

Where the Best Hold On for Dear Life

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HERE on the rocky coast of northwest Spain, where the lives of humans and barnacles overlap, the ocean favors the barnacles. These unlikely looking delicacies grow all along the cliffs, but flourish best where the waves are highest and the wind is at its most fierce. The brutal waves wash barnacle fishermen to their deaths so regularly that the local marine rescue service cringes every time the phone rings.

"Calls about barnacle fishermen are the worst," said Jose Pose, the director of the Marine Rescue Coordinating Center for the region. "We work as hard as we can to save their lives, but usually the best we can do is retrieve the corpse."

A few disturbing mortality statistics are not enough to turn a Galician away from the sea. The ocean is such an integral part of life and work here that locals have named every rock of any size for reasons of both deference and reference. Fishermen who fare badly leave as their legacy bitter names for stretches of the coast, like Earth's End and Coast of Death.

In this fishing town, Jose Caneda, a 33-year-old barnacle fisherman, has spent little time pondering how the ocean giveth and taketh away. "You end up with broken bones, sprained ankles, and maybe chop off a few fingers with your barnacle scraper," he said. "But dying? I have never really thought about it."

Mr. Caneda heads out to the cliffs in a little motorboat about 20 times a month with his wife, his father, his sister and a brother-in-law. Harvesting is possible only during the three hours around low tide. When the price of barnacles is too low to merit harvesting them, the local

fishermen's union cancels the day's work. There are also times when the seas are too rough, and seasons when the barnacles are declared off-limits and allowed to regenerate.

But whenever possible, the Caneda family hunts barnacles. The women stay on the boat, ready to collect full bags. The others jump ashore, each armed with a long wooden stick with a metal scraper on one end. The barnacles cement themselves to the rocks and come loose only after vigorous scraping. The best barnacles are the strongest, and are harvested still clinging to bits of rock.

The boulders are alive with crabs at the waterline, and guarded by defensive gulls above. Dressed in wet suits, Mr. Caneda and his party look a little like frogmen cleaning the dentures of some submerged oceanic giant. The best barnacles have a tendency to tuck themselves deep into crevices and underneath boulders, so the fishermen often disappear almost completely under rocks and water. When a big wave comes in, all they can do is try to hold on.

"When the weather is bad, you're careful," Mr. Caneda said. "When the weather is good, the work is easy. The dangerous time is when it's in between. You become careless and suddenly a huge wave crashes into you."

To increase traction, the fishermen wear high-top sneakers. The rocks are so rough and sharp that a pair lasts only days.

In one trip, the Caneda family can harvest \$325 to \$375 worth of barnacles, more than \$3,000 worth in a really good week.

As the popularity of barnacles from Spain has grown -- long a local favorite, especially at Christmas, they are coveted by top chefs around the world -- the 186 permits granted to harvest them in the Aguiño region have become desirable property. Originally free, they are now a bit like New York City taxi medallions, significant investments. One permit recently changed hands for about \$16,000 -- about six times what one was worth five years ago.

By the time the barnacles, known as goosenecks in English, *Pollicipes cornucopia* in Latin and *percebes* in Spanish, show up on a restaurant table, they have often been shelled. The diner peels off the leathery black skin of the stalk to reveal a multihued plug of flesh. The inside of the scaly tip is sometimes eaten as well.

Barnacles are harvested in many places, including Canada, Peru and Morocco, but those from Galicia are considered the finest by connoisseurs, and sell at prices far higher than those from other countries. The total Galician harvest was 334 metric tons last year.

That harvest comes at a human price, however. The rescue center receives 10 to 15 calls a year about accidents, Mr. Pose said, and most accidents are fatal. That's a small part of the total call volume, but barnacle fishing is a very small profession, with only about 2,000 practicing it in all of Galicia.

When a call comes in, it triggers a series of events that have become sadly routine. "We send out our rescue teams in helicopters and boats, and we will look for three days for a survivor," Mr. Pose said. "After that, there is virtually no hope of finding the fisherman alive, but we continue a reduced search for the next five days."

None of that concerns Mr. Caneda. He has no plans to stop harvesting barnacles. "Not unless I win the lottery," he said. "Then, I'll spend my time eating the barnacles, instead of harvesting them."