

## THE REALITY OF CALIFORNIA'S MARINE RESOURCES AND COMMERCIAL FISHING

Before most of us are awake, California's commercial fishermen are hard at work, fishing with care, governed by wind and weather -- and regulated by an intricate network of restrictions to conserve and sustain our marine resources. Risking their lives at sea, local commercial fishermen provide food for our tables, making life better for all of us. Yet today our fishermen face vitriolic, incendiary attacks on commercial fishing. Such environmental sensationalism is intended to tug on emotions, influence public opinion; ironically, it targets the very people who are closest to the ocean, the natural world.

The realities of nature, and of fishing, are far cry from graphic claims by so-called experts perpetuated in recent news reports and editorials, that local fishermen have caused "serial depletion" of our marine resources, that "relentless overfishing" is driving species "to the brink of extinction". What is the truth behind these claims? Who are these "experts" and where's the proof?

### **Hidden Agendas**

With few exceptions, these serial attacks on fishermen also plead an emotional case for marine "no-take" zones, or harvest refuges, as a way to restore a sorely troubled ocean. The chief instigator in the call for establishing local no-take zones around the Channel Islands is the National Park Service (NPS). For the past several years, Park Service biologists have observed declines in certain marine species on transect lines established in several nearshore areas around the islands. Establishing a system of no-take zones is now essential to restore the marine environment, these "experts" argue. But, as is often the case, these proponents of harvest refuges omitted a few key facts.

Park Service biologists played on the sad state of southern California's abalone resource, a poster species, illustrating the allegedly depleted state of California's marine resources. Curiously, they failed to mention withering foot syndrome, caused by a bacteria of unknown origin. Withering foot disease has decimated as much as 95 percent of standing stocks of black, pink, green, white and flat (a noncommercial species) abalone since the 1982-83 El Niño. The spread of this disease played a major role in the State's decision to close the abalone fishery in southern California. Even after the fishery closure, the disease has continued to spread up the coast. No-take zones established to restore the abalone resource could not succeed until a cure for withering foot disease is found. So what's the rationale for no-take zones?

For decades the federal Park Service has angled to increase its turf and control over state resources. A longstanding, insidious conflict between state and federal agencies over the waters surrounding the Channel Islands has simmered since the formation of Channel Islands National

Park. Federal goals include increasing National Park lands and control over resources 30 percent by the year 2002. Isn't it ironic that the Park Service proposal for no-take zones amounts to 23 percent of Channel Islands National Park? Former Congressman Robert Lagomarsino sponsored the bill creating the park; the Act specifically maintained State of California Department of Fish and Game jurisdiction over marine resources, although it provided the Park Service with a one-mile "easement" for enforcement purposes. The state vs. federal battle extends beyond a turf war to opposing ideologies: the sustainable resources, multiple-use mandate of California's Fish and Game Code versus the implicit "non-consumptive use" philosophy of the NPS.

### **California Marine Resources and Fisheries**

Which species have been driven to the brink of extinction, as Park Service experts argue? Not spiny lobster or rock crab; both are healthy, sustainable fisheries, thanks in part to cooperation between fishermen and fishery regulators to enact such laws as seasons, size limits and escape ports. Certainly not sea urchins, as a recent editorial suggests. The Park Service's own transect data for each of the Channel Islands shows that overall sea urchin densities have not changed for more than a decade, although the average size is smaller now.

The truth is that, with the exception perhaps of certain abalone, no commercial fish or shellfish species in California is in danger of going extinct.

Allegations that California fishery resources are in decline usually support the premise by comparing historic commercial landings with the present. Fishing – both sport and commercial – has reduced virgin abundance to be sure. But natural forces, strict regulations and international economics have had an even greater effect, at least on commercial catches. The natural effect of strict regulations, coupled with natural cycles and international politics, is reduced catches. Reduced landings, however, do not automatically mean declining stocks.

Cycles of abundance for different species rise and fall in a natural rhythm that we don't fully understand. Scientists term broad-scale oceanic cycles a "regime shift." A shift to a warm-water cycle, beginning in the late 1970's, is strongly influencing the decline of such temperate-water species as rockfish and lingcod. Added to these natural cycles are the drastic impacts of El Niño's on many marine resources.

For many years California fishermen have worked closely with state and federal fishery biologists and regulators to better understand and safeguard fish populations and fisheries. Fishermen support conservation measures to sustain our local seafood resources. Nearly two years ago, new ultra-conservative federal laws were enacted, sharply reducing limits on many local groundfish species such as rockfish and lingcod until their estimated numbers increase. Strict new state laws provide another layer of protection.

This warm-water oceanic cycle produces good news stories, too – such as the increased abundance of tunas and swordfish we've seen in local waters the past few years. And consider sardines, which made up the lion's share of commercial landings in the 1930's and '40's (more than 1 billion of a total 1.8 billion pounds in 1935). The fishery crashed by the early 1950's and

the blame fell on fishermen. But after studying core samples from an anaerobic deep-water trench off the Santa Barbara coast, scientists now know that sardine populations fluctuate cyclically, abundant in extended warm-water periods. In fact, the great sardine decline was precipitated by a major oceanic shift to an extended period of below-normal water temperatures. Fishing exacerbated the decline, but the sardine population would have declined if there had been no fishing at all.

Recently, although few know it (and why is that?) California's sardine resource was declared "officially recovered" in a short news release issued by the Department of Fish and Game. Once again the ocean is teeming with sardines; the silvery tide extends from Enseñada, Mexico to British Columbia. More than one million tons of sardines are estimated in California waters alone. Sardines are absolutely not verging on extinction. So what about harvest refuges?

### **Harvest Refuges: Fact and Fantasy**

Proponents advocating establishment of no-take zones around the Channel Islands perpetuate serious misperceptions in addition to allegations of overfishing. One is that no-take zones may actually enhance the long-term health of fishing, or in fact of resources, outside the reserve. Consider these excerpted findings from independent scientists in California who have published research papers on the effects, mostly theoretical, of harvest refugia as applied to marine resource management.

- . Marine reserves tend to support denser populations of resident species, but resident species are usually habitat specific, reluctant to disperse. Thus the reserve does not necessarily lead to significantly increased catches beyond reserve boundaries.

- . The export of larvae from reserves to augment regional fisheries has theoretical potential but is almost entirely unproven.

- . To design effective marine reserves, studies are needed of the movement patterns and habitat requirements of all life stages of all targeted species. Extensive baseline studies are needed in proposed reserve areas before the reserves are established, in order to properly quantify their long-term effectiveness. Improperly designed refuges may endanger a fishery resource by providing a false sense of protection. Also, attention must be paid to the management of the growth of these renewable resources. Most proponents of no-take areas want to close the area first, then study it later. This is putting the cart before the horse.

- There is a perception that marine reserves will provide effective protection with little need for detailed knowledge of the species and without direct management of populations within the reserve. This is wishful thinking.

### **A Call for Objective Science**

We live in complicated times. In recent years we've observed a trend away from objective science to science advocacy. The self-serving nature of many scientific studies is

beginning to backfire as people become more savvy, questioning the goals of the sponsoring groups.

To commercial fishermen, harvest refuges are not a new concept. Commercial fishing regulations already include numerous area closures, as well as gear prohibitions, in and around the Channel Islands and southern California, as well as throughout the state. Nor are fishermen philosophically opposed to the idea of a harvest refuge designated as “wilderness”, no harvesting and no modern conveniences – such as motor boats or scuba tanks – allowed.

What fishermen DO object to is science with an agenda. As the Commercial Fishermen of Santa Barbara stated in a recent press release, “The National Park Service’s continued use of opinion, poor biology, and a negative public relations campaign, can in no way be supported by local fishermen.” The release continued:

Fishermen share a common goal with the (California Fish and Game) Commission, maintaining sustainable fisheries based on sound biology. After a full review of resource needs, recommendations by the Department of Fish and Game and establishment of sound, measurable goals and objectives, (the State) may recommend that no-take zones should be implemented. If it is determined that no-take zones are needed, (local fishermen) look forward to working with resource managers, deciding where to place these reserves. The combined effort should benefit fish populations and minimize negative impacts on commercial fishermen, their families, and California consumers who value fresh, local seafood.

### **The Bottom Line**

Commercial fishermen and women care about the ocean; they have a vested interest in the long-term health and conservation of fishery resources. In truth, California’s commercial fishermen fish by proxy for consumers who do not have the time, luxury or interest to fish for themselves: this group includes more than 97 percent of all Californians. . California consumers have voiced their opinions in third-party polls that they prefer “fresh, local” California seafood. Seafood is a desirable, healthful and nutritious food. And California’s seafood resources are, after all, renewable.

California fishermen strongly advocate for increased objective research and partnerships between scientists and fishermen. Fishermen have much to contribute toward increasing our understanding of the ocean, but their views are rarely heard. It is in everyone’s collective interest to protect coastal waters and ensure sustainable marine resources, as well as a healthy local fishing industry.

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*The California Seafood Council is a non-profit organization administered by the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Its mission is to provide education and information on California seafood and local coastal waters.*

