A note on sponge-fishing in Hydra

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A small note for the organisers of the Hydra Sponges Conference, from the last of the Hydriot free sponge divers, Manolis Tsakiris.

In the old historical tavern of the sponge divers of Kyria Sofia in Kala Pigadia, during many an autumn night, together with an old "*mechanikos*" operator of the compressor for sponge divers, Lefteris Arapogiannis – long may he flourish – I learned at first-hand many stories about sponges and about the sponge-fishers, from the period of the Occupation through to the point when the sponges in the Mediterranean ceased to exist – because, as the experts suggest, of the Chernobyl disaster.

It was in this little taverna that the captains would hire their sponge-fishing crews, for the six-month trips to the waters of Libya and beyond.

Both in his job as a builder, and as operator of the air compressor, Lefteris was a responsible person, because on him depended the life, or the death, or maybe the paralysis of the sponge divers.

It was from Lefteris that I learned that certain heartless captains – he never mentioned their nationality – used to leave stricken divers, with horrific pains, in the white waters of Libya, and instead of giving them aspirin those godless men gave them, about the same size, the eye of the pandora fish. So that's how the shores of Libya ended up being filled with the bones of dead sponge fishers.

Lefteris also talked to me about the other way of fishing – the *gagáva* – a net with a big metal pipe which was dragged along, scouring the seabed.

But all this is ancient history now. Hydra was once the heartlands of sponge fishing, but in the end it had to accept the total elimination of the sponges.

Hydra produced *melátia*, the tight sponge without holes, but also *spóngoi*. Sometimes sponges as big as a child's embrace. All of this was of particular interest to me, along with the fish under the rocks that I used to target with my spear gun (always free diving, never using any breathing apparatus). I dived comfortably to 25 metres and I have explored and observed all over the island, both fishes and sponges.

Every time I entered the port with my boat, Lefteris would come to see what sponges I had caught. He was a kind man, and instead of saying : "Hey, that's not particularly special," he would always say: "Manolis – that's really nice!"

But then the total destruction came, and the Mediterranean as a whole does not produce sponges any more.

This has forced many spongefishers to fish illegally with compressors, just to survive. With permits that were given for oyster fishing during the period of the dictatorship, all the fishermen, from Kalymnos and other islands, were thrown into illegal fishing, where, along with private illegal fishing, they are tending to destroy all the marine wealth of Greece, and I assume also other countries where the same thing has been happening.

Together with the sponges, we used to fish oysters whose shells weighed half a kilo, and *kalógnomes* [clams] and *fouskes* [sea squirts / sea figs]. But from once having been a sponge-fishing island, Hydra is now left only with memories. The sponge processing

plant that existed for decades in Hydra, the Bratsera of the Nevros family, is the last living monument of that era that was very interesting from all points of view.

Now, let this be a lesson to all of us – that the state of the marine environment depends mainly our own behaviour as human beings. And the old saying still holds true: "let the baby fish grow to be a parent".

Maybe one day the miracle will happen and life will return to the bottom of the sea, and also the sponges, of course, which for a long time were such a source of revenue for the island of Hydra, for this island of Revolution and Culture.

I would like to welcome the organisers of this interesting conference, and the attendees, and I wish you every success. Regrettably I cannot be with you in person, but I am with you in spirit.

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