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Nature Note

Hedgehogs of the Sea

► **LOOKING LIKE** little round prickly hedgehogs, the sea urchins creep over the ocean floor, seemingly unconcerned about the pain they inflict when stepped on by waders and swimmers.

Numerous sharp spines, sometimes filled with poison, stick out in all directions from this odd creature. These spines are hinged on a ball-and-socket base attached to the fragile five-sectioned calcareous skeleton.

The urchin keeps these spines in constant motion and responds to any shadow or threatening object by moving and pointing them in the direction of the shadow. When the animal dies, its spines soon drop off, leaving the round fragile shell children love to collect.

Spines of the hatpin urchins may be as long as one foot, jet black, fragile and shaped like hollow needles. These spines penetrate human skin easily where they break off and cause intense stinging pain.

Sea urchins are members of the phylum Echinodermata, with sea stars, sand dollars, sea lilies and sea cucumbers as relations. Like these sea creatures, sea urchins have a radial symmetry, usually in sections of five.

The common sea urchin, *Arbacia punctulata*, is also called the purple urchin because of its color, which varies from violet to a deep purplish red. This species may be found along the Atlantic Coast from New England to Yucatan, ranging from the low-tide mark to depths of 600 or 700 feet.

Other species are found in all waters of the world. In many places, the soft insides are eaten and considered quite a delicacy.

• Science News Letter, 22:350 November 27, 1965

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