



Sea Squirts: Miyagi Saves A Delicacy Greatly Damaged By the East Japan Tsunami

Eight years have passed since the disaster of the March 11, 2011, Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami.

Today, rugged growths of natural sea squirts spread on the sea floor off the town of Onagawa in Miyagi Prefecture, one of the hardest hit areas of the calamity. When illuminated with a strobe light, the masses of vivid sea squirts appear brilliantly, like fields of reddish flowers.

When diving in the sea in that vicinity, you may become aware of white parts standing out on the rock faces. This is a phenomenon called “shore-burning” due to proliferation of sea urchins. The event is also known as “sea desertification,” as fish and shellfish become scarce and because of the depletion of seaweed.

The onslaught of the tsunami brought about a drastic change in the region’s undersea environment, causing first a sharp growth of seaweed, which in turn has led to a sharp increase in sea urchins that prey on the seaweed.

Sea urchins have eaten not only the seaweed, though. They are also invading the territory of the sea squirts, or hoyo in Japanese, which are sometimes called sea pineapples because of their appearance.

Masayoshi Takahashi, who runs a dive shop in Onagawa, put it this way: “For a few years after the great earthquake and tsunami, sea squirts were seen growing densely, rammed side by side on the rock faces. But now their population has decreased markedly because of steep rise in sea urchins.”

Meanwhile, the cultivation of sea squirts, one of the major delicacies of the Sanriku coastline of the Tohoku region facing the Pacific, has been confronted with new challenges since the catastrophic damage caused by the tsunami. Following the disaster, local fishermen managed to resume sea squirt cultivation by removing the juveniles of wild sea squirts. However, it has been a process of trial and error as they try to find markets for this delicacy.

Prior to the disaster, South Korea accounted for about 70% of the export market for sea squirts produced in Miyagi Prefecture. Seoul, however, banned sea squirt imports in 2015 due to fear of radioactive pollution from the tsunami-caused nuclear accident at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Complex of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). The ban continues even now.

The resulting glut of sea squirts was so serious that a significant portion of the fishermen’s haul has had to be scrapped. Recognizing the challenge, both private and public sectors of the prefecture have come together in an effort to overcome the problem.

Fumiya Sato, who operated a fishery processing company in Shiogama, Miyagi Prefecture, before the disaster, is part of this effort. Two years ago, he opened a sea squirt specialty restaurant in the city named hoyo-hoya tei, with tei meaning an eating place. The name reflects the food he is promoting, with a view to encouraging further distribution of sea pineapples.

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Sato has perfected a technique to flash-freeze them quickly after they are freshly landed and at their best in the rainy season. He has come up with a variety of serving ideas for the sea product. This lets customers enjoy eating fleshy sea squirts around the year.

“The most recommendable are their dishes of karaage (fried sea squirts coated with flour or potato starch),” said Sato. “Some people who don’t like raw sea squirts say they are fond of fried ones.”

He shows a great readiness to have sea squirts become a more familiar cooking ingredient in Japan.

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真冬の海に広がる花畑 宮城県女川町の天然ホヤ

東日本大震災からまもなく8年を迎える宮城県女川町。沖合の海底にはごつごつとした天然ホヤの群生地が広がっている。ストロボの光をあてると、ホヤの群生地が赤い花畑のように鮮やかに浮かび上がった。

海に潜ると、岩肌に白い部分が目立つことに気づく。ウニの増加による磯焼けだ。海藻が減り、貝や魚が獲れなくなる“海の砂漠化”とも呼ばれる現象だ。津波による海中の環境変化で海藻が増加、それを捕食するウニが急激に繁殖。ウニは海藻を食べ尽くしホヤも襲っていた。女川町でダイビングショップを営む高橋正祥さんは「震災後、数年間は岩肌に隙間なくびっしりとホヤが生えていたけど、最近ではウニが増えすぎてしまった影響でホヤは減っています」と話していた。

一方、津波による壊滅的な被害を受けた三陸名産の養殖ホヤも課題を抱える。震災後は天然モノから種苗を採取し養殖再開にこぎ着けたものの、販路で試行錯誤が続く。

震災前、宮城県では生産量の約7割を韓国に輸出していたが、東京電力福島第1原発事故後の平成25年に韓国が輸入禁止の措置をとり今もそのままだ。廃棄処分されるほど供給過剰に陥った現状を打開しようと、県内では官民一体の取り組みが続く。

震災前に宮城県塩釜市で水産加工会社を営んでいた佐藤文行さんは、ホヤのさらなる流通を目指して2年前に同市にホヤ料理専門店「ほやほや屋」を開店。年間を通じて肉厚なホヤを楽しめるようにと、旬の梅雨時に水揚げしたものを新鮮なまま冷凍し、さまざまな食べ方を提案している。「おすすめは唐揚げ。生は苦手だけど、揚げれば好きという人もいます」と佐藤さん。ホヤをより日本人になじみのある食材にしたいと奮闘は続く。

出典:真冬の海に広がる花畑 宮城県女川町の天然ホヤ
<https://www.sankei.com/photo/story/news/190305/sty1903050002-n1.html>