ago, it was only \$1.25. Then, the buyer didn’t worry about a little extra water weight in the cooler, Sparks says. Today, all of the sea cucumbers are dumped onto a sifter to drain water before they’re weighed.

It’s 485 pounds. Sparks can harvest 1,315 more pounds this week. He will try to get them all.

The buyer will take the sea cucumbers through the next phase, which involves cooking, dehydrating and freezing them for storage. That allows him to hold onto his product until prices rise again.

The market? Mostly China. Sea cucumbers have been a hot commodity there for decades. They can be rehydrated and used in various dishes. Prized for their powers of regeneration, they are also used in medicinal products.

While demand is still strong, politics, taxes, trade issues and the COVID-19 pandemic have all made an impact over the past few years,

causing the market to fluctuate.

Sparks sells the sea cucumbers raw. He has to roll with the market.

Growth and opportunity

On Saturday afternoon, Sparks arrives at what is known as the red cannery off 11th Street in Anacortes. Today is not a sea cucumber day. He’s here to load up 3,000 pounds of live crab that he and his son Nicholas will deliver to Canada.

A little boat trouble interrupted some of his sea cucumber harvest plans this week, so Sparks will try again Sunday to collect the 600 pounds remaining on this weekly allotment.

Sparks has been diving for sea cucumbers, urchins and other edible seafood for 40 years in California and Washington.

His business, Wildcatch Seafood Products, had leased and operated out of the red cannery for several years.

Then in December 2020, Sparks and Johnson fulfilled a long-held dream when they bought the red cannery with Canadian partner Smokey Bay Seafood.

The is one of the last two cannery buildings still standing in this city with its long history of canneries and fish processors. This one, built in 1914, has historically been the Sebastian Stuart cannery, and the name is still painted on the water-facing side.

They’ve left that as the official building name to honor its connection to Anacortes, Sparks says.

While the sea cucumbers are exclusively shipped to Asia, some other products are sold here.

“We buy and ship crab around the U.S., Canada and Asia,” Sparks says.

Green sea urchin sea-

son starts this October, and red sea urchin starts in December. Sparks will dive for those, too.

With the cannery, he sees opportunity to focus on expanding the seafood products offered. For now, there are holding tanks for live crab and a chilling area to lower their body temperature to 34 degrees for safe transport overseas.

Long-term plans include renovating the cannery. Sparks envisions re-establishing a processing center for various seafood, including fish. He’s renovating a bigger boat for the diving part of his operation.

He also would like to set up part of the plant for aquaculture, such as growing oyster and geoduck seed.

He hopes to find ways to help fisheries become self-sustaining. One way is by educating people about them, so he sees a public-facing role for the cannery — retail sales and even school tours.

Sea cucumber seeds aren’t possible yet — not enough research has been done — but Sparks sees it as a future solution that could one day help reestablish hard-hit areas and preserve “a strong and growing fishery for continued generations.”

Frierson says there is already some research on growing them from larval to adult size, though using sea cucumber seed commercially is likely years away.

“There’s still a lot to learn about how to do it efficiently,” he says.

Soup and salad?

Sea cucumbers aren’t found on many menus in the U.S., and a domestic market won’t happen overnight.

Sparks and Johnson have tried the sea cucumbers. Johnson preferred the meat diced into strips in a stir fry.

“It tastes kind of like clam strips,” she says.

She’s also tried the skins but was unimpressed with the texture. Some things are an acquired taste.

It could happen. The U.S. has acquired a taste for sea urchins, which are now popular in many sushi restaurants.

In parts of Asia, sea cucumbers are now being rehydrated and sliced into ringlets for salads and soups, something that could catch on here, Sparks says.

“There is a small U.S. market in the Asian communities, and it’s slowly growing,” he says.

See a video about the harvest at goanacortes.com.

* Colette Weeks is editor of the Anacortes American and director of content for Skagit Publishing.