

# World sea cucumber markets: Hong Kong, Guangzhou and New York

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## Abstract

Hong Kong, Guangzhou and New York are the most important markets in the sea cucumber industry. Dried sea cucumbers are brought from all over the world to be bought and sold in Hong Kong. Traders and wholesalers are located along Nam Pak Hong Street in the Sheung Wan area in the north-west of Hong Kong Island. Hong Kong and Guangzhou in Guangdong province, China, have been tightly connected since the birth of Hong Kong in the 19th century. Through this channel, most of the dried marine products imported into Hong Kong are re-exported to Guangdong, from where they are traded throughout China. Wholesalers gather along Yat Tak Lou (Yi De Lu) Street in Guangzhou. This paper will explore the historical development of the sea cucumber market in China, with special reference to regional differences. A recent development in the New York market is also explained in relation to trade of the Galapagos sea cucumber, *Isostichopus fuscus*. The characteristics of these three intertwined markets indicate that resource management plans should take market preference into consideration.

## Trade in dried sea cucumber

In 2007 Hong Kong imported 5,296 tonnes (t) of dried sea cucumber: Papua New Guinea exported the most to Hong Kong (704 t of dried sea cucumber), Indonesia (653 t) second, and Japan (585 t) third. According to the Monthly Statistics of Hong Kong, it re-exported 4,149 t of dried sea cucumber to 13 countries and regions in 2007. Among them, China imported 3,576 t (86% of the total re-export volume from Hong Kong).

## Sea cucumber species

About 50 species out of a total of 1,200 are currently commercially traded in the world. Sea cucumber can be classified by its form in two categories: *ci-shen* ('spiky') and *guang-shen* ('shiny'). The spikes actually refer to the parapodia on a sea cucumber's back and sides that harden when dried.

The most common *ci-shen* species is *Stichopus japonicus*, which can be found in the Bohai Sea and along the Korean, Japanese and Russian maritime coasts. The species shows regional variation in sharpness of its spikes, with the Hokkaido variety demonstrating the sharpest spikes. Several of the internationally traded *ci-shen* sea cucumber species have temperate seas as their natural habitat, while *guang-shen* sea cucumbers, the rest of the commercially traded species, are typically found in tropical marine environments. Some types of tropical sea cucumber found in the Pacific Ocean and around South-East Asia, such as *Thelenota ananas* and *Stichopus chloronotus*, are also classified as *ci-shen*. *Isostichopus fuscus*, a species harvested around the Galapagos Islands and in other locations, is also considered *ci-shen*.

The differences in the form of sea cucumber species also play an important role in sea cucumber food preparation. Chinese cooking is largely divided into Beijing, Shanghai, Sichuan and Cantonese cuisine, and regional differences are most pronounced between Beijing and Cantonese cuisine. Traditionally,

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in Beijing cuisine, *ci-shen* sea cucumbers are preferred, while the Cantonese prefer *guang-shen* species. While geographic location plays a part in the preference for the temperate *S. japonicus* in the north and the tropical *Holothuria fuscogilva* or *H. scabra* in the south, cooking styles also explain the difference. Pekinese prefer to serve food in small dishes, while the Cantonese use a large serving dish placed in the centre of a round table, which explains the higher demand for small *ci-shen* species in Pekinese, and large *guang-shen* species in Cantonese, cuisine.

## Conclusion

To my understanding, the New York market prefers *ci-shen*, especially *I. fuscus*. The species began to be commercially harvested in the late 1980s, and became very particular in symbolising globalisation of the sea cucumber industry, as well as sea cucumber conservation (e.g. the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). This paper presumes that the New York market would have played an important role in the exploitation of *I. fuscus* in Central and South American countries such as Mexico and Ecuador. This is another reason why it is necessary to investigate market preference, and feed the results back into resource management planning.