

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

Federal funding supports research into East Coast ocean herbivore

The establishment of an exotic and voracious marine herbivore that could devastate Tasmania's lucrative abalone and rock lobster industry has attracted crucial Federal Government funding for ongoing research at the University of Tasmania.

The \$400,000 funding injection from the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, on behalf of the Government, will boost the University's capacity to further investigate suitable management options concerning the establishment of the long-spined sea urchin along Tasmania's East Coast.

The University's Tasmanian Aquaculture and Fisheries Institute has already proven that the sea urchin has spread as far south-west as Port Davey and had the potential to damage the island's \$150 million black-lipped abalone and Southern rock lobster industries.

School of Zoology, Marine Ecology researcher, Professor Craig Johnson, said the funding for the project *Rebuilding Ecosystem Resilience* would help establish strategies to prevent further destruction of rocky reef habitat.

Prof. Johnson said the sea urchin had created 'barren' areas along the East Coast by overgrazing seaweed and invertebrates which had sustained the abalone and rock lobster fisheries.

"It really is the equivalent of taking a bulldozer to a rainforest and clearing everything to bare earth. It's a major crash in biodiversity and productivity, with a big impact on important commercial fisheries," Prof. Johnson said.

"The sea urchin barrens present a significant problem for managing fisheries. The abalone and rock lobster industries are extremely concerned about it."

The spread of the sea urchin from the NSW coast is the direct result of changes to the East Australian Current.

Although researchers concede it was too late to reverse the problem, the proposed work is to identify management options to prevent further destruction of reef habitat by the sea urchins.

The research team will now meet with key stakeholders in a bid to secure a further \$500,000 required to meet the total cost of the project.

For interviews contact Prof. Craig Johnson on 03 6226 2582 or 0418 535 443.

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