

MORRO BAY: ABALONE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

A HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

For many years, the City of Morro Bay and harvest of abalone were synonymous. 1988 marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of this unique fishery at Morro Bay by the Pierce family. Many local families can trace their roots back to some level of participation in the abalone harvest.

As a food source, the abalone has been important to coastal inhabitants for thousands of years. Kitchen middens, the shell piles left by native Californians, provide evidence of the vast quantities of shellfish: abalone, sea urchin, Pismo clams, mussels, crab, lobster, etc.

Chinese emigrants, brought to California to build the railroads, were the first to harvest abalone commercially. Rather than diving, the Chinese used long poles to hook abalone and drag them to the surface. The abalone were dried or canned for export to the orient. By the end of the 19th Century, first county, then State government agencies became concerned with the high level of harvest and passed legislation on size to limit the take. The turning point for the Chinese was the restriction of harvest to water 20' or deeper. Since the Chinese did not dive, their industry quickly declined.

This commercial niche was soon filled by Japanese divers, based in Monterey, who harvested abalone by traditional free-diving techniques. By the 1920's the Japanese had introduced the modern hard-hat diving suit to the fishery.

In 1928, the Pierce Brothers began using Japanese diving gear to harvest abalone near Morro Bay. Bill Pierce of Morro Bay is credited as the first of the caucasian divers. This early effort spawned an entire industry for the people of Morro Bay and introduced thousands of young men and women to fishing. Many of these young divers taught biologists of the day to dive which opened up the sea for further exploration and study.

Between 1916 and the mid-1960's, an average 2 million pounds of abalone per year was landed at Morro Bay, leading to the title as "Abalone Capital of the World". The mainstay of the industry was the red abalone, Haliotis rufescens the worlds largest of over 100 species. To many people, this level of harvest means one thing-over fishing. However, the fishery was well managed and only the largest abalone (over 8" before 1959, 7 3/4" today) harvested. Size limits and area closures have protected the resource from over exploitation. Even today, commercial divers must stay attached to their boat by airline. No SCUBA equipment is allowed. Abalone permits (issued by the State) are limited to 175. There are about 120 active commercial abalone divers today.

The biggest problems facing the abalone resource today are near-shore pollution and the resulting destruction of habitat and the sea otter, Enhydra lutris l. Research has shown that as few as 100 sea otters may consume 1 million pounds of abalone per year (Wild 1974).

Mariculture experiments (ocean farming) are now underway at Morro Bay which may someday return our coastal community to the status of ABALONE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD! Commercial and recreational divers are also experimenting with re-seeding of reefs to enhance the wild populations of abalone. Much is being learned about abalone life history from these cooperative efforts.

