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## LOOK WHAT THE TIDE WASHED IN

Off the Sooke shore, seaweed is emerging as a cottage industry.

Just like you can't see the forest for the trees, you can't see the seashore for the ocean. At a glance, the sea floor at low tide has nothing to recommend it and smells like it, too. But to Diane Bernard, who strolls the shore in front of Sooke Harbour House every morning, there is much to discover. "It's amazing what you miss if you don't know what you're looking for," she says.

Diane is on the lookout for seaweed. Much the way a landlubber can distinguish daisies from dandelions, she can quickly identify one species from another as she pokes around rocks and scans the ocean floor. Rockweed, sea lettuce, porphyra, egregia -- all grow within steps of the shore or have been washed in with the tide. "Look, there's a piece of kelp," she states. "You might know it because it is the most common aquatic plant in the world and grows in beds that are several acres in size. But did you know that kelp is edible, too?"

Therein lies the reason behind Diane's daily foray along the seashore. "There are some 250 species of seaweed in front of me and most of them can be put to some practical use," she says. "Some of them have medicinal properties, others are wearable, and scores of them -- from kelp to sea cabbage, sea fingers to sea olives -- are edible." Gathering them is her business. As the brains behind an innovative enterprise called Outer Coast Seaweeds, Diane is licenced by the provincial government to hand-harvest seaweed along the shore -- her territory runs some 40 kilometres to the Jordan River, including the waterfront at Sooke Harbour House, where so many inquiring minds have stopped to investigate that she now offers tours to anyone who is interested.

Chefs love to work with seaweed. Not only does it add to the definition of regional cuisine, its curious shapes and textures bring a new dimension to the art of culinary presentation. Moreover, seaweed is among the most nutritious of all foods, rich in protein, minerals and vitamins. "Most of all, it's about flavour," Diane says. Like wine, seaweed is an acquired taste; at first everything seems salty, but with a little time, you can start to pick out the cucumber flavour in alaria and the sweetness of sea cabbage.

Currently, Diane and her staff of five provide seaweed to some 30 restaurants, including Sooke Harbour House. "If they phone me a couple of days in advance, I can have their order in their kitchen a day or two later," she explains. But not all of Diane's daily harvest finds its way to the dinner table. "I sell some of my crop to naturopaths and much of it goes to health spas. I even manufacture my own line of spa products." Seaweed is the main ingredient in any number of body wraps, exfoliants, and skin-care lotions. "More and more, the nutrients of seaweed, sea salts and seawater are recognized for their ability to nourish and cleanse the body," she says, "To a growing number of people, seaweed is gaining a reputation as a legitimate medical treatment."

Before she took the plunge, Diane -- a criminologist by trade (go figure) -- interviewed chefs and spa operators to see if they thought her idea would fly. But there's more to her seaweed harvest than a business venture, she says. "There's a bigger picture here. I see this product as a player in developing the local economy based on local resources." In an era when big business has earned a nasty reputation for pillaging the landscape and then pulling up stakes, Diane hopes small-scale businesses like hers will prove more lasting and make the community more self-sufficient. She hopes seaweed does for Sooke what soapstone carvings did for aspiring Inuit artists: provide an opportunity that only the locals can fulfill. As the word gets out, maybe it will.