

The Suicide March of the Squid



At certain times in the spring, you may paddle along a shore of Baja and see schools of 2 foot long squid, swimming close to the surface, and gathering at water's edge. As you arrive at a lovely cove to make camp, you are suddenly engulfed in a horrendous stench of rotting flesh and realize that the tide line is littered with carcasses of dead squid, baking in the hot sun, many being vandalized by scavenging seagulls and vultures only too pleased with this bountiful harvest—on to another camp. But in the next harbor you are horrified by hoards—hundreds, maybe thousands of bloated, floating dead squid, carried in by the tide. But this time wind has warned you by carrying the aroma from a half-mile away. You know you'd have a hard time relaxing here. Don't get discouraged. Keep paddling and hope it's better at the next beach. Either that, or in another couple weeks, the beaches will all be clean again after the carcasses have been fully composted, devoured by sea maggots, and recycled into the food chain. In the meantime, be resourceful. Reach out and scoop up one that has just landed, is still fresh and wriggling,

and grill him up for dinner.

Recently beached squid display marvelous chameleon colors, changing their bodies from pale orange to deep purple, to stripes and spots, and many variations in between. Here their bodies throb and choke on the air as they gasp their last breath, the gulls already pulling their limbs apart. If you try to save one by throwing him back in the water, he just turns right around and thrusts himself back onto the beach in a defiant suicide leap.

Once you get over this macabre parade, however, they taste quite fine grilled in a pan with olive oil, onions and garlic. We recommend eating the outer body flesh, about a half-inch thick. It separates from the core with a few easy slices of the knife. Work around a few areas of cartilage, then remove the thin skin. Tenderize the steak by beating between two smooth rocks, pounding until it is almost in pieces. Grill over medium heat, but do not overcook. The frayed piece comes back together under heat and tastes like firm chicken.

What are those Squid up to Anyway?

Squid are like weeds. They are opportunistic. They reproduce and grow rapidly, moving into any open niche in the ocean ecosystem. They are ravenous carnivores and in turn, serve as principle diet to many of the large predator fish, like dolphins, whales, tuna, and shark. They are a very important part of the ocean food chain, perhaps comprising some of the largest biomass (the largest amount of critters by weight) on the planet.

Squid are in a class called Cephalopods, along with octopus, cuttlefish and nautilus, which belong to an ancient group of invertebrates (critters without a backbone) called Mollusks. They have fossils that date back five or six hundred million years (very old, long before mammals were around), yet are considered the most complex and intelligent of their family—other family members being clams, scallops and other brainless shellfish. The Cephalopods have the distinction of being free-swimming, and have large, complex eyes, a great advancement from their clam cousins in the mud.

Squid also have cells in their skin called chromatophores, which produce different colors as needed, presumably to visually communicate their intentions.

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Squid live a very short and fast life, with many of the common species growing to adult size of two feet in just a few weeks. Most species live only a few months or a year. Along the way, they are efficient and voracious predators, eating everything including smaller squid. They travel in schools, using safety in numbers; but also providing a large, dense source of food for the larger fish. At their zenith, they mate in big groups, flashing their bright colors and patterns in a complex mating dance before the males inject the females with sperm. Shortly after laying thousands of eggs on the sea bottom and reefs, their body tissues change and deteriorate rapidly. Many die in the water. It is not known if the end of the mating cycle is what causes others to commit suicide on the beaches, or if they are just traveling and responding to some irresistible electromagnetism homing impulse that says "the beach is the right direction."

Recent studies have shown a dramatic increase in the numbers of squid worldwide, even as most other fish are showing a sharp decline. In fact, it is believed that as the oceans are being fished out of most large predators, (whales, sharks, tunas...) the space is open for the squid to expand their populations with less predation. ---Lori Russell

