

Environmentalists seek greater protection for California anchovies, sardines, other lowly fish

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A school of sardines swims in one of the aquariums at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, in Monterey, Calif., in this March 4, 1998 file photo. California researchers have reported that Pacific sardines and anchovies seem to take turns in abundance, explaining a study indicating that cool anchovy-rich periods extended from about 1900 to 1925 and from 1950 to 1975. Warmth-seeking sardines ruled from 1925 to 1950 and from 1975 to the mid-1990s. (AP Photo/Ventura County Star, Chuck Kirman, File)

The lowliest of fish have always been a big part of Monterey Bay's story, from Cannery Row's sardine days to the squid boats that ply not far from the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf.

But those so-called forage fish, which make up a big part of the food base for larger fish such as salmon and tuna, are facing huge demand from fish farms and elsewhere. And ocean advocates are now pushing for greater protection of the

sardines, squid, anchovies and herring that make up a huge percentage of the Central Coast catch.

"These fish are the foundation for all commercial fishermen and recreational fishermen," said Darrell Ticehurst, executive director of the Coastside Fishing Club and a former board member of the Pacific Fishery Management Council, which sets policy for most West Coast fisheries. "If you disrupt the food chain at the forage fish level, it can have catastrophic consequences."

Local groups are lobbying federal and state policymakers to take a harder look at management of forage fish. A state bill by Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, being aired today would prevent new fisheries on unfished forage species, require regulators to account for the species' value as prey, and prioritize human consumption over using them as feed or fertilizer, including for the growing aquaculture industry.

For conservationists, the first point may be the most important, representing a break in how fisheries have traditionally been managed. By looking at forage species' value relative to other fish, regulators would be moving toward an ecosystem-based management approach, rather than setting species-by-species fishing limits based on historical catch numbers.

"That's really the paradigm shift we're seeing here," said Geoff Shester, Monterey program director of Oceana. "This is really the first bite at the apple of ecosystem-based management."

While there are quibbles over which species are forage fish, there is little question they serve a vital role in the ocean, feeding on plankton and

translating that energy into food for larger predators.

Yet unless you like anchovies on your pizza, management of forage species hasn't been high the public's list of concerns, particularly when catches are high. But with aquaculture now the fastest-growing sector of U.S. agriculture, even reaching the cover of Time magazine recently, there is growing concern about the forage fish needed to support the rapidly expanding industry.

"What hasn't been done is taking into account the values these fish play in the larger ecosystem," said Paul Shively, manager of Pew Environment Group's Oregon-based Pacific Fish Conservation Program. "We hear a lot of, 'Where's the crisis?' Our response to that is, 'Why do we need a crisis to do the right thing?'"

Debate rages over whether an ecosystem-based system is needed to protect the ocean. At a June meeting of the Pacific Fishery Management Council in Spokane, Wash., some environmentalists walked away disappointed that the federal agency did not strike out more boldly toward taking a holistic approach to fishery management.

"Those questions are not being asked when we're setting harvest rates. At the most basic level, we've got to start asking those questions, because we know they're important," Shester said. "It's not only intuitive, but that's the result of the models that are out there."

Mike Burner, a staff officer for the council, said that while the group is looking at ecosystem management, and wants to take a closer look at forage species in particular, there is no indication that council would drop

species-by-species limits on fisheries, upon which many livelihoods depend.

"The council has not yet shown an interest in ditching their species-based approach to management," Burner said.

Part of the problem, some say, is that an ecosystem-based approach relies upon an uncertain definition: what's a healthy ocean? And if you can't define that, how can you set catch limits?

Alec MacCall, a senior scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fishery Management Division in Santa Cruz, pointed to evidence demonstrating that some fisheries, such as sardines, can drop off a cliff for years at a time.

"We know there's a huge natural variability," MacCall said. "Our oceans are sort of like a pitcher -- you never know what kind of ball it's going to throw you next."

In written comments on AB 1299, the bill being considered today, the National Marine Fisheries Service expressed concern that catch limits wouldn't account for natural fluctuations in fish population, that the bill's proposed analysis of forage fish may rely on unreliable or unavailable data, and that the bill could impede, not help, a move toward ecosystem-based ocean management.

"Based on our experience with the Pacific Council process, fishermen can

still be provided fishing opportunities while equally maintaining ecosystem protections," reads the letter, signed by regional administrator Rodney McInnis. "Such a workable balance allows fishermen to maintain a diverse fishery portfolio for maintaining jobs year round and contributing to local economies."

Many environmentalists favor farmed fish over wild catches because they lessen the impact on depleted ocean stocks. The increasing focus on forage fish, which are caught and shipped to aquaculture operations around the globe, show a burgeoning tension among policymakers.

Others besides the ocean-advocacy groups are starting to get involved. Ticehurst wants to move toward a global approach to fishery management to help bolster the numbers of larger fish sought by recreational fishermen. According to the state Department of Fish and Game, recreational fishing provides a much larger economic boost to the state than the commercial fishing industry.

And many are convinced that protecting forage fish is the wave of the future.

"It's increasingly apparent that there's a very important role that these forage species play in the overall ocean health," Shively said. "You can't sustain healthy populations of salmon and tuna and other predator species that we all love if they don't have something to eat."

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