



MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Sea lions entertain tourists at the Santa Cruz municipal wharf, but fishermen say their population is out of control.

# Fishermen: Sea lions prey on their catch

*Animals' welfare*

*SMN 12-799*

■ **Salmon loss:** Fish and game group says surging population doesn't need protection.

BY LEE QUARNSTROM  
Mercury News Staff Writer

Landlubbers gazing down at the huge California sea lions basking on catwalks and crossbeams beneath the Santa Cruz municipal wharf may find the behemoths picturesque.

But to commercial fishermen such as Jim Moser and Bob Pierce, the voracious sea lions are predators decimating the

salmon fishery off the central California coast.

The sea lions, as anyone who's ever dropped a hook and line into the waters of Monterey Bay knows, often snatch the silvery salmon from fishermen's gear before they begin to reel in their catch.

"It's a devastating problem some of the time," said Moser, 50, who's spent half his life fishing the Pacific Ocean. "I used to

make my living fishing up at Año Nuevo Island. Now I stay away. The sea lions take 95 percent of the fish you catch in that particular area."

So far, he noted Monday, sea lions have learned that boomboxes designed to frighten them packed nothing more than a sonic punch. They long ago learned to stay out of the range of shotguns some skippers used to carry on their boats.

Can politicians do what weapons and loud noises can't?

The Santa Cruz County Fish and Game  
See **SEA LIONS**, Page 8B

“The first thing we should do is stop trying to save them. They are not an endangered species and their population has grown tremendously.”

— Jim Moser, commercial fisherman



MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

The growing sea lion population, fisherman Bob Pierce says, take fish from hooks in deep water and surface far afield, out of the range of the illegal shotguns some fishermen used to carry to blast the animals.

# Fishing commission bids for controls on sea lions

## ■ SEA LIONS

from Page 1B

Advisory Commission, which first brought its concerns about the problem to the board of supervisors seven years ago, today will ask the board to join an effort to remove California sea lions and Pacific harbor seals from the list of creatures whose lives are protected by the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Commissioners, who voted unanimously to seek help from county supervisors, are also asking the board to endorse further studies by the National Marine Fisheries Service. A study submitted by that agency to Congress last February concluded that "California sea lion and Pacific harbor seal populations on the West Coast are increasing while many salmonid populations are decreasing."

### Out of balance

"The populations of marine mammals in California and more specifically in Monterey Bay are out of balance with the salmonid populations," Gary Lease, chairman of the county fish and game advisory commission, wrote to county supervisors on behalf of the advisory body last week. "Indeed, in some cases these marine mammal populations are out of control."

The animals, which have more than tripled their population in the state — to about 250,000, according to the commission — have taken more than 60 percent of the salmon catch of commercial and sports anglers.

Lease and his commission have asked supervisors to support the group's efforts to promote legalization of measures "up to and including the harvest of surplus sea lions and harbor seals," to bring the animals' populations down.

Meanwhile, Moser has developed his own tactic to outwit hungry s-

lions. He waits until other boats have left the Santa Cruz yacht harbor and settled down wherever they've found salmon. Then, said Moser, he darts out past those boats and the sea lions they attracted and puts out his lines away from the animals that prey on hooked salmon.

Fortunately, Moser said, salmon have been plentiful in recent years.

"We have a real healthy resource out there," the Santa Cruz fisherman said. "But we should have. We've put a lot of our own money into hatcheries up on the Sacramento River system and that's paying off as far as the number of salmon goes."

### Evasive pirates

But, his pal Pierce warned, the healthy salmon population has just made it easier for the sea lions to grab handy bites. The animals, he said, take fish from hooks in deep water and then surface with their prey far afield, out of the range of the illegal shotguns some fishermen used to carry to blast preying sea lions.

"I think the only thing shooting at them does," he said, "is to lower someone's blood pressure."

Like Moser, Pierce, 72, also of Santa Cruz, has been fishing for 25 years. He said he heads north, toward Bolinas, when he fishes in order to avoid the sea lions.

"But it's hard to make a living when you're only getting a buck and a quarter a pound," he said.

Moser said he used to have "hundred-fish days." When he was getting \$3 a pound 20 years ago, he was making a good living. Now, he said, there are hundred-fish days but often many or most of those fish have been taken or chewed on by sea

lions.

"Even when we're scratching" 20 or 30 fish a day, he said, "the sea lions might get all 20 or 30 of your fish."

Moser can't think of a good plan to solve the problem.

"But the first thing we should do," he said, "is stop trying to save them. They are not an endangered species and their population has grown tremendously in recent years."

Meanwhile, he said, the number of Santa Cruz commercial fishermen who depend on salmon to make a living has probably dropped to no more than 10 — although another few dozen go out when they feel like it.

He said he's been waiting for Mother Nature to help solve the problem.

"Generally," Moser said, "when we've upset the balance of nature and we get an overpopulation of something, it usually heals itself."

### Waiting in vain, so far

"I've been living in the hope that nature will kick in and help us out.

"So far, though, it hasn't."

Pierce suggested a solution based on human nature.

Noting that some endangered species have been hunted almost to the point of extinction in order to collect body parts said to increase men's sexual prowess, Pierce said, "I'm trying to start a rumor that the sea lion's third molar is an aphrodisiac."

Lee Quarnstrom covers the county of Santa Cruz and Watsonville. Contact him at [leeqqqq@cruzio.com](mailto:leeqqqq@cruzio.com), (831) 423-3234 or by fax, (831) 423-3119.