

Christmas marked by starfish in the sea

A time to help others braving the storm

By Beth Parks
Special to the NEWS

Not so long ago, mussels thrived on a rock-strewn bar that stretched between two small islands along the coast of Down East Maine. Twice each day, the receding tide exposed the center of the bar. So numerous were the mussels that year that they looked from a distance like a slick of black oil.

If it was a good year for mussels, it was an equally good year for the starfish that fed upon them. Visitors who walked between the islands at low tide saw hundreds of five-armed stars, ranging in color from pale orange to pink and purple, draped over mussels fastened to rocks below the gently undulating waves.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BETH PARKS

Nature provides, but nature also takes away. Early that winter, a fierce storm rammed its way up

the coast. Enormous spray-tipped breakers rolled in from the open sea and waves suffused with a ter-

rifying energy swept across the bar.

The next morning's sun glowed red upon the devastation. A thigh-high row of knotted brown rockweed, crammed with dead or dying starfish and the mussels upon which they had been feeding, lay reeking on the beach.

Now and then, an injured star's arm protruded from the moldering heap, its feeble tube feet probing for the sea that had so callously rejected it.

There's something special about starfish. Perhaps it is their shape. Perhaps it is their name. On that morning after the storm, despite the fact I know full well that death is a normal and necessary part of life, I wept for the multitude of stars that lay tossed and torn along the shore.

That night brought down a rush
See Starfish, Page C9

Starfish

Continued from Page C7

of frigid air from Canada. Tide pools lay ice-skimmed among the ledges, and frost sparkled along the strings and tangles of storm-pitched wrack. No movement was evident in the breaking dawn, save that of herring gulls eyeing the detritus for signs of an easy meal.

The next day was Christmas Eve. In the afternoon, I lay dozing in the golden sun that poured through my window overlooking the sea. A sharp rap on the glass startled me awake, and I looked out to see a neighbor bundled tightly against the bitter wind.

My neighbor extended his right arm skyward as if he were a lobsterman's version of the Statue of Liberty. His mittened hand clutched the largest starfish I had ever seen, frozen in a stellar excellence of outstretched rays.

That starfish, dried and gilded, now occupies a place of honor atop my Christmas tree. Smaller stars glitter from their resting places on scallop and mussel shells. All serve as a silent reminder of the beauty and fragility of life.

I was an observer of nature that year of the storm. Many of us live our

lives primarily as observers. We watch. We chatter idly among ourselves. We take from our surroundings without giving back.

Perhaps what we should take now is a lesson from the late naturalist and author Loren Eiseley, who decades ago penned a short story he called "The Star Thrower." The story has been retold over and over, often with convenient variations in the characters and settings. What follows is my own retelling of Eiseley's memorable tale.

A young man, already slump-shouldered and confused by the tragedies and mysteries of life, walked along a beach after a great storm. The beach was littered with starfish and other marine animals cast up repeatedly by the sea.

On the ebb came professional collectors who, in their greedy madness, raced to gather whatever stars and shells they could clean and sell. The collectors thrust scores of helpless, voiceless sea jewels into steaming kettles along the beach.

The young man cast his eyes away from the repugnance and into the sun-struck mist. In the distance, he glimpsed a human figure standing within a shimmering rainbow of incredible perfection. The young man watched as the figure picked up an

object and flung it beyond the breaking surf.

Curious, the young man made his way over uncertain footing until he reached the figure.

The thrower kneeled and plucked another starfish from the suffocating mass of sand and silt. With a quick and gentle movement, he hurled it out to sea, where it sank in a burst of spume. "It may live," he said, "if the offshore pull is strong enough."

"But there are so many," lamented the young man. "How can you possibly make a difference?"

The thrower seemed magnified in the changing light, as if casting larger stars upon a greater sea.

"I made a difference to that one," he said softly.

"I understand," the young man replied. Silently he picked up a still-living star and spun it out into the waves. "Call me another thrower."

The sea of life casts up, in every country and in every nation, those who cannot brave the storm.

In this season that means so much to so many, will you become a star thrower?

Throw wisely. Throw well.

Beth Parks, an educator for University of Maine Cooperative Extension in Penobscot County, lives in Corea.