



Spiny delicacy: 'Tehe-tehe' sea urchins being served on plates as a meal.

A 'spiny' source of income

Unimas researchers conducts study to identify species of sea urchins with commercial value

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KUCHING: At first glance, sea urchins may look threatening but these spiny creatures have the potential to be a source of extra income for the people.

Researchers from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) is now carrying out a study to identify species of sea urchins that have commercial value besides reassessing the current population of the creatures.

"Aquaculture techniques in sea-ranching may be developed in the future so that sea urchins can be bred in captivity and exported in bulk to countries that have high demand for them," Unimas said in a press statement yesterday.

At the same time, Unimas is stepping up efforts to obtain more information about the breeding season, and has plans to create artificially-produced sea urchin seeds to be released into the wild.

Sea urchins are marine organisms that inhabit the depths of coral reefs and rocky shores that are covered with seaweed.

Spherical in shape, they possess thorns

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or spines all over their bodies as their defence mechanism against predators.

Urchins are typically divided into two main types based on the length of their spines.

Those with longer ones are feared by scuba divers for their needle-sharp spines that can puncture skin easily and cause severe injuries.

On the other hand, sea urchins with shorter spines are prized for their eggs, especially



Furball: The short spined *T. pileolus* sea urchin is edible and harvested by many of Sabah's ethnic tribes.

in Japan.

In Sabah, the Bajau, Suluk, Kokos and Ubian tribes harvest the creatures, particularly their eggs, to be sold and eaten as a delicacy.

The long spined sea urchins are called *tayum* in Sabah, while the shorter spined species is called *tehe-tehe*.

Sea urchins are sold in wet markets at varying prices depending on their type and location.

Tayum eggs are usually eaten raw, selling for RM2 to RM5 per pack.

Tehe-tehe, meanwhile, are sold from RM1 to RM2 for every three urchins with their skin intact to be cooked into *oko-oko*, a traditional Bajau delicacy.

In comparison, sea urchin eggs can go from RM36 to RM60 for every 80g in America while in Japan, an urchin can cost as much as RM18.

However, further uncontrolled harvesting of these creatures may affect marine ecology and life in the long run.

Moreover, information and knowledge about sea urchins in Malaysia is very limited compared to that in Japan and America.

Japan's Fishery Research Centre has taken the initiative to produce several species of sea urchin seeds every year to be sold to fishermen around the world.

Seeds that are not sold will be released back into the wild to help increase the local population.