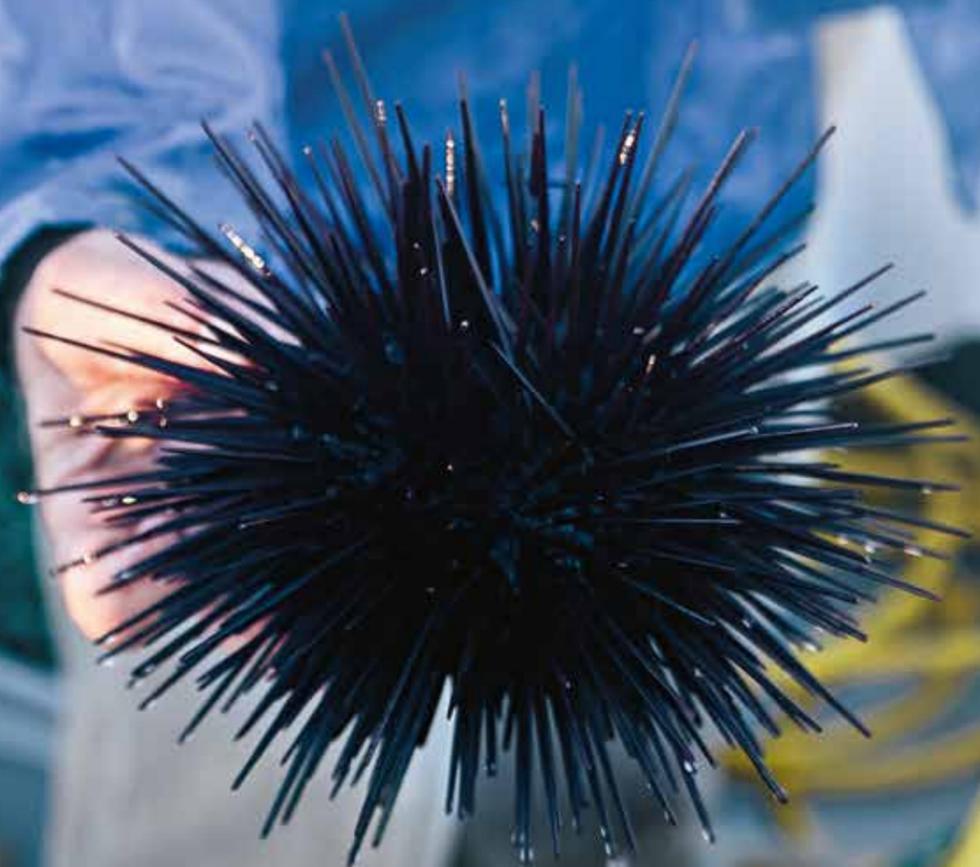


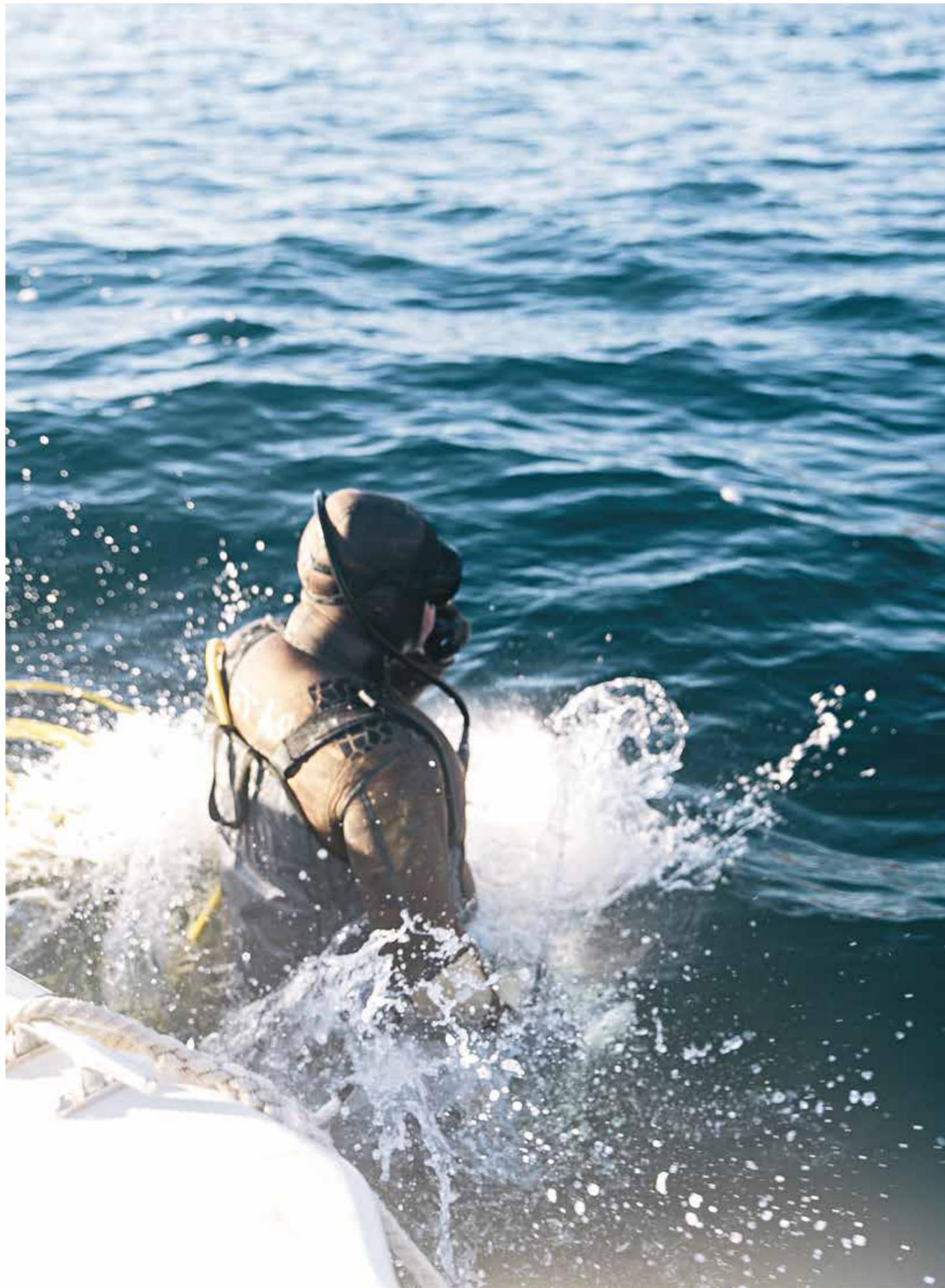
Keith Browne prepares for a dive. A diver all his life, Keith says the best things about being in the water is "the amazing sea creatures and the silence". **FACING PAGE** The spikey sea urchin may look formidable but its roe makes for delicious eating. The colour of urchin species can vary widely from deep red to dark purple and black.

## DIVING DEEP

KEITH BROWNE HAS PUT SEA URCHINS ON THE MENU AT TOP RESTAURANTS, WHILE HELPING REGENERATE THE OCEAN FLOOR ON THE FAR SOUTH COAST OF NSW.

WORDS BARBARA SWEENEY PHOTOGRAPHY ABBIE MELLE





**ABOVE** The air compression hose is Keith's lifeline. His deckhand Andrew Curtis keeps a careful eye on the line the entire time Keith is in the water. **FACING PAGE** Jumping in. Keith and his divers hit the water most days when the weather is kind.

WE'RE A COUPLE OF HUNDRED metres offshore and a half hour into a five-hour dive session when the first bag breaks the surface of the water. It's a blur as it flies aboard in a fine spray of seawater — yellow tubing, fluoro-green nylon webbing and a spikey cargo of 50 kilograms of red-purple sea urchins.

Andrew Curtis, deckhand on *Soul Urchin*, sets to emptying the bag and packing away the urchins, all the while manoeuvring the boat and keeping an eye on the hookah hose — the compression air hose that's attached to the man below — and the tell-tale bubbles that rise to the surface as the diver moves about. At the other end of the hose, 10 metres below, is Keith Browne, owner of South Coast Sea Urchins.

Sea urchins are invertebrates, a member of the phyla classification of echinoderms and a close relative of the starfish, and have never been a full-time fishery in the waters off Pambula on the far south coast of NSW — until now.

They're considered by many a pest: they breed prolifically and feed aggressively on algae in sub-tidal zones, reducing the ocean floor to a white, barren seascape. With no food and a reduced habitat, the number of the

commercially valuable abalone and crayfish in the area has contracted as sea urchins have proliferated.

When Keith, 53, arrived in Pambula in 1998 it was in search of a diving job — like his father before him, Keith was a champion spear fisherman in New Zealand, where he'd been raised. After living in Melbourne and working in a seafood factory for eight years, it was time to get back into the water. "I left my wife Kath and the kids at home while I looked for work up here," he says. "It didn't take me long to become known and to get work as a nominated diver for a couple of fellows with abalone licenses."

The move wasn't straightforward for Kath, 51, who followed Keith to Pambula two years later with their two children, Hayley, now 25, and Dalton, 22. "My whole family is in Melbourne and I found it really hard to leave. But, I knew Keith. I knew he loved the water and I knew that's where he wanted to be. I said I'd give it two years — and we're still here 18 years on. It's been fantastic."

After a few years diving for abalone, Keith found the ecological impact of the sea urchins impossible to ignore. >



Andrew holds a large, just-harvested sea urchin, which has five symmetrical sections. Inside each is an edible creamy roe; Keith back on dry land. **FACING PAGE** It takes about half an hour to fill the catch bag and each haul is about 50 kilograms.

Then, in 2004, the abalone industry hit rock bottom when quotas were cut. “The situation made me think outside the square,” says Keith. “There were too many divers and too few abalone. Plus, I knew that there was a market for sea urchin in New Zealand.” With that realisation, Keith and Kath invested in a second-hand boat and all the necessary equipment to process sea urchins and started their business in 2005.

What Keith has discovered in the 13 years since is that, by managing the number of urchins he takes from an area and only diving specific locations once a season, the ocean floor can be regenerated and habitat restored. The stunning outcome has been an increase in abalone numbers and better quality sea urchin roe — colour, texture and taste are all improved with a better diet.

“You’re always looking forward,” says Keith. “When you take sea urchins, it’s as much about what you’re leaving behind to harvest in three years’ time as what you have in your catch bag. Reducing the numbers of urchins in an area allows seaweeds to flourish, which provides more and better quality food for the urchins and therefore better

quality roe. But it also means that abalone will return to spawn and create new colonies. We’re going to see a real change in biodiversity in the future if we keep doing this.”

Keith and Kath’s work is paying dividends. “In our first year of operation, there would have been less than 10 per cent of A-grade urchins in our catch,” says Keith. “Now it’s more.” The quality is exactly what top restaurants have been looking for and South Coast Sea Urchins have become sought-after. Leading chefs, among them Melbourne’s Shannon Bennett and Peter Gilmore from Quay in Sydney, showcase them on their menus. It’s not easy to find the words to describe the taste and texture of a sea urchin to the uninitiated. “People compare them to oysters and reckon the taste lies somewhere between that and a scallop,” says Keith. Fresh from the sea they smell clean and briny and taste smooth and creamy.

“It’s been a 20-year commitment and a lot of heartache,” says Keith. “But I didn’t want to be the guy who had an idea and didn’t have a go.” *CS*

For more information, visit [southcoastseaurchins.com.au](http://southcoastseaurchins.com.au) or telephone 0447 019 188



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