Our Ocean Backyard

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Salmon and Squid

Salmon and squid both came on the radar this past week. As my wife and I took an early morning walk (early like 5:30) on the beach this past weekend, we noticed a whole line of lights offshore from the squid boats. The squid fishers use bright lights to attract the market squid to the surface at night where they are netted after laying their eggs.

Last week the fishermen and women of Monterey, Moss Landing and Santa Cruz began fishing for salmon as the season opened, which in good years forms the backbone of the fishing industry in the summer months. One thing that both of these species have in common is that they are both terminal spawners. That sounds a little depressing, but it’s just the way life is for these guys. After they spawn or lay their eggs, life comes to a close. For one of these slippery cephalopods, life can be just 6-12 months long. Salmon on the other hand, depending upon the particular species, can live for 2-4 years.

These two marine animals have both shared some top billings in their importance to California’s commercial fishery in recent years, although there are significant year-to-year fluctuations. Calamari or market squid have been the number one fishery in tonnage caught, year after year… until last year. In typical years, 70,000 to 118,000 tons (118,000 is the allowable total catch) would be brought to the docks by the squid boats, making up consistently 2/3 of the entire commercial catch.

Last year, however, the catch was down to a fraction of that, just 13,600 tons; and while still first in tonnage, this was just 25% of the total commercial catch. Water temperature and food supply are recognized as major influences on the squid population, with generally smaller catches in warmer El Niño years and larger catches in cooler La Niña years. But with prices at the dock last year at 50 cents a pound, you need to catch a lot of squid to make much money. The total catch last year still earned $13,434,163, ranking No. 3 in value. What may be surprising, about 90% of those 13,600 tons of Calamari is exported, mostly to Asia. And after cleaning, some of that get shipped back to the U.S. for sales to fish markets and restaurants.

Salmon was on the other end of the price per pound spectrum last year, with dock price averaging $6.36/pound, and the total catch bringing $16,385,298, number two and 11% of the total catch value. In tonnage, however, salmon were No. 9 on the list, at just 1287 tons.

You might be wondering if Calamari was No. 3 in value and salmon were No. 2, what was No. 1? Perhaps not surprising, Dungeness crab. These clawed crustaceans are usually high up there on the list and in 2019 sold at the dock for $3.31/pound and brought in a whopping $51,802,121, or 35% of the total commercial catch income. It was a good year for crabs after an extended closed season several years ago, and 7,804 tons were caught in crab pots, 3% of the total tonnage.

There are a few other standouts on the commercial catch list. Anchovy was No. 2 in tonnage with 11,204 tons caught, 20% of the entire commercial catch, but at only 5 cents a pound, they didn’t make in the top ten for catch value.

Number 1 in value per pound was spiny lobster at $13.74/pound, which ranked them No. 4 in catch value at $11,321,272. This is a modest size fishery in tonnage, however, at just 12 total tons. Prawns are another valuable catch, bringing $8.47 per pound at the dock (number 2 in value/pound) and a total catch value of $7,298,264, ranking number 4.

Last year overall was not a big year for California’s commercial fishery with just 55,000 tons landed (which is less than the Calamari fishery itself usually brings in) bringing in a total of $148,143,454. It's a tough life for those who make their income from commercial fishing. The vagaries of year-to-year climate differences, changing ocean circulation patterns, differences in ocean temperatures, both short and long-term, food supply, and then the uncertainty of harmful algal blooms, which impact the Dungeness crab fishery, for example.

The state has nine major commercial fishing ports: Eureka, Ft. Bragg, Bodega Bay, San Francisco, Monterey, Morro Bay, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and San Diego. In 2019, Monterey delivered 25% of the total catch by weight, followed by Los Angeles with 23.2% and Eureka at 18.2%. These three ports brought in 2/3 of the total catch. By catch value, Eureka was 1st with 26.1%, Santa Barbara was 2nd with 16.3% and then San Francisco with 15.8%, nearly 60% of the value unloaded at these three ports.