

COLUMN ONE

In deep with the sea urchins



Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times

Terry Herzik pours warm water into his exposure suit to brace himself against the 52-degree water around Santa Barbara Island.

Terry Herzik assumed he'd be through with commercial diving by now. A weary 61, he's tethered to a dangerous and depleted industry.

By Joe Mozingo, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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The Sunstar's ancient twin diesels fire up like an old man clearing his throat. Terry Herzik cocks his good ear to listen. They are losing compression, but sound as if they should make the three-day trip.

Dawn glows faintly behind the gantry cranes and shuttered canneries that overlook Fish Harbor, a blighted abscess of Terminal Island.



 PHOTO GALLERY

[The old man and the sea urchins](#)



MAP

Herzik climbs into the door-less wheelhouse through a window, trying not to strain a hernia he tore putting up the Christmas tree while his two sons were home from college. His partner throws off the dock ropes. Herzik eases the throttles down, and the battered orange-and-gray boat chugs out of the harbor.

The stink and scrape of the port slowly recede. The sea begins to roll in big loping swells, a light wind cross-hatching the surface. He sets the course to 240 degrees southwest.

Herzik dives for sea urchins and sea cucumbers, considered delicacies in Asia. He is 61 and built solid by the work, thick in the shoulders and neck. His hands are knots of callus, muscle and buried urchin spines.

He thought he'd be out of commercial diving years ago. This is no job for an aging body. Divers spend hours in icy water, dragging 300-pound bags of urchins and sea cucumbers from the sea floor. They are at sea for days at a time, often during bad weather, in rickety, overloaded boats. They risk capsizing, drowning and shark attacks. More than half of the roughly 175 full-time divers in the industry have suffered decompression sickness, the potentially fatal "bends."

Like so many cowboy-types who flocked to the industry as it boomed in the 1970s and '80s, he is now heading into his senior years on a youthful dream that has grown more complicated with age.

Herzik can't see a way out. There is no 401(k) in his line of work. And his and his wife's financial planning was always aimed at their two sons' education. They took out second loans on their Redondo Beach home to put them through 13 years of prep school in Palos Verdes, and then sent them to two of the top liberal arts schools in the nation.

This has allowed little for retirement, at a time of diminishing returns. The urchin industry has been in decline for years, as local stocks are depleted and divers in Chile and eastern Russia flood the market. Herzik tries not to contemplate whether he will still be huffing out of the port at 75 -- or, worse, dying out there, in the empty blue.

After 36 years in the business, he has a more layered relationship with his calling than in his youth. There's drudgery and anxiety and a sense of mortality -- and a perennial sense of wonder exploring an offshore wilderness that few Californians ever see.

When his children were younger, they would beg to hear stories of his encounter with the great white shark off Catalina, or the sea lion that jumped into his tiny cabin when he was sleeping.

"Dad, what'd you see this trip?" the boys would ask when he walked through the door, grizzled, exhausted, smelling of diesel and ocean. "Anything cool happen?"

"Oh, I saw a massive pod of dolphins extending to the horizon," he would say, grandly, and sit down and tell them about his journey.

His younger son Nick, now a 19-year-old sophomore at Williams College in Massachusetts, recalls how proud he was when his dad brought a bunch of live sea creatures to his first-grade class: brittle stars and spider crabs and lobsters.

As he grows older, Andrew, graduating this month from Middlebury College in Vermont, marvels at his dad's strength and self-reliance.

"They say you come to a point where you realize your father is mortal," says Andrew, 23. "I haven't. He's almost indestructible in my mind."

Yet the sons know there is anxiety stirring in their father.

"He knows he cannot do this forever," Andrew says.

Terry Herzik's patch of the global economy is the four Channel Islands southwest of Los Angeles. Today Herzik and his co-diver, Gary Thompson, are headed to Santa Barbara Island, a wild, uninhabited square mile of plunging cliffs and roaring elephant seals about 50 miles off San Pedro.

The sea urchin market is overloaded right now, and his buyers don't want any of the spiny creatures until the quality of their roe -- the salable part of the animal, sold as uni in sushi bars -- improves. This has put many of the 30 or so battered boats in Fish Harbor out of work. Herzik can't afford to stand down. So on this trip, he's in search of "cukes."

Warty sea cucumbers are vile-looking creatures -- the size of their namesake vegetable, wormy in texture, with no eyes and covered with black-tipped bumps. They have no defenses against predators, but almost none will deign to eat them.

In China, sea cucumber flesh is dried as food and considered to have healing qualities.

Cukes are a gamble this time of year. At the end of every fall, they go into hiding to perform a quirky ritual: ejecting their internal organs and growing new ones. Herzik can only hope they are back.

Midmorning, past the rugged west tip of Catalina, the water has gone from green to deep cobalt and is smooth as oil. Whales puff white geysers in the distance. All that can be seen of the mainland are the snowy tops of mountains.

By noon, the boat is off the jagged shores of Santa Barbara Island. Sea lions swarm the boat, watching and playing. "Welcoming committee!" Herzik says in a booming voice. His family calls this his boat voice -- Capt. Herzik.

All around the island, waves explode through blowholes in the volcanic rock. Thousands of elephant seals and sea lions line the shore. Their barking cuts through the surf and wind, a forlorn sound, like children crying in a distant storm.

"What do you say here, Gary?" Herzik asks, about half a mile off the island.

Thompson is a slender, compact 65-year-old with a pencil mustache, a meticulous manner and smiling eyes. His voice is as twangy as Herzik's is deep. As a "walk-on diver," he brings in his own haul and pays a cut to Herzik.

Thompson looks at the churning water. "We could be in for some exercise," he says.

Fishery diving is a race against time. Divers get two hours or so underwater before they must surface and decompress for a similar spell. They race across the sea floor like farmworkers through a row crop.

The two men lubricate their limbs with hair conditioner to squeeze into tattered wetsuits. Thompson fires up the air compressor, which feeds the 500-foot-long hoses they will breathe from. The machine is so salt-crust and beaten, it looks like a boulder covered in lichen. It is their lifeline.

They study the water. There is nothing beckoning about it. A normal soul facing hours fighting

currents and cold 60 feet below the surface -- only to spend the night with no warm shower and no toilet -- would kill to be back on the freeway, driving to a dreary cubicle.

Herzik rolls in. About 40 feet down, he can make out a barren landscape. An explosion of brittle stars has consumed all the visible plant life, leaving a scene of gray devastation.

The swell has stirred up a sand storm and is knocking him around. Herzik follows the flat bedrock sea floor looking for outcroppings where the cucumbers might be sheltered. After 20 minutes, he is vexed. The pickings are scant. He has hernia surgery in a week, and then Andrew's graduation. He'll be out of the water for a month. The pressure is on. His wife, a nurse practitioner, has taken up a lot of the slack. But his income is critical.

He lumbers onto the boat. . "I'm trying to think of where we should go," Herzik tells Thompson. He ponders trolling to San Clemente Island, five hours south.

First he'll try a spot 200 yards away. "If this spot isn't good, we're going to have to do something radical," Thompson says.

"I know."

Although fishery diving in Southern California dates to the turn of the last century, when divers harvested abalone from the reefs off Palos Verdes, most of the men in the business today started when the sea urchin trade opened in the 1970s.

Tales of good money attracted all types of mavericks: abalone divers, surfers, stoners, military frogmen, loggers, marijuana smugglers.

Herzik first heard about urchin diving in 1971 from his brother Doug, a Navy SEAL just back from Vietnam and living in Redondo Beach.

Herzik was working odd jobs in Maryland after dropping out of an engineering program at Texas A&M. He was a quiet man, shy in groups but drawn to adventure as much as solitude. Doug's pitch had immediate appeal. He moved to Redondo Beach, and soon he and Doug bought a 34-foot boat built for commercial diving, the Sunstar. By the late 1970s, fishermen were landing record numbers of red sea urchin, almost exclusively for export to Japan. What was once just a pest consuming California's kelp forests was becoming one of its most lucrative fisheries.

Herzik had found his groove. He fell for a former ballet dancer, Deborah Stellar, from Redondo Beach. They got married in 1982. Andrew was born two years later, and Nick four years after that.

Herzik jumped as enthusiastically into family life as he did into the urchin trade. He struggled with the absences from home, but eventually he struck a manageable balance.

He scheduled his trips around parent-teacher conferences, birthdays, school plays, sports. He doted on his boys. They would become top students, avid surfers and championship water polo players. Herzik would take up surfing -- a deceptively grueling sport to learn -- in his mid-50s just to spend time with them.

The urchin industry began to struggle in the 1990s as stocks were depleted. Although Southern California held up better than the north, the glory days were gone. And increasingly, divers grappled with the dangers of the job.

Two divers were killed off Mendocino when the exhaust from their air compressor came too close to the intake, poisoning them with carbon monoxide. Three others died when their boat capsized. Another suffocated when a boat caught his hose in its propeller. Three had fatal heart attacks or strokes underwater; two drowned for unknown reasons. Several were crippled by the bends. And one was killed by a great white shark off San Miguel Island.

Unlike recreational divers, commercial divers eschew the safety of the "buddy system" so that they can cover a bigger area.

Some 300 pounds of sea cucumber fall into a plastic trash can in a gelatinous *phloop*.

"Well, that'll pay for expenses," Herzik says. "Tomorrow we can make money."

The second dive of the day was much better than the first.

Thompson surfaces after two hours underwater, grinning. "Now that was fun."

Herzik sets a cutting board over a barrel and begins to process the creatures, slicing them open and removing their sand-filled innards. They pop like water balloons under the knife. When he is done, he whips the boat around to the leeward side of the island for the night.

Thompson does his processing in the dusk. The wind is biting cold. In the cramped space, the two men move around each other with the smooth precision of a peaceful marriage. In a past life, Thompson was a physicist with a doctorate from UCLA.

As night falls, they hole up in the cabin. Herzik pours a little chardonnay, Thompson sips juice. They watch "Jeopardy!" on a tiny television. When they are asleep, a seal circles and dips around the boat, stirring constellations in the bioluminescence.

Herzik was diving off the back side of Catalina one day in 1997. A giant south swell had stirred up the silt, and he couldn't see 10 feet in front of him. He moved across gravel areas, but the urchins were thin. He needed to find a reef.

Through the cloudy water, he saw a shadow and moved toward it. Eight feet away, he could make it out.

His heart nearly exploded.

Great white.

Herzik gasped and shoved his bag of urchins in front of him.

The shark hovered, angling toward him, watching with a lifeless black eye. It was maybe 15 feet long.

Herzik flailed, trying to propel himself backward.

The shark swooped his tail fin slowly and vanished into the murk.

Herzik's nerves screamed with adrenaline. He wasn't safe. He couldn't tell where the predator was.

The Sunstar was a good 250 feet away. But Herzik couldn't know exactly unless he surfaced. The urchin diver killed three years before was hit on the surface.

Herzik plowed into shore, eyes darting all the way.

In the tidal zone, the surf bashed him. He tried to climb onto the rocks but got sucked into a crevasse and dragged over barnacles. Finally, he scrambled onto dry land.

When his brother got back on the boat, Terry waved him down. Doug positioned the Sunstar as close as he could and Herzik dashed toward it with Olympic speed.

He has studied shadows very closely ever since.

The second day out at Santa Barbara Island, Herzik is 60 feet below in clear water. He follows rich veins of sea cucumbers, picking up every one, his bubbles rising in silver umbrellas. He keeps his eye out for a 300-pound black sea bass that gave him a start the day before.

Later, coiling his dive hose, he is pumped. "I was picking five with one hand," he tells Thompson.

They figure they have about 800 pounds of processed cucumber, a decent haul at \$2 a pound.

But the marine radio bears bad news. Fierce Santa Ana winds are expected tomorrow, which can create dangerous seas. Herzik weighs the second night.

"There is a fine line between being smart and being an alarmist," he says. "I don't know where it is sometimes."

If they stay, they might have to wait out the winds for days. Herzik decides to motor home.

The Sunstar is showing signs of decrepitude. The paint is peeling, the wood is frayed. The cleats are deeply rusted and the running lights don't work. He ties two flashlights to the bow to be seen.

In the dark halfway back, Herzik realizes he's not getting any drive out of an engine.

Before midnight, they pass the green beacon of Angel's Gate lighthouse. They enter the sprawl of cranes and lights and pull up to the darkened quay in Fish Harbor. They transfer the barrels of cucumbers into the buyer's pickup.

The next day, Herzik determines that the transmission on one of the engines has burned out. He'll have to pay \$600 to fix it and spend hours removing the engine himself. But he doesn't have time now.

As the winds subside, he and Thompson chug out of the harbor before dawn, on the one good engine.

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