

Asparagopsis

By John Huisman

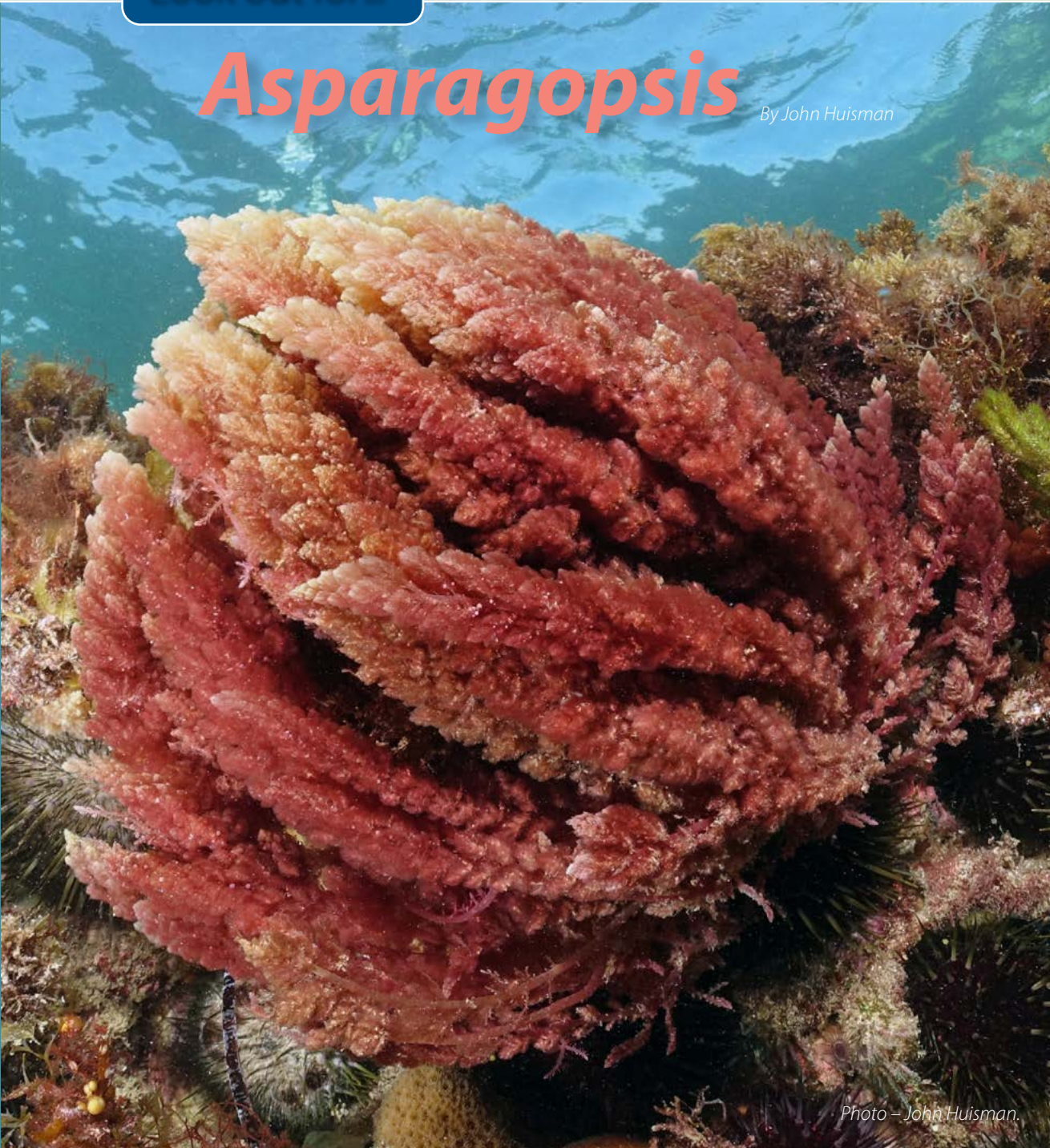


Photo – John Huisman.

Asparagopsis is one of the more unusual seaweeds. Looking very much like a mass of light pink fluffy foxtails, it grows prolifically on rock (in the case of *Asparagopsis taxiformis*) or attached to other seaweeds (*Asparagopsis armata*). The genus is currently of great interest as it has been discovered that adding even a small amount of *Asparagopsis* to ruminant stock feed drastically reduces their methane output, a major greenhouse gas. Researchers are now looking at the best way to farm this seaweed, as wild harvesting the required quantities would not be sustainable. *Asparagopsis taxiformis* is also the 'limu kohu' (the 'supreme seaweed') in the Hawaiian Islands, which as the name suggests is the most favoured limu of most Hawaiians. The popularity has meant that its collection in Hawaii is regulated, and it is illegal to collect the creeping base, which allows the plants to regenerate. In ancient times limu kohu was so esteemed that it was forbidden to all but the ali'i (nobility) and was cultivated in limu gardens. After collecting, the plants are cleaned, soaked overnight to reduce the bitter iodine flavour, drained, lightly salted and rolled into balls about the size of a walnut. It is added to stews and only a small portion is used as the peppery flavour is intense.

Asparagopsis taxiformis is widespread along the WA coast, from the tropics south to at least the Capes region, generally growing in shallow water. It is often seasonal in colder waters, overwintering as the inconspicuous alternate stage of the life cycle, with the conspicuous plants appearing commonly in spring and summer. This photograph was taken while snorkelling at Cape Peron.

A word of caution for those thinking of embarking on a culinary experiment: *Asparagopsis* includes a vast array of volatile compounds in addition to the bromoform that is active in ruminant digestion, the presence of which might suggest that it is poisonous to eat. As there has never been a reported case of illness resulting from its consumption, it is likely that the overnight soaking and overpowering flavour are natural constraints that limit the quantities ingested. Nevertheless, excessive consumption is not advised!