

Diver feels no 'urchincy' about job

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I was diving along this shallow reef off Carpinteria with a net bag in my hand, scooping up sea urchins with a little hand rake and thinking, wow — this is like getting paid a lot of money for picking up Easter eggs.

Little did I know.

I was out on a test dive, with two other commercial divers waiting up above to see what I could come back with before they'd agree to take me on as one of their divers. I didn't care that I was the only woman in Santa Barbara enlisting to dive sea urchins commercially — I wanted to pay my bills, that was all.

I was told a person could make \$400 a day diving sea urchins, and I thought just two days a month with this diving would fill the holes in my checkbook.

Instead, I got holes in my fingers, my wetsuit, and finally the net bag I was dragging around the reef.

Those big bags that urchin divers use get

heavy when they're filled, so there is always some sort of flotation device attached to them that can be inflated underwater with air from the regulator.

My first mistake in this diving exercise was to fail to notice there was already air in my flotation device when I jumped into the water. So, while my two would-be partners watched in disbelief, I kicked and kicked and could never get beyond five inches of the surface.

They were laughing like mad when I finally gave up.

Then I finally got down on the reef, and with my little hand rake I started shoveling black subsea pin cushions into my bag like mad. I would show those guys up above that girls could do this thing, too.

For an hour I raked and raked.

As the bag got heavier and heavier, I would occasionally take my regulator and blow air into the little flotation device. That way, I lightened the load and continued collecting. My dive was going to produce

the greatest harvest known to man.

Finally, I began the long swim back to the boat, dragging my loaded net behind me.

Just before I surfaced, however, I turned to see why everything had seemed so light and easy.

The slip-knot at the bottom of the net, which divers simply pull to unload the sea urchins, had undone itself during my swim back to the boat and every single sea urchin I'd collected had trickled out and were now spread all over the reef. I mean, they were all gone forever.

Actually, there was one sea urchin left — a little purple guy, stuck in the net.

So, after diving for over an hour, I now surfaced to show my fellow divers the little purple urchin that was stuck in my big mesh bag, and as they laughed louder than before, I resigned.

And, to this day, I keep my commercial diving license taped to my word processor at work — just to remind me of how difficult a job can really be.