

# Save the rockfish

## Anglers asked to cooperate with drive

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STAFF WRITER

Hints of a declining rockfish population have prompted California Department of Fish and Game officials to ask sport and commercial anglers to toss back black rockfish less than 14 inches long.

The black rockfish is a common catch along the Santa Cruz County coast and, unlike its deeper-water relatives, lives in shallow water and has a good chance of surviving when thrown back, department officials said. The voluntary conservation program was put in place April 1 to insure the future health of the population, they said.

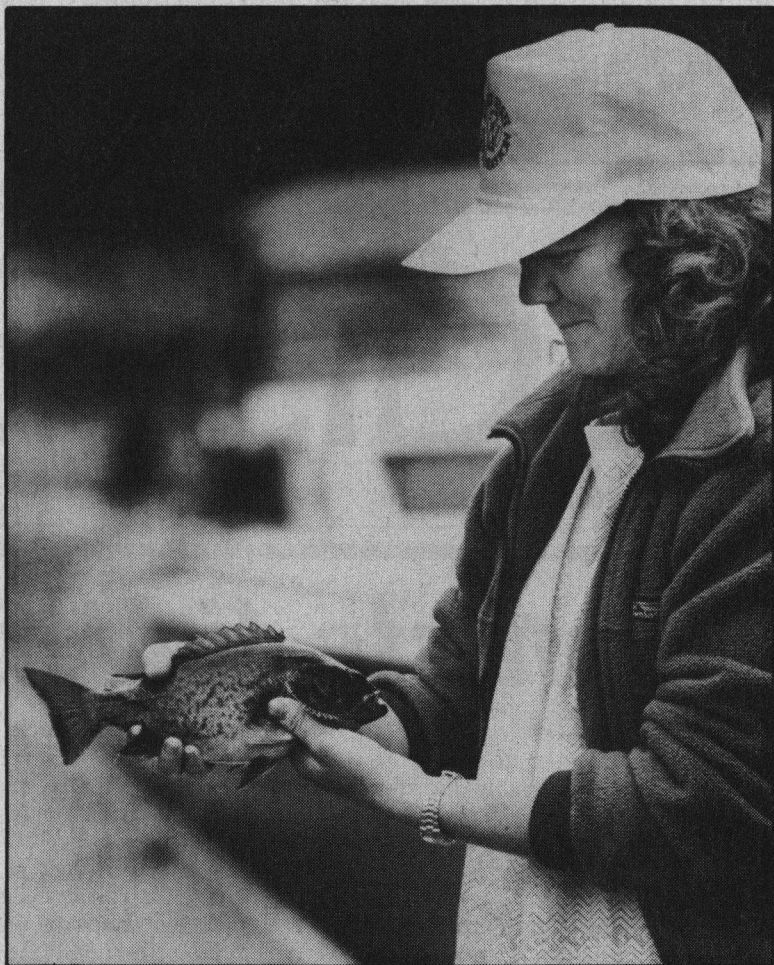
"If you throw back fish that are smaller than 14 inches, then you're giving those fish a chance to at least reproduce before they get caught and are taken from the gene pool," said Fish and Game biologist Deb Wilson-Vandenberg.

The black rockfish, or *Sebastes melanops*, is distinguished from other species by its speckled dorsal fin and light gray torso. About 40 species live in waters off California. Among them are chilipepper, olive, rosy, canary and yelloweye rockfish.

Catches from skiff and party boat anglers in Monterey, San Francisco, Morro and Bodega bays and ports off Fort Bragg were sampled over a 3½-year period. According to the study, designed to monitor the health of marine sportfish, the average size of black rockfish shrank from 14½ inches to just over a foot.

The data was not analyzed for statistical significance, but because more than 2,000 fish were sampled in the San Francisco waters, the decline was considerable, said Wilson-Vandenberg, one of five biologists who worked on the study.

Black rockfish less than 14 inches long are not likely to have reached sexual maturity, she said.



Kurt Ellison

### Biologist Deb Wilson-Vandenberg with rockfish

Anglers' catches also contained fewer black rockfish. In Monterey Bay, the numbers were negligible because of a small sample size, but off the San Francisco coast the numbers fell 10 percent from 1988 to 1991, according to the study.

Fishing areas off Santa Cruz and San Francisco overlap, Wilson-Vandenberg said, so that releasing juvenile black rockfish could help revive the black rockfish population throughout the areas studied.

Current California fishing regulations do not place size limits on rockfish, which are subject to the daily bag limit of 15.

Wilson-Vandenberg expects conservation-conscious anglers

to comply with the voluntary program.

"Most of the skippers have a long-term interest in the fishing industry so they're interested in seeing they have a livelihood in 10 or 15 years," Wilson-Vandenberg said.

Upon learning about the program, anglers at the Santa Cruz Harbor seemed receptive to the idea.

"Those rock cod take a long time to get to a decent size anyway," said Scott Henneman, an angler who focuses his effort on rockfish during the fall.

"They seem pretty plentiful. It seems to me if they put a size limit on them they'll get a little bigger."