

# qathet's colder, wetter farmers



30 feet below the waves off Savary Island, you'll find Mark Benckhuysen in his scuba gear, harvesting geoduck alongside the crews he leads.

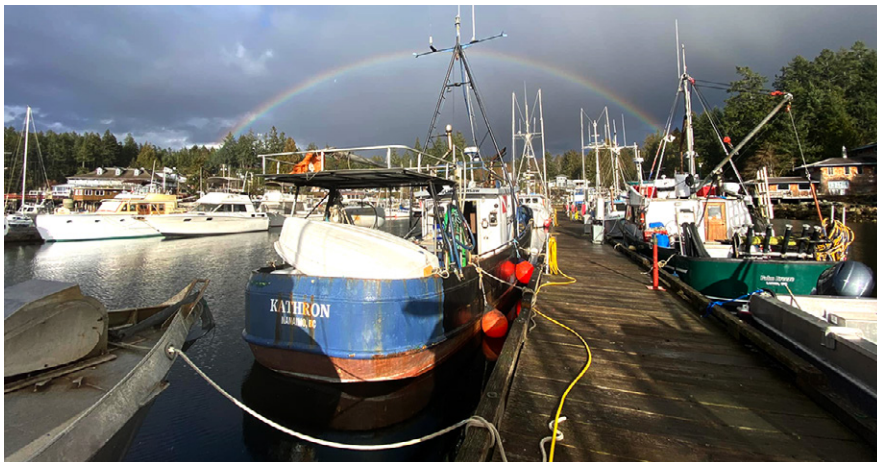
Or, you can catch him on the North Coast in fall, on a live-a-board, getting ready for a day diving for sea cucumbers or sea urchins. Or, he might be off Sechelt, using his ROV submarine to help the annual clean up of the Sunshine Coast's many oyster farms, as newly mandated by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

The Salish Sea can get cold. Usually, he wears a dry suit, but his head still gets wet. Divers are expected to spend about five hours a day underwater, when they're diving 30 feet below. Slightly less, if they're diving deeper. That's not the only tough thing. Living on a boat on the North Coast with a small crew of other divers for a month at a time can get crowded.

"But when we all get along, it can be really awesome," Mark reflected. "We get a lot of ocean life encounters: sea lions, humpbacks. We visit a lot of small communities up and down the coast, such as Hartley Bay and Alert Bay. You definitely get to experience parts of the coast most British Columbians never get to see. The best



**PROFESSIONAL SEA URCHIN:** Desolation Dive Services' owner Mark Benckhuysen (left, with a friendly octopus). Above, sea urchins captured in Johnstone Strait, and geoduck from Manatee Holdings' Savary Island operation. Below, the *Kathron*, Mark's dive boat, stationed in Lund.



parts of the coast.”

Mark has worked as a commercial a diver for about eight years, after graduating from Campbell River's Dive Safe International.

Last year he launched his own company, Desolation Dive Services, and runs Manatee Holdings' three dive crews through it - as well as specializing in underwater imaging. He also recently bought his own 44' dive boat: the *Kathron*.

In other words, Mark is investing in himself, and a local, sustainable food industry that he believes will be thriving for years to come.

“It's a bigger industry than people think,” said Mark, noting that a few dozen professional divers live in qathet, and work in fishing and

aquaculture. And, that divers and dive tenders are in-demand professionals; finding enough crew is a challenge, he shared.

“Boats leave out of Lund every day to serve the geoduck farm, and come back. Most of the work is very local.”

Surprisingly, diving is a departure for this Alberta-raised entrepreneur, though food production runs in his blood. Mark grew up on a dairy farm. When he was 17, at the request of his then-75-year-old grandmother, the two took a scuba class together in Victoria. He was hooked.

“Now diving is all I talk about when I go home to visit,” said Mark. “People are so interested. It's such a strange thing to do. I think my family is just happy I found something I love.” 🍎

Expect the best from our:  
**LOCAL** produce  
**LOCAL** beef  
**LOCAL** pork  
**LOCAL** chicken  
**LOCAL** seafood  
**ALL IN ONE STOP!**

**LOCAL OWNERS**  
**LOCAL STAFF**  
**LOCAL GOODNESS**



4741 Marine Avenue 604-485-4838

**Blueberries**  
**U-Pick or We Pick**



**5 & 10-lb boxes**  
**available to order**

**RUSTY GATE**  
**BERRY FARM**

**Mike & Denise Nicholson**  
**2575 Maywood Road**

**Blueberries July & August**

Call 604-740-7215 or follow us on Facebook for updates

**Farm Stay Camping can be booked via**  
**hipcamp.com or campertunity.com**