



# new info

beche-de-mer

## Beche-de-mer processing—A little more effort to get much more money while saving precious resources

by Johnson Seeto<sup>1</sup>

Primary beche-de-mer processing is well-known among the fishers in the Pacific. Sea cucumbers have been collected, boiled, slit, re-boiled, gutted, smoke-dried whole, bagged and then sold to Asian buyers for about 100 years. In earlier times of this period, European or Asian beche-de-mer merchants would use local labour to collect and process the holothurians. Nowadays, the locals sell their processed product to Asians but the processing technique has not changed.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (formerly South Pacific Commission) has produced various versions of its Handbook No. 18 called Beche-de-mer of the South Pacific Islands (1974), Beche-de-mer of the Tropical Pacific (1979) and Sea Cucumbers and Beche-de-mer (1994). The primary processing of holothurians is well documented in these booklets and widely used. Some species such as *Stichopus chloronotus* and *Holothuria scabra* will require special processing treatment.

After the dried holothurians have been bought by the Asian buyers locally, they are usually sold whole to markets in Asia. What happens between the time the whole beche-de-mer leave our shores (or enter local Asian premises) and end up as beche-de-mer soup or holothurian cooked with chicken in restaurants has never really concerned us because we do not eat them. While the way that we process holothurians now preserves the product, final processing will do the same too.

The final processing by some local companies or Asian factories abroad will require the re-boiling of our dried beche-de-mer to soften them. The outer skin, mud and sand are then scrubbed off totally. The 'inner skin', mouth piece and latitudinal/lon-

gitudinal muscles are totally removed. The cleaned animals are then re-boiled and diced into small pieces for soup or as larger chunks for adding to Asian meals.

The diced and cleaned beche-de-mer are then re-dried (usually by sun or oven) on trays, packaged in plastic bags and placed in a nice convenient box for sale to consumers at a high price. The final product can remain in the box for a long time provided it is dry and packed in an air-tight plastic bag. Final processing does not require elaborate factories. The same process can also be done in a restaurant and the diced product can be used immediately without drying or be frozen for later use.

With slightly more effort, local fishers can have value added to their product. Rather than sell whole, uncleaned and dry beche-de-mer to Asian middlemen now, locals can final-process them (from live to diced) while saving effort and resources (firewood, fuel and water) and also get a higher price later.

Though some buyers in Fiji will buy live animals (only high-priced species) because they want to do all of the processing themselves, we as Pacific Islanders should also try to do processing. While we may produce an inferior product in the beginning, by trial and error we will eventually get it perfect.

To encourage final production techniques, Fisheries Departments and Trade-Investment Boards should try to help establish markets in Asia. This may be the hardest part to achieve, but an excellent product will gain market share, especially if it is cheap. Workshops should be conducted by Asian buyers to train locals to do final processing

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well. The development banks should give loans to allow fishers to access equipment for final processing. In this way, we will try to eliminate the middle-person, keep earnings in our own countries, create more jobs locally and get more money for our precious marine resources.

We should not forget that there is a local market, too, for final processed beche-de-mer for local Asian consumers who eat it or export it overseas as gifts. In the Suva Market, local fishers sell boiled holothurians to local Asians who then final-process the product at home.

Final processing of holothurians produces organic waste which should be disposed of carefully.

## References

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## Beche-de-mer markets and utilisation

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Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Korea, are major consumers of dried fishery products such as sharkfins, beche-de-mer, fish maws, dried molluscs, etc. Japan, though a leading market for fishery products, has a considerably lower beche-de-mer consumption than other Asian countries.

The market for beche-de-mer is dominated by only two trading nations, namely Hong Kong/China and Singapore, although products are imported from all over the world. Imports from South Pacific Island countries consist of high-value species of dried beche-de-mer.

The Asian market for beche-de-mer is estimated to be worth US\$ 60 million annually. Seven countries account for almost 90 per cent of the total trade of fresh/frozen/dried beche-de-mer, with an average quantity of 13,000 mt.

Almost 95 per cent of the beche-de-mer is imported in dried form. A small volume of fresh, chilled and frozen products is imported into Hong Kong and Taiwan for speciality restaurants.

Generally dried beche-de-mer from the Pacific Island nations (PINs) are imported by Hong Kong and Singapore. In 1995 Singapore imported 135 mt of dried products, mainly from Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, and Hong Kong bought about 900 mt the same year (Table 1).

**Table 1: Imports of fresh/frozen/dried beche-de-mer, 1992–1994**  
(Q = mt, V = US\$ 1,000)

Country		1992		1993		1994
HongKong	Q	7,030	Q	7,401	Q	7,281
	V	35,136	V	29,774	V	35,136
China*	Q	2,423	Q	3,508	Q	3,163
	V	N/A	V	9,140	V	8,260
Singapore	Q	1,435	Q	880	Q	1,242
	V	11,001	V	6,953	V	11,341
Malaysia	Q	401	Q	335	Q	400 (e)
	V	1,081	V	761	V	1000 (e)
Taiwan	Q	1,191	Q	1,135	Q	1,124
	V	9,229	V	6,030	V	5,543
Korea	Q	18	Q	21	Q	25
	V	265	V	327	V	400 (e)
Japan	Q	40	Q	17	Q	17 (e)
	V	1,263	V	635	V	635 (e)
<b>Total</b>	Q	12,538	Q	13,297	Q	13,252
	V	55,018	V	53,620	V	62,315

Note: (e) estimate; \* imports from Hong Kong only

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