Our Ocean Backyard

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California’s Commercial Fishing Industry

Living on the edge of Monterey Bay with the very large Pacific Ocean beyond, the fishing industry has long been a significant part of our local economy. From the birth of the sardine canning industry in 1902 until the late 1940s, Monterey was the largest fishing port in the western hemisphere with 19 canneries processing 726,000 tons of sardines at the peak in 1936. While sardines were by far the biggest catch and export through the heyday of Cannery Row, with the collapse of the fishery, other fish and shellfish became more important.

Although overfishing was initially blamed for the collapse and may have been a factor, marine scientists in subsequent years have discovered that the sardines and anchovies actually alternate in their abundance as ocean temperatures change over periods of decades, with somewhat warmer water being more favorable for sardines.

Today the state Department of Fish and Wildlife keeps track annually of about 250 different fish, shellfish and a few other marine animals that are commercially harvested. While many of these are things you will find in the local fish markets, whether fresh or frozen, there are a whole lot more on the department’s catch list that I’m guessing 95% of us have never heard of. This list includes things that don’t sound particularly edible; creatures like the shovelnose guitarfish, pomfret, quillback rockfish, California scorpionfish, threadfin shad, and three-spine stickleback. There are also fishers out there returning warty and giant red sea cucumbers, Kellet’s whelks, keyhole limpets and all variety of other marine life for someone’s dinner table.

For the rest of us, however, there is a much smaller number of more familiar species that constitute the great bulk of the commercial catch, in both tonnage and value. As has been typical for many years, and is often a surprise for many residents, the lowly market squid comes in at number one in tonnage at 13,600 for 2019, which constitutes 24.5% of the total commercial catch. The great majority of the squid is exported to Asia, although much of what we see in our local restaurants has been shipped to Asian ports where it is cleaned, at much lower labor costs than here, and then shipped back again. Seems odd,­ but it has something to do with economics.

Number two in abundance in 2019 was northern anchovy at 11,204 tons or 20.1% of the total, followed by Dungeness crab at 7,804 tons and 14% of the total commercial tonnage, mackerel with 7.5% of the catch and 4,170 tons, and sole of all types, totaling 2,263 tons and making up 4.1% of the catch. So these five alone, of the 250 species that are counted, made up 70.2% of the total commercial catch by weight in 2019.

The ranking by dollar value at the dock was almost a totally different list. Top value was Dungeness crab at nearly $51.8 million and 35% of the total commercial catch value. This was followed by salmon at $16.5 million and 11.1% of the total, market squid at $13.4 million and 9.1% of the total, spiny lobster at $11.3 million and 7.6%, and number five, all species of tuna combined bringing $6.8 million and 4.6% of total value. These five species alone made up 57.4% of the total dollar value of the catch.

One other interesting indicator, which the commercial fishers know well, is the value per pound. At the top of that list was the gnarly looking spiny lobster, which while only ranking number 14 in total tonnage, had the highest value per pound at the dock of $13.78 in 2019. Chinook Salmon was a little less than half of that at $6.36 per pound. Halibut came in at number 3 at $5.42/pound, followed by swordfish at $4.13, and at number 5, Dungeness crab at $3.31 a pound. These are really high value fisheries where a relatively small catch can produce a high return, and as with all fish and shellfish, with a lot of hard work.

At the other end of the value per pound spectrum are Pacific sardines and northern anchovies at just five cents a pound. You have to bring in a lot of either of these small fish to cover the costs of keeping your vessel running. Market squid, which ranked number one in tonnage was also way down the list in return/pound at 49 cents.