

## Community Comment – August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014

By Jon Sapper  
Abalone Diving

I love hunting Easter eggs. But, when I became a teenager and being 3 feet taller than the other hunters, it didn't seem appropriate to run over and snatch an egg out from underneath the hands of a 4 yr. old. So I took up abalone diving, which is really nothing more than the adult version of an Easter egg hunt. OK, OK, it's a little more dangerous, but the adrenaline is about the same.

This is my 46<sup>th</sup> year of diving the North Coast waters for abalone which is certainly the prize jewel of the sea. A local gentleman taught me how to do it. I remember the first time he took me. It was a calm clear day and we swam out from shore in about 30 feet of water. He said, "Watch me". I floated on the tube with my face in the water, watched him dive down to the bottom, swim around, grab 4 abalone and come back up. He said, "There's lots of 'em down there. Dive down and get some." Being novice, I took a breath, dove under the water and swam.... and swam.... and swam and never did get to the bottom before I had to come back up. "Too deep", I said. I went in shallower.

Some folks have asked if I'm afraid of sharks. I said, "No, not afraid.....Petrified!" Thankfully, I haven't seen any, but in the 70's when the movie Jaws came out, I saw it on a Friday and went diving the next day. After I swam out and taking my first dive I started humming that music....nananananana. Scared myself to death. I need to stop singing this right now or go home.

Back then you could take 5 abalone a day, no seasonal limit. Today, you can only take 3 per day and 18 per year. That's actually enough. I go to the same five places every year and there are just as many abs today as there were 46 years ago. It's estimated over 250,000 abs are poached each year and sold for up to \$150 apiece in the Bay Area and up to \$1,000 per pound in some overseas markets. That's crazy.

It is a fun sport, but yes, it is dangerous. An average of 5-6 people die each year doing it. I did have fun last week, though. My great nephew went for the first time and I went with him. With a bit of nostalgia, the person who taught me how to dive also went. The last time he and I dove together was 40 years ago. He's

close to 70 now and yes he dove in 30 feet of water comfortably. Unbelievable. During our dive there were two seals playing around us. One nibbled at my fins and stayed within a few feet of me the whole time. It was a short dive though, grabbing my 3 abs and getting out of the water quickly. Sharks love to eat seals.....and I don't think I can outswim a seal.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.