

Salmon fishermen vs. sea lions

By NANCY BARR
STAFF WRITER

Fishing off Pescadero one day last year, a local commercial fisherman hooked 98 salmon. Only 38 of those fish ever made it to market. The rest were eaten by sea lions.

The fisherman was understandably upset.

The California sea lion population has grown dramatically since the passage of the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972, jumping from about 20,000 in the early 1970s to an estimated 120,000 today.

Although the exact population is unknown, the state Department of Fish and Game and the National Marine Fisheries Service say there are between 75,000 and 80,000 sea lions off California shores, and maybe 40,000 more off the coast of Mexico.

The increase can be attributed largely to the federal protection act, which made it illegal to hunt or harass marine mammals, except under certain conditions.

To many, the increasing California sea lion population is a great source of pleasure — they are nice to look at and fun to watch or feed from the end of the Santa Cruz or Monterey wharf. They are one of the state's natural tourist attractions.

But commercial fishermen have a different view of the sea lion. They see it as a competitor, an obstacle to overcome as they try to make a living.

"Inevitably, the fishermen see the fish the sea lions are getting as fish they'd be able to catch," said Alan Baldridge, librarian and assistant to the director at the Hopkins Marine Station in Monterey.

It doesn't mean the fishermen have lost their livelihood

to go out on a boat and see it to understand."

The state Department of Fish and Game understands the fishermen's problem, and has been looking for solutions. It will soon be testing a new chemical repellent that seems to hold some promise.

The sea lion's traditional diet didn't include any of the fish that are commercially important. But some sea lions have learned to appreciate the taste of salmon.

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— commercial fisherman are catching an abundance of salmon this year — but for some, sea lions are a constant source of frustration.

"People think they're cute," said fisherman Bill Tomlinson of Watsonville, "but the sea lion is just a vicious predator. They take more fish than everyone in the state of California put together."

His colleague, Bill Murtha, agreed. "It makes you sick, really. A person would have

On the other hand, sea lions eat a lot of hake and lamprey, Baldridge said. Since lamprey are a natural predator of salmon, sea lions are actually beneficial to the salmon fishery, he said. Sometimes, though, it's hard for a fisherman to remember this, when a sea lion is going after his catch.

Some sea lions — biologists guess it's a very small number — have learned to feed on mackerel, bonita and salmon, because they can get

a good meal just by following a fishing boat.

In Southern California, the sea lions are particularly fond of following charter fishing boats that take out large groups for sport fishing. From these boats, the sea lions take a lot of mackerel and bonita.

In Northern California, sea lions have learned to feed on salmon, and that the best way to do so is to follow commercial trollers.

"A fisherman that has a sea lion following him and eating his fish is in a pretty miserable condition," Baldridge said. "They get greatly exasperated when they haul in a fish and find a sea lion has been following the boat and has taken a bite out of it."

Gill-net fishermen are also known to have some trouble with sea lions. Sea lions "treat gill nets like delicatessens," said fishing industry representative Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

Ironically, the gill-net fisheries are also a danger to the sea lions, as many of the animals get caught in the nets and drown.

Off the Central California coast, there's no question that

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it's the salmon fishermen who suffer the most harassment by sea lions. These fishermen have one option immediately available to them — they can shoot the animals giving them trouble.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act has a provision allowing fishermen to get permits to kill any sea lions that get in the way of their fishing. Fishermen are required first to try to scare the animals away, but if that fails, they may kill them.

Jim Lecky of the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates some 400 fishermen have such permits.

The permit requires that fishermen report each time they kill an animal, but such reports are almost unheard of. Lecky said fishermen just don't bother to file the reports. Grader, of the fishermen's federation, agreed, and blamed the poor record-keeping practiced by most fishermen. The fishermen are often alone on their boats or have only one helper, and are just too busy to take care of the paperwork side of their work, Grader said.

Even though the fishermen don't report taking animals, there is plenty of evidence some are taking advantage of the privilege.

"Once the commercial salmon season begins, you can hear the gunshots, and we get a big increase in the number of dead sea lions on shore," Baldridge said. The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito

Animals

has also gotten calls about beached sea lions, finding that some have been shot and have pellets lodged in their heads.

Grader said that while many fishermen will shoot the animals that harass them, others are fascinated with the sea lion, and refuse to even carry a rifle on board.

"A lot of fishermen really feel they shouldn't have to be gamekeepers," Grader said. "Why should the fishing industry get a black mark by its name because it's tried to cull out these bad animals?"

Because most fishermen don't enjoy shooting animals, the Department of Fish and Game has even more incentive to find a non-lethal method for controlling sea lions, said John Scholl, a marine biologist with the department. Grader said fishermen are also interested in finding another way to control the animals because of the benefit they provide by keeping the lamprey population in check.

Although Grader and other fishermen talk about the possibility of some kind of "birth control" or neutering program, biologists say there is no such move planned or even being considered.

What may be more help to fishermen would be an effective sea lion repellent. Scientists at Oregon State University thought they had the solution four years ago when they came out with a device that emitted sounds extremely annoying to sea lions.

It seemed to keep the animals away for a little while, Scholl said.

But "after a matter of weeks, the animals that were repelled started coming back and taking fish off salmon troll lines," he said.

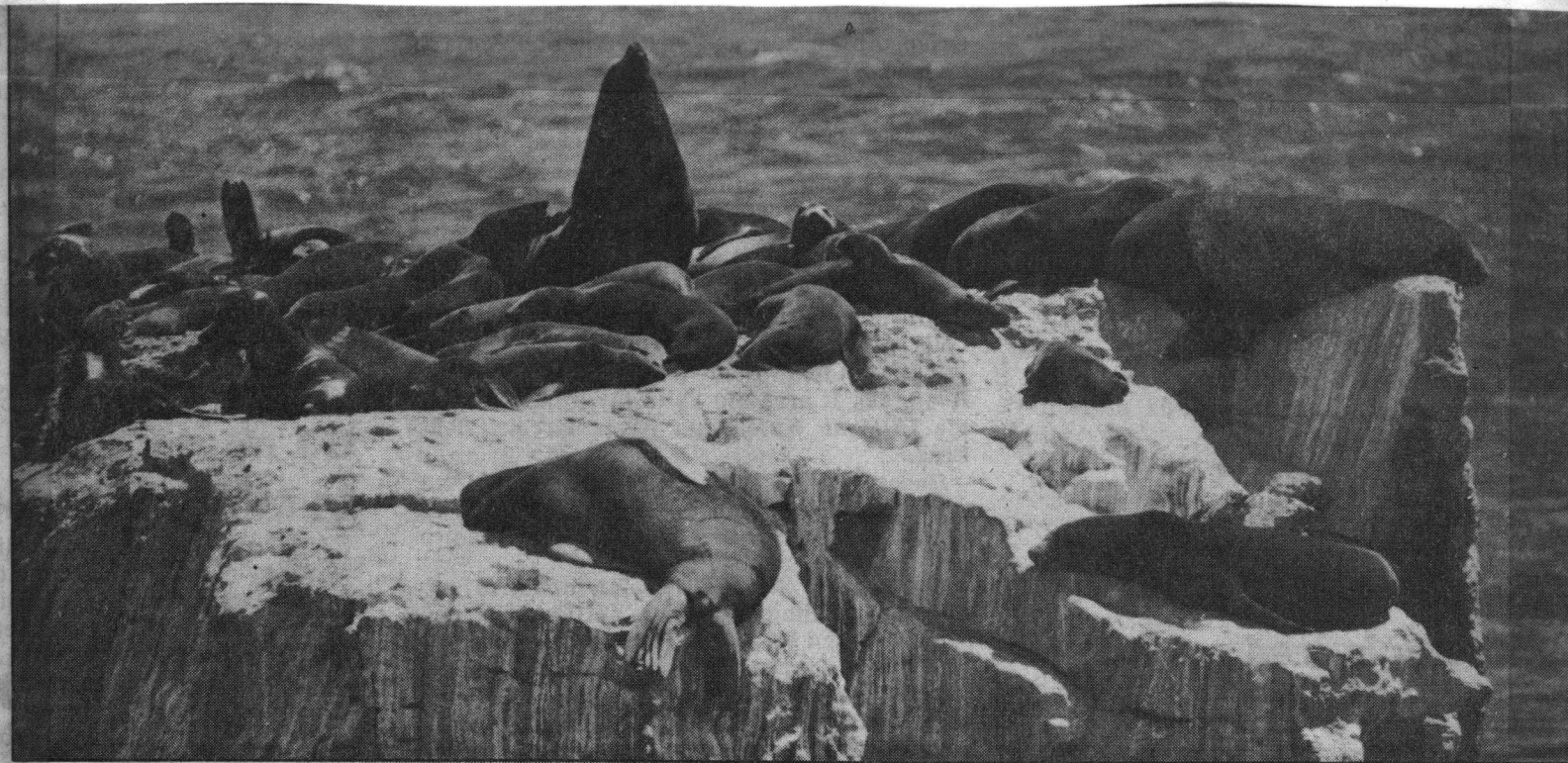
Sea lions are an intelligent species, and Grader surmised they are so smart that they soon learned to associate the sound with salmon, and the sound ended up serving more like a dinner bell, attracting instead of repelling the animals.

Fishermen are now waiting to see the effectiveness of the newest repellent — lithium chloride, a chemical that makes sea lions violently ill for about a half-hour after ingesting it, Scholl said. The chemical will be tested in Southern California this summer.

Scholl explained that he and others conducting the research project for Fish and Game will inject lithium chloride into fish, and hang them on the gear of charter boats.

They will mark the sea lions that come around the boat and eat the catch, and will watch to see if those animals continue to show up after their experience with the chemical-laced fish.

The idea works much like trying to discourage a child from sucking his thumb by putting an offensive-tasting substance on it. In this case, if the sea lion associates the lithium-chloride illness with a certain kind of fish, it may learn to stay away from that kind of fish.



Sea lions cavort on Seal Rock off Lighthouse Point in Santa Cruz.

Kurt Ellison

If the two-month experiment proves the use of lithium chloride is promising, Fish and Game will conduct a similar experiment on Northern California salmon trollers.

Fishermen will be anxiously awaiting the results of the lithium-chloride tests, to see if there may finally be a way to keep sea lions from stealing their fish.