THE STRAIT TIMES

from Ridge to Reef to Ridge of the Somosomo Strait

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WHEN DOES A CUCUMBER BECOME A PICKLE?

The Fiji government extended a recently opened harvesting window for sea cucumbers through January 2027. For local communities, the luxury food, and functional health consumers this may be a relief.

BY MARINE STEWARDSHIP DESK | REPORTING FROM NAGARA



A dive master in a briefing was overheard labeling this unsung sanitation engineer with the tired trope, *'whale poop'*. Despite resembling an excrement sausage, sea cucumbers are tireless echinoderms spending their lives vacuuming up detritus, bacteria and micro algae from the seafloor.

By ingesting sediment and excreting clean sand along with essential nutrients like calcium carbonate and nitrogen, they maintain seabed health and prevent organic waste from choking the reef.

How did this creature, that coastal communities used to gather from the shallows for a village meal, become the anchor of a multi-million-dollar international luxury trade plus the source of modern ecological and economic headaches?

It is a centuries long tale of fishermen and chefs; traders, nobles and chiefs. But in a word - imagination. We assigned it another role. The food hasn't necessarily improved. Though the chefs who conjured up those early appealing dishes for elite pleasure-seeking palates would disagree.



Plucked from the seafloor and plopped into the imagination, the sea cucumber's social meaning was enhanced and prized.

The cleaner acquired **prestige**.

Now the sea cucumber helped a wealthy host demonstrate social standing, creating added demand. Seeking supply the traders looked to Fiji and saw a substantial price differential. A musket for a delicacy. A chief saw a means of projecting power. **The loop closed**. The trader gained an opportunity; the chief gained military leverage; the wealthy host gained distinction. The fishermen gained income, as long as there were cucumbers left to gather.

And the **sea cucumber saw nothing coming**. Same animal. Same role. Same life. New meaning.

Still the sea cucumber's ecological role carries troublesome weight. Clean out the cleaners and a mess is what you get in the water. Both coastal livelihoods and coral reefs trapped in a very real pickle.

Our ingenuity often creates an appetite for what nature has on offer. Nature cannot always satisfy that appetite.

And the sea cucumber? Still on the seafloor, going about the same unglamorous business it was doing long before anyone thought to put it on a banquet table.

Leaving us with the question - when has making something desirable never become a problem?

Cue Johnny Cucumber - *the floor is mine; to clean and shine; I walk the line.*



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Serving Vanua Levu, Taveuni, and the Waters of the Somosomo Strait
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