

Interview of Peter Halmay, Sea Urchin Fisherman
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By Anna Talley, 2nd Grade, McKinley Elementary School

1. Anna: What kind of fish do you catch?

Pete: I dive for sea urchins. Sea urchins are a kind of echinoderm like sea stars and sea cucumbers. Everything a fisherman catches he calls fish even though they are not true fish. Here in San Diego we also have people who fish for things like crabs, shrimp, or sea urchin, like I do.

2. Anna: How do you catch your fish?

Pete: I catch them by SCUBA diving. I go diving and I have an iron hook that I use to detach them from the rocks. Then, I pick them up by hand and I put them in a basket. When the basket fills up, I take them up to the surface.

3. Anna: Do you catch a lot of colorful fish or sealife? What colors are they?

Pete: Remember that I'm a diver so the funny thing about color is that when you go down about 30-40 ft under water, the red colors of the rainbow disappear. So everything below that depth where I catch fish all has kind of a greenish brownish color—it doesn't have much color. It's only when you bring it up, when it comes to the surface, that the colors come out. So if I catch a fish and it's bleeding a little, the blood looks green. If I bring it up, it looks red. It's a really funny thing.

The most colorful fish I've gone diving for are not fish, they are hydrocoral. When you get down on the bottom the reef looks like a rose garden filled with rosy red, and purple.... All kinds of different colored coral that grow like bushes. There are hundreds of feet of this coral. But again, when on the bottom, I have to picture what color they are. I have to picture which shade of brown the rose color is compared with the purple because on the bottom they are just different colors of green and brown.

4. Anna: How long do you go out fishing for?

Pete: I used to leave San Diego and be gone for 20 days. I'd leave San Diego, go out for 2 days and come back to the Port at San Pedro and then go out again and bring the fish to shore 2 days later farther up the coast. We'd criss cross our way up the coast that way. I'd be gone from San Diego about 20 days of each month. Now I day-boat. Day boating is going out in the morning and coming back at night. So now I go out in the morning about 9 o'clock and come back by 6 o'clock.

5. Anna: What would you say your favorite fish is and why?

Pete: I'd have to say my favorite fish is sea urchin. The main reason is that's what I sell. So I want everyone to say it's their favorite fish so I can sell a lot.

Anna: Well, that's not my Dad's favorite fish¹, that's for sure.

Pete: Well, we're going to have a talk with that guy, I'll tell you that right now. We'll have to break him in right! [laughter]

6. Anna: What is your favorite part about fishing?

Pete: The funny thing is, every fishermen you'll ever talk to will say the favorite part is heading home and not the part about catching a lot of fish. When you go out you worry about whether the weather is going to be bad, whether I can catch any fish, how many am I going to catch? Then you fill the boat up and turn the boat around to start heading for home. The work is done and you're relaxing, and you know you have money in the bank. You get to come home and play with your kids, your wife and your dog. [laughter] You're looking forward to it. So, in two words, "heading home" is my favorite time of fishing.

7. Anna: Is there anything you don't like about fishing?

Pete: The hardest part was being away from my family. When you're out to sea for many, many days your kids grow up and before you know it they've finished school and left home while you were away. You get used to it but you never like it. That's why I changed to day boating. Now, I'm home every night and I went to the kids' ballet, and I went to their water polo games, and I went to the graduations whereas I missed all those things when I was out fishing.

8. Anna: What did you study in school or learn somewhere else to get you ready to be a fisherman?

Pete: Fishing you ultimately have to learn by experience. It's not one of those professions you can study in a book because even if you read up about it you won't learn all you need to know out on the water. Now, the basic subjects in school can get you ready for that. To navigate the boat, fish responsibly, and come back and sell your catch you rely on math and science, and reading, writing and communicating.

What I studied later in school was engineering and what engineering taught me that helps me now is to think systematically. When I want to accomplish something or solve a problem, I do it by thinking it through one step at a time-- what's the first thing you've got to do to get started? What's the second thing? What's the third thing? That's what engineering taught me. If you're building a house, you put one brick on top of the other. All the tasks that we accomplish in life are like putting one brick on top of the other. For example, to start this new fishermen's dockside market we had to break it down into about 65 steps to get the market planned and set up and running. That systematic problem solving was what I learned with engineering.

9. Anna: What made you interested in being a fisherman?

Pete: Fishing isn't a job, it's a lifestyle. You don't catch fish, you ARE a fisherman. I like the freedom of going out on the ocean, getting away from everything and when I jump in the water and go diving, even after 45 years, it's always different. I don't have to argue

with people, I don't have to deal with people, I just deal with nature. I think the freedom is the best part of fishing.

10. Anna: Do you know any fishermen who are women?

Pete: Very few. There are not many women who go into fishing. I don't know if it's that they're too smart and they get better jobs, or why, but the fact is as a reporter like you probably makes more money than I do right now. [laughter] I know the three women fishermen out of about 150 fishermen in San Diego. So about 2%.

11. Anna: What would you tell kids who want to be fishermen? Any advice?

Pete: If you love the water and you really like to do it, then you'll be a good fisherman. It's not a job that you take to make money, you have to really like it. I'd recommend that when you're old enough, you get out on a fishing boat and work as a crew member, and see what it's like. And if you like it, then you do it.

12. Anna: Do you have anything you would like to add?

Pete: I'm glad you asked me all these questions because I love talking about fishing. If anybody stops me on the street, I talk fishing to them.

Anna: Thank you

Pete: Thank you.

¹ My dad likes sea urchin just fine, but his favorite fish is the California killifish, a small fish that lives in local salt marshes and is not food for humans.