

The cycle of the barracuda

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Local fishing has always had its ups and downs

THE BARRACUDA are back. The torpedo-shaped fish are not as dependable as Capistrano's swallows (who showed up late this year, incidentally) nor as regular as our own Monarch butterflies, but they come into the Monterey Bay Region during the periods of ocean warming we call El Niño. Scientists monitoring the ocean temperatures in the South Pacific have been predicting an El Niño for over a year and the arrival of the silver punctuation marks clinch it. El Niño is here.

Long before there were scientists on this coast there were fishermen. They may not have known what to call the warming water or what caused it, but they knew that at least once each decade the barracuda would slide into Monterey Bay, followed by their Southern California brethren — tuna, yellowtail, bonito and skipjack.

We know that the Ohlone Indians knew about the El Niño because barracuda bones have been found in middens at Monterey. Early Yankee fishermen also noted the barracuda's arrival as in 1859 when the Sentinel reported that "Barracouta are honoring our waters and adorning our tables." Chinese fishermen on both sides of Monterey Bay caught barracuda and sold it door to door, but it was not until the arrival of the railroads in the 1870s that the commercial fresh fish industry began in earnest — and it was the Italians who successfully made the arrival of the barracuda a commercial success.

We need to say something about the phrase "fresh fish" before you get the wrong idea. In the 1880s and 1890s, before the advent of canneries and dependable refrigeration, a "fresh" fish was one that was caught in the morning, delivered to the railroad in the afternoon, shipped uncleaned and without ice to San Francisco and sold the following day. Finally (mercifully), a good part of the catch was thrown away at the end of each market day. Locally, fresh fish were caught and sold on the same day.

BETWEEN 1890 and 1920 the Southern California fish came into the bay on at least three different occasions. Local newspapers noted schools of barracuda in the bay during the summer of 1895, and in August of that year an Italian fisherman at Monterey caught a huge tuna that weighed 406 pounds. (The record bluefin tuna caught in California waters is listed at 363½ pounds. Verified records do not go back into the 1890s.)

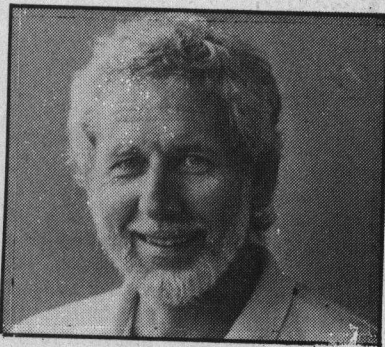
Tuna and barracuda returned to the bay in the summer of 1907, and the Monterey Cypress newspaper crowed that tuna fishing off Monterey was "better than Catalina." In September, 1907, the Monterey fish markets were selling fresh barracuda and skipjack along with the usual rock cod and mackerel. Daily shipments of barracuda were being shipped from both Monterey and Santa Cruz. The warm water apparently continued through the summer of 1908 as barracuda continued to be shipped out of the region until winter of 1908-9.

One of the best local economic indicators during this period were the names of the teams in the Central California Coast professional baseball league. In 1909, the Salinas team was known as the Burbanks after the Burbank potato, which was grown widely in the Salinas Valley, though they were most often referred to as the



A haul of salmon and sea bass litter the Santa Cruz Wharf in this 1890s photo.

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

Spuds. The Hollister team was the Haymakers, San Jose fielded a team called the Prunepickers (using that name in San Jose when I was growing up could get you a punch in the eye), and the Watsonville team was the Pippins. (Watsonville's team in the 1890s was known as the Sugar Beets, but the sugar factory moved to the Salinas Valley in 1898, so they renamed it after the apple.) Santa Cruz's team was nicknamed the Sand Crabs. (You'll have to decide how to turn that into a crop.) Monterey's team was nicknamed the Barracudas.

In a dramatic season-ending playoff game in October 1909, 3,000 spectators watched the Watsonville Pippins beat the Monterey Barracudas 2-0 to win the pennant. There's no way to prove any cause and effect relationship between that loss and the fishing, but the team's namesake did not return to the bay until 1915.

By this time the fishermen were pretty familiar with the comings and goings of the Southern California fish, so when B. Bregante caught a 355-pound tuna off Santa Cruz in September of 1915, he told the newspaper reporter that the tuna were found this far north because there was "an unusually warm current flowing north this summer." The 1915 season was a banner year for barracuda with Italian and Japanese fishermen at Monterey shipping up to 3 tons of barracuda a day to market in San Francisco. By 1917 the warm water was gone and so were the barracuda.

CYCLES. That's what fishing has always been about around here. From the longer cycles brought on by El Niños to the shorter ones involving squid and salmon, fishermen have always had to deal with the comings and goings of fish and shift their industry accordingly.

The current debate about the salmon season is not a new one, as similar discussions have been held throughout the 20th century on topics ranging from abalone fishing to sardines. In the early days of this century fishermen had time to adapt to new regulations and conditions because the amount of money invested in boat and gear was modest. Many, like the Azorean fishermen, were also farmers, so when fishing was off, they farmed harder. These days the mi-

grations and regulations continue to be unpredictable, but the boat payments come regularly every month. Fishermen are no longer able to wait out the hard times while the resources and their respective governmental agencies shift gears.

Fishermen adapted to changes earlier in this century, and probably will again, but not without pain and hardship. If fishermen are anything, they're tough. Some of them will get through these hard times and be there to greet the barracudas when they return again.

Sandy Lydon is a member of the Cabrillo College history faculty and will be co-hosting a television special titled "Fading Fishermen" that will be shown on KCBA TV at 7 p.m. May 2.