

New industry growing from invasive species

Sea urchins destroying abalone reefs are being exported to Asia, says **Dean Lisson**

IT'S not every day you get to help stop degradation of our environment and kickstart a new export industry, but that is exactly what an innovative incentive scheme is doing.

Over the past decade, rising water temperatures in currents have enabled the southerly incursion of longspined sea urchin — *Centrostephanus Rodgersii*, better known as Centro — down Tasmania's East Coast.

It is estimated there are now about 18 million urchins at sites along the East Coast.

Centro occur naturally in NSW waters but are a marine pest in Victoria and Tasmania as the urchin has gradually increased its range down.

There is plenty of scientific and anecdotal evidence to show Centro, which eats kelp and algae, has damaged the health of the inshore reef ecosystem resulting in the creation of large underwater barren areas.

This has displaced abalone from previously productive beds. While other factors are also involved, the overall abalone harvest from the Eastern Fishing Zone had dropped 67 per cent in recent years, representing a loss of \$49 million export revenue.

To put this loss into a broader context, if the annual commercial harvest from the Eastern Zone abalone fishery remains depressed at current levels, more than \$1 billion will be lost from the state economy over the next decade.

To counter the urchins, the Tasmanian Abalone Council introduced in 2016 a scheme to provide a financial incentive for divers to collect Centro urchins to be sent to a factory for processing for the fledgling sea urchin roe export industry.

Urchin divers receive from the Abalone Industry Development Fund 75c/kg payment for harvesting Centro. They are also paid by the processor for their catch — initially also 75c a kilo but that price has more than doubled over the past two years as the export market grows.

Initially the scheme targeted two reefs affected by Centro invasion — Cape Pillar to the northern tip of Fortescue Bay in the South-East, and north of St Helens. However, due to its success, the scheme has been expanded to include yearround harvest in any location between Eddystone Point and Cape Pillar. The weight of Centro harvested under the TACL urchin subsidy program to date is 357,000kg, which amounts to about 1,100,000 urchins removed from between the St Helens/Bay of Fires region south to Maria Island.

So far this season the major buyer of Centro, RTS Paua Co P/L located south of Margate, has processed 146 tonnes and is estimating to process 480 tonnes by mid-2019, a substantial

increase over previous years.

About 95 per cent of the urchin roe is exported to Asia with the balance entering the domestic market.

The TACL has invested \$200,000 in the subsidy program from the AIDF.

AIDF funding for the subsidy finished in mid-January and it has been replaced by funds accessed from the recently established \$5.1 million Abalone Industry Reinvestment Fund.

The AIDF is a longstanding government funding commitment to the abalone industry to fund projects to the industries benefit.

The AIRF is a recent significant commitment from the Government of \$5.1 million over five years to support the sustainability and productivity of the eastern zone of the abalone fishery.

The program is part of a multifaceted and co-operative approach by the abalone and sea urchin industries, the State Government and research institutions such as the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, to slow down the spread of the longspined sea urchin and aid the recovery of affected habitat.

The Tasmanian abalone and urchin industries have liaised closely since 2013 to achieve a properly structured and resourced harvest strategy to maintain a healthy and biodiverse inshore reef ecosystem where abalone and urchin can coexist to the benefit of both sectors.

More work is needed to rehabilitate barren sea beds and prevent further expansion of barrens. All stakeholders are looking at a range of options from other jurisdictions, including Norway, but TACL's financial incentive program is working.

Dean Lisson is TACL chief executive.