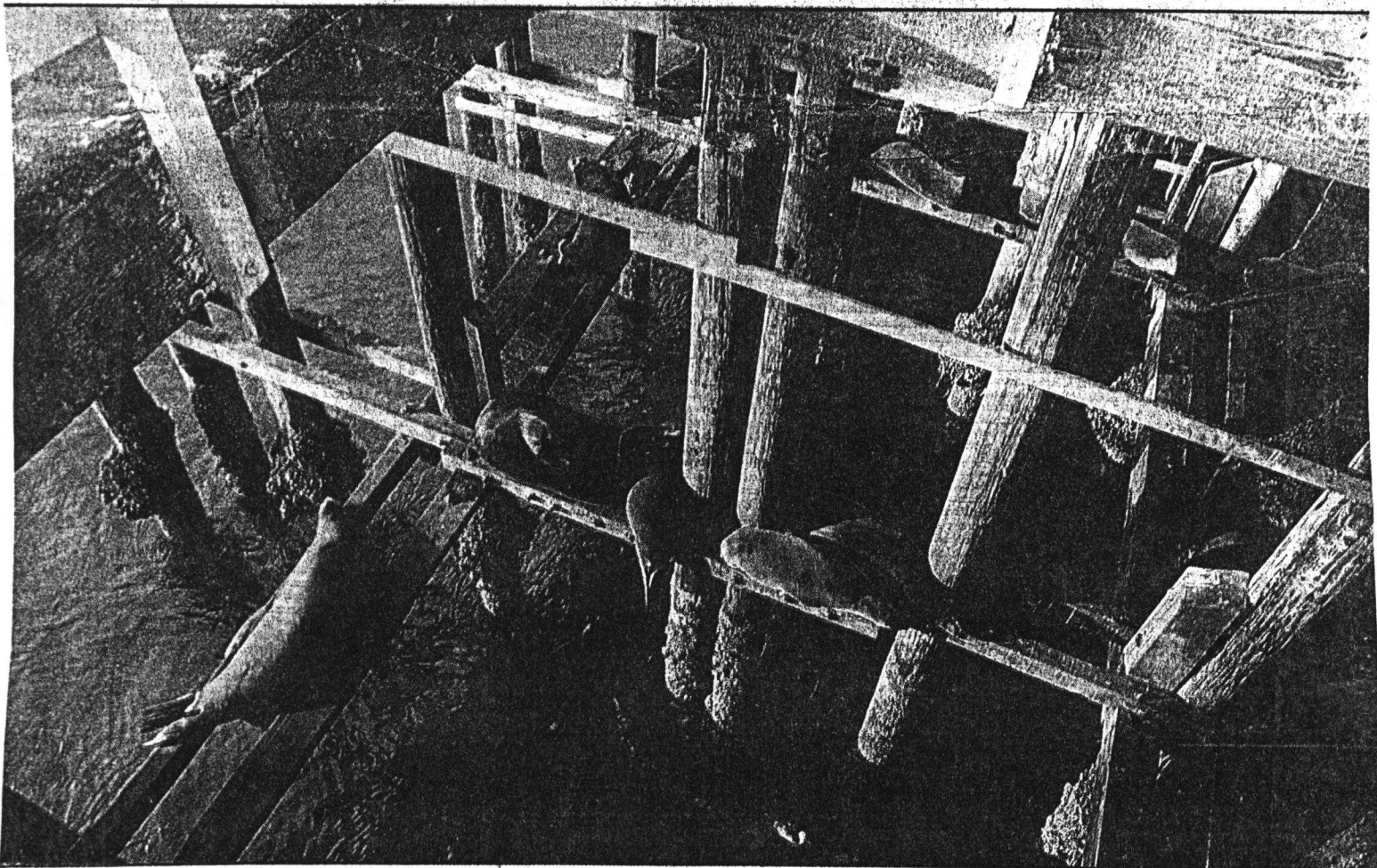


Waiting for lunch



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Sea lions, like these basking on the supports under the Municipal Wharf, are having a feast at the expense of fishermen

Fishermen at odds with sea lion herds

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The California sea lion is a common thief of the sea whose herds should be thinned out, say fishermen who are tired of battling the animals over their daily fish catch.

Over the past 20 years the sea lion population has exploded under federal protection. As many as 10,000 sea lions now live in the Monterey Bay and as their population grows, more of the animals are finding easy meals at the end of a fishing line.

"They are like a cat. They get

one fish off you and they follow you all day long," said Victor Ghio, a longtime commercial fisherman. "The sea lions are killing us. It was never this bad before."

This salmon season almost every commercial boat was shadowed by groups of barking, belching and insatiably hungry sea lions. When a salmon was hooked, it no longer meant a few dollars to the fishermen, but a race to see who could land the fish first.

"A lot of days I got one fish

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Sea lions

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out of 20," Ghio said. "Four or five are taking your fish. You could shoot them, but by the time you shoot one, the others take your fish. And nowadays there's always someone around to run you in."

Fishermen blame the federal Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972 for compounding many of the problems. The act outlawed the killing of sea lions — and all other marine mammals — except as a last resort, such as if an animal became entangled in a net and could not safely be removed. Killing a sea lion can result in fines of up to \$50,000 and a year in jail.

Like many marine mammals, the sea lion once faced extinction. As many as 200,000 sea lions once lived along California shores, before hunting reduced their numbers to several thousand in the 1920s.

"Sealers wiped out the whales and elephant seals," said UCSC biology professor Burney Le Boeuf. "Sea lions weren't worth as much. It wasn't as large an industry. What they did was shoot the adult males and take their testes and penis bone, which were sold to the Far East to Asians to make a powder for a (supposed) sexual rejuvenation process."

That trade ended in the 1930s and for years there were few problems between fishermen and sea lions.

Then the sea lion population began growing.

When the sea lions interfered with fishing, the herds were culled, often by shooting the animals at rookeries during mating seasons.

Up until the 1960s the government even paid a bounty for sea lion hides in some areas of Oregon.

Those days are over and under protection, the sea lion population has mushroomed to 90,000 in Cali-

fornia and is increasing by thousands of animals a year with no end in sight.

Critics, however, charge that allowing sea lions to propagate without control is bad policy that not only threatens the livelihoods of fishermen, but other species.

"It's a case of wildlife management out of control," said Stan Dowling, owner of Shamrock fishing charters out of the Santa Cruz harbor. "A lot of commercial fishermen go out and sea lions take 30 to 50 fish. It's a really destructive force. If a (sport) fisherman has to hook 10 fish to take home his limit of two, you are going start having a depletion of the resource and that is the greatest concern."

Dowling and others think the wildlife services should consider a way to manage the seal lion population, perhaps through sterilization or other such means.

"I'm not sure how to overcome the problem," Dowling said. "I don't think anyone would advocate a wholesale slaughter."

Jim Lecky, chief of the protected species division for the National Marine Fisheries Service, says the government has no intention of placing controls on the sea lion population.

"It would be inconsistent with our general goals," Lecky said. "Our act requires that we manage the population so they can recover to optimum levels and our analysis of the sea lion is that we are just getting into that range."

The optimum sea lion population according to Lecky is "the maximum the environment will support."

He suggests that fishermen try to find ways to discourage the sea lions from going after their catch, rather than hoping to diminish the herds.