

Sea Urchin — Uutuk

KASUKUAGMEN AGKUMA, UUTURSURCIQUA CALL. – WHEN I GO TO AKHIOK, I WILL GET SEA URCHINS, TOO.



Photo: Sea urchins in Alitak Bay.

Sea urchins are echinoderms, spiny-skinned animals related to starfish and sea cucumbers. Kodiak is home to two varieties, the red urchin (*Strongylocentrotus franciscanus*) and the green urchin (*Strongylocentrotus droebachiensis*). Both are about the size of a tennis ball and both live in lower intertidal and shallow subtidal waters. Urchins have a hard shell known as a test. They prefer rocky substrate where they feed on kelp and floating algae. They mature at age three and produce five skeins of roe, a favorite food of sea otters, starfish, crab, eels, and people. Commercial harvesting of Alaska's sea urchins began in the early 1980s and continues today. Urchins are easy to catch. Scuba divers simply rake them into a mesh bag.

Urchin shells are a common find in many coastal archaeological sites, suggesting that this seafood has been a delicacy for thousands of years. Today, Alutiiq people gather sea urchins for their eggs, particularly during very low spring tides. Urchins produce roe in late winter and spring for about six weeks, so April is the most common harvesting time. People enjoy eating urchin eggs raw or wrapped with rockweed leaves, a tender marine algae.