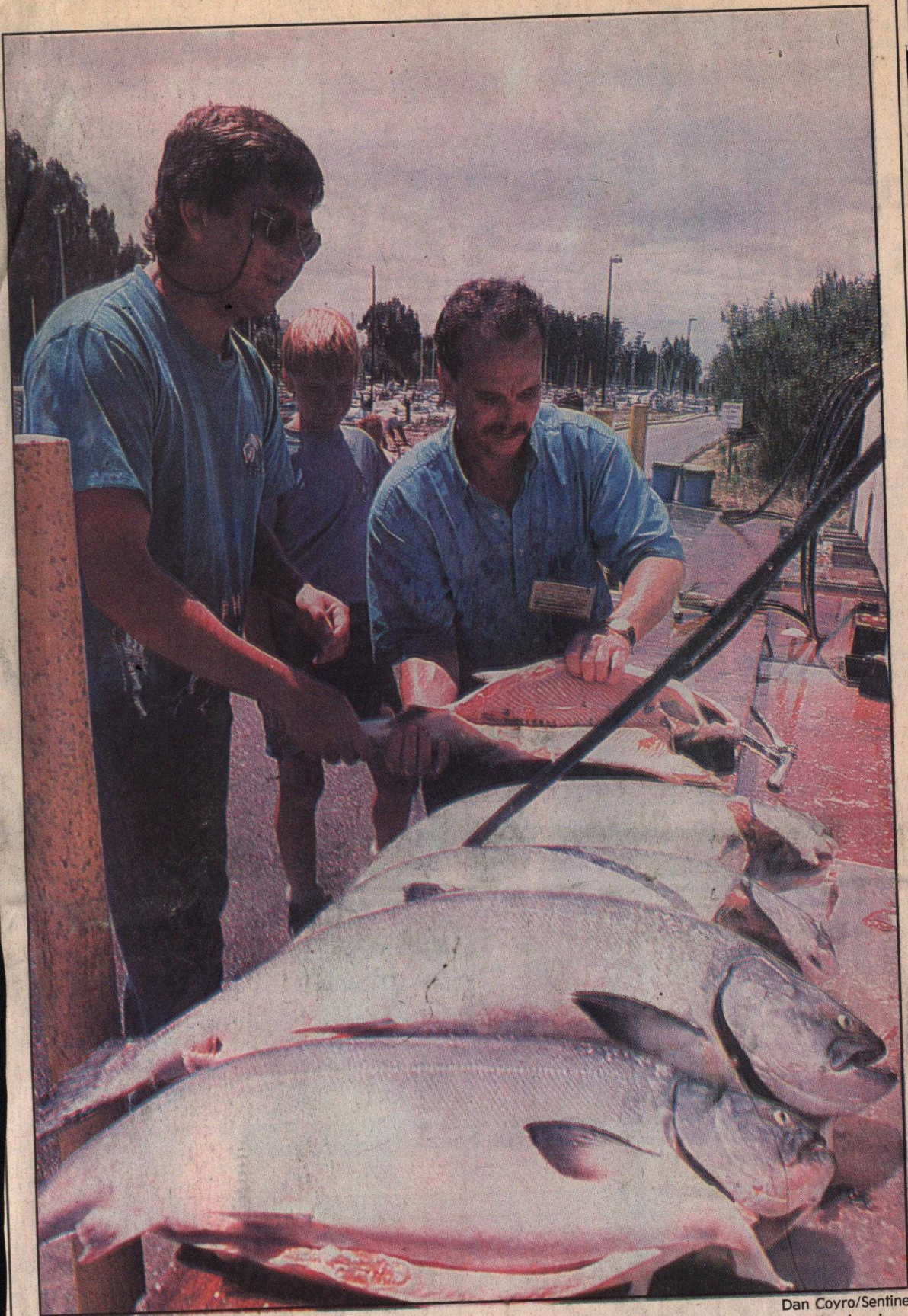


Catch of the decade



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

J.P. Mangelsdorf and Rick Lundberg clean their catch Wednesday at the yacht harbor.

Extraordinary run of chinook has salmon fishermen hooked

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — In a run worthy of legend and the tales of old men, millions of chinook salmon continue to swarm through the Monterey Bay.

Even old-timers can't remember a year when the salmon fishing was better than this season. Since the season opened in March, more than 400,000 salmon have been caught in Monterey Bay, and the schools of fish are still miles wide.

"I've never seen it like this," said Ken Stagnaro, a fourth-generation fisherman who runs the family charter boats. "My uncle says there hasn't been anything like it since a big bite in the 1950s — and that didn't last as long."

In the past 10 days, Stagnaro has landed more than 1,000 fish. His charter boats, and every other charter in the bay, are booked solid with two trips a day. Fisherman catching their limit in minutes is the norm — not the exception as in years past.

"I'll look around and every boat is netting fish, and then I'll look through binoculars two miles downstream and everybody is doing the same thing," Stagnaro said. "We've been trying to imagine how many fish are out there, but you can't."

Not even biologists will venture a guess. No one is quite sure why this year is so extraordinary, including scientists who monitor salmon populations.

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"I'm very surprised," said Alan Baracco, a state Department of Fish and Game biologist in charge of salmon programs. "We projected a high population, but nothing of this magnitude."

Baracco attributes the salmon boom to benevolent ocean conditions, with plenty of food production, and the end of the California drought, which has improved inland river habitats.

"We must be having a much higher ocean survival rate than in years past," Baracco said. "But we don't know for sure."

The salmon now in Monterey Bay are fall-run chinooks, most hatchery bred or spawned in the Sacramento River system.

Last year about 30 million hatchery-bred chinook smolts were released. Normally only 1 percent, or 300,000, of those would survive to adulthood, indicating a higher ocean survival rate or an extraordinary natural hatch this year.

In normal years, the salmon already would have begun migrating north, leaving the Monterey Bay and passing through the Golden Gate in late August on their way to spawning grounds in Central Valley rivers.

But this is not a normal year. The fish are bigger, more plentiful and staying farther south, later in the season.

"We normally see a substantial drop-off in catches in the Monterey Bay by mid-July," Baracco said. "But it is lasting much longer."

The great body of chinooks has also journeyed farther south, with a gathering of huge schools in a pocket of cold water off Santa Barbara. For weeks, charter boats in Santa Barbara have also been recording limits caught in only a short time.

But while the bite is booming to the south, the Northern California salmon fishing has been poor, according to Baracco, with fishermen

out of Bodega Bay complaining of too many "shakers," or fish too small to take legally.

Salmon up to 40 pounds have been caught in Monterey Bay, with 20 pounders common. Some of the bigger salmon in the bay may be 4-year-old fish from an unscheduled planting of 750,000 chinooks at Moss Landing in 1992, biologists said.

The fish were released after they became infested with freshwater parasites because of design flaws in the state's Merced River salmon hatchery.

According to biologists, water pumped into the Merced hatchery was too warm, enabling the parasites to infest the smolt salmon population.

The smolts were then taken to the state's Feather River hatchery and then trucked to Elkhorn Slough for release in May 1992, according to Melodie Palmer, an associate ocean biologist with the Department of Fish and Game.

Most of the smolts planted in Elkhorn Slough would have returned to spawn last year, but they were not tagged and their fate has been a mystery. While some of the Elkhorn Slough-planted fish would naturally return to the Sacramento River, others may not have had time to "imprint" on their proper spawning grounds, leaving them wandering the bay in search of rivers that do not exist, until they die.

How long this extraordinary bite will last is unknown.

Charter captains expect a slight dropoff in catches when commercial salmon season reopens Wednesday. Commercial boats tend to disperse the schools, making the fish more difficult to find, biologists said.

In the meantime it has been a boon for fishermen, charter boat workers and salmon eaters.