

Northern California Recreational Red Abalone Fishery

California abalone is a resource treasured for its recreational and commercial value. More recently, the scarcity of this resource has increased the interest of consumptive users and the concern of resource managers throughout the state. The decline and, in most cases, closure of California's abalone fisheries in the late 20th century has been the subject of widespread deliberation, consternation and conjecture. Resource managers can point to a number of factors contributing to the species' decline including low reproduction, disease, natural predation and, of most significance, both legal and illegal commercial and recreational fishing.

Abalone is generally vulnerable to overfishing as has been demonstrated in the collapse of abalone fisheries due to this activity in Southern California and in other parts of the world. As noted, reproduction of abalone is tenuous since high densities of abalone are required for successful reproduction. Recovery of a near-extinct abalone predator, the sea otter, has resulted in greater numbers of abalone being consumed as a food source in the wild, thus putting greater pressure on the fishery. Finally, withering syndrome, a lethal bacterial infection, which causes the abalone to shrink or "wither" has caused widespread decline in fisheries along the coast. These stressors are significant, yet scientists believe overfishing remains the primary culprit in the downfall of this fishery. Of particular concern to DFG law enforcement is the illegal take or poaching of abalone, primarily for commercial sale to consumers. It is estimated that 250,000 abalone are taken illegally each year, which contributes greatly to the overfishing stressors. As abalone and the opportunity to harvest this resource become scarcer, poaching has become more prevalent, and a continuation of this trend will severely damage abalone fisheries statewide.

Commercial interests have been dramatically affected by the decline and subsequent closure of this fishery. Many abalone fishermen have found themselves without a viable occupational enterprise. The closure of localized fisheries to both commercial and recreational fishing has impacted the economies of communities that depend on the tourism income that the fishery provides. The financial impacts are readily apparent and accepted as a byproduct of the fishery's decline. However, there still are recalcitrant constituents that feel the fishery is not in decline, and the resource is, in fact, abundant in areas outside the high-use fishery sites.

The Department of Fish and Game (DFG), relying upon scientific data, and the findings of marine fishery experts, is considering regulatory changes to further restrict the fishery due to recent lower abundance reports. DFG game wardens conduct targeted, in-season abalone check points, and aggressively employ undercover and investigative tactics to apprehend poachers. In considering such actions, DFG gives significant consideration to potential economic and staff impacts, yet must discharge its public trust responsibilities to protect this irreplaceable resource.