

Sponges

Most people have a sponge or two in their kitchen. A sponge is handy for washing dishes and wiping counters. Most of our sponges are made by machines, out of wood fiber or plastic. But before man-made sponges were invented, people used natural sponges.

A natural sponge is, in fact, an animal. It lives in the ocean. It has no eyes or mouth. It has no organs at all. It cannot swim. It is anchored to a rock and feeds on the bacteria in the water that flows through it.

For hundreds of years, people in the Greek islands fished for sponges. A sponge diver dove from his boat wearing only a rope around his waist. He carried a heavy stone, which took him quickly to the ocean floor. He could hold his breath for three to five minutes at a time. He used a small curved knife to cut the sponges from the rocks. He took as many as he could before his breath ran out, and put them in a net bag.

When diving suits were invented, sponge divers began to use them. The suits let them stay on the ocean floor longer. They could dive deeper. They brought up more sponges than they had been able to before. But the divers had to be careful to avoid decompression sickness, which could kill or injure them.

Now there are very few sponge divers left. Most people use man-made sponges, which are cheaper. Also, the number of sponges living in the ocean has been reduced by pollution.