



CALIFORNIA WETFISH PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION

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OPEN LETTER TO PAUL NICKLEN NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER

Dear Mr. Nicklen,

As an award-winning journalist, whose stunning photos have graced the pages of National Geographic, and as the holder of a degree in marine biology, your audience has come to expect your images to be not only thought-provoking and artistic, but to be captioned accurately, with information based on science and facts.

The captions you wrote accompanying the photograph that you recently posted on your Facebook page and Instagram, depicting anchovy floating on the surface while thousands of birds gorged on the feast, has caused an uproar in the fishing community as well as outside it.

Your accusations and call to action demanding an immediate stop to the fishery wrongly attacks anchovy fishermen, their families, the workers at the processing plants and allied industries. It also attacks Monterey's historic fishing economy and culture. But the reasons you cited in calling for this action are inaccurate. Like many members of the public, you appear to have accepted the hyperbole produced by extremist groups who have a history of playing fast and loose with the real facts. Here's the rest of the story.

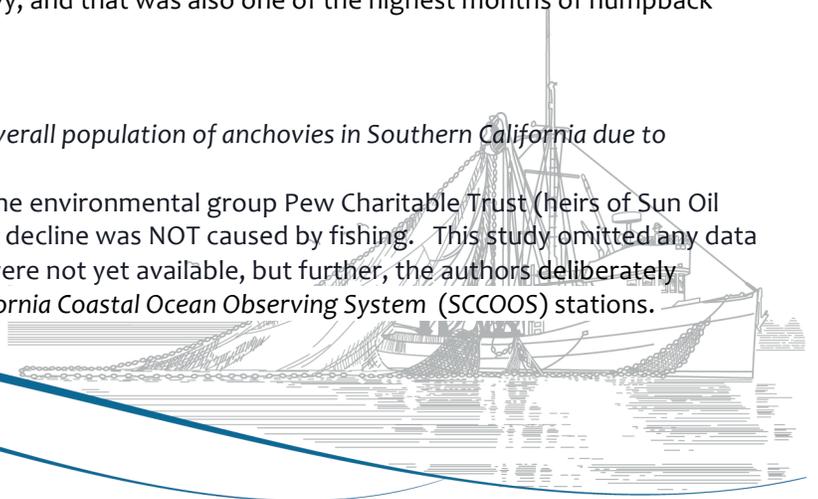
First, let's analyze your photograph. As a photographer myself, I'm well aware of the illusions produced by the focal length of the camera lens. Your caption describes "hundreds of thousands" of anchovy but your image depicts a few hundred POUNDS, at best. These fish are not going to waste -- your photograph itself is evidence, and your text acknowledges "thousands of birds" enjoying the bounty.

You assume the cause is a greedy fisherman overloading his boat; but the truth is there are any number of explanations for the floating anchovy. Fishermen reported a large pod of whales gorging near Half Moon Bay about the same time as this incident. Could it be your whales found a new feeding ground? They do move about, you know, and rapidly at times. In our observations, whales are oblivious to fishing activity. Case in point, in October 2013, the fishery landed some 3,000 tons of anchovy, and that was also one of the highest months of humpback whale sightings.

Now let's review your "facts":

1. You said: *"There has been a 99% collapse in the overall population of anchovies in Southern California due to overfishing"*.

The "99% collapse" came from a study funded by the environmental group Pew Charitable Trust (heirs of Sun Oil Company); however the paper explicitly stated the decline was NOT caused by fishing. This study omitted any data gathered after 2011 because ichthyoplankton data were not yet available, but further, the authors deliberately omitted data collected at nearshore Southern California Coastal Ocean Observing System (SCCOOS) stations.



SCCOOS data and other recent surveys document a big upswing in anchovy numbers. For example, a 2015 NOAA-NMFS rockfish recruitment and ecosystem assessment cruise report found, "... catches of [Pacific sardine and northern anchovy] larvae and pelagic juveniles were the highest ever in the core [Monterey Bay to Point Reyes] and north and still relatively high in the south." (See Appendix III).

The anchovy study is still in peer review, and has been criticized by other scientists for ignoring recent years. The Southwest Fisheries Science Center will present a supplemental report to the Pacific Fishery Management Council at the November meeting, highlighting recent year data and noting its importance to assess the current status of anchovy and other Coastal Pelagic Species. Anyone who has experience on the ocean knows that cycles can change dramatically in five years. In fact, recent year data are now documenting substantial changes in the temporal and spatial spawning patterns of coastal pelagic species like sardine and anchovy. Historical data cannot predict the present, much less the future.

One more point contradicting your editorial comments -- anchovies are now abundant in the nearshore, albeit under the thermocline at times, from Southern California along the entire California coast. The study you're citing as gospel assumed there were only 15,000 tons, and they 're all in Monterey Bay. Absolutely false!

2. Monterey Bay Sanctuary was created to prohibit oil development, not fishing. The sanctuary charter still promotes multiple use -- in fact fishermen supported the creation of the sanctuary as they were promised the sanctuary would not regulate fishing. Fishery management is strictly governed by the National Marine Fishery Service, which has scientific expertise in population dynamics.

You impugn anchovy fishery management that "authorized" 55 millions of pounds of anchovy every year. The 25,000 ton allowance is a limit, not an annual quota. The limit was set based on highly precautionary estimates that leave 75 percent of the biomass in the ocean. Further, the little anchovy fishery in Monterey, while an important 'fill-in' for local boats and processors when other coastal species are unavailable, has harvested less than half of the limit over the past two decades.

3. You also state that the government "refused" to conduct a stock assessment. Again, not true. The fact is, fishing effort for anchovy has been so light in recent decades that the National Marine Fisheries Service by necessity focused its strained research budget on more active fisheries. Again you base your anchovy population estimate on the flawed study that did not consider recent year abundance data, nor the finding in the 2015 rockfish survey that documented "... catches of [Pacific sardine and northern anchovy] larvae and pelagic juveniles were the highest ever ..."

4. You trash the value of the anchovy fishery, but acknowledge that fishermen do need to fish for something. However, the tone of your editorial comments implies that fishing is somehow related to the decline of squid and collapse of sardine. Fishing had nothing to do with the ebb and flow of these coastal species. Squid are taking a hike during El Niño, as they always do, and the sardine "collapse" is a topic of heated debate. The fishery is closed because the population estimate, based primarily on acoustic surveys that do not "see" all the fish, estimated a population below the 150,000 mt cutoff for directed fishing. Yet small and large sardines, as well as anchovy, are now abundant both in Monterey and southern California. Hopefully this abundance will be accounted for in future stock assessments.

5. Toxic algal blooms that produce domoic acid have persisted for an unprecedented period, resulting in the postponement of the Dungeness crab fishery as well as advisories for anchovy and sardine.

6. The only market open to anchovy at present is for 'dead bait'. Some anchovies are going to Australia to feed tuna, but the fish are not ground up for fishmeal. This economic activity supports the local Monterey fishing fleet, the processing crews and allied industry at a time when the boats would otherwise be tied to the dock and the market doors closed. (Anchovies are generally not targeted by the wetfish fleet in southern CA.)

7. You refer to a video that was posted online without permission from the skipper. Then you sensationalize the fishing activity, accusing the fishermen of driving away marine life by tossing “seal bombs”. Sea lions are a huge problem for fishermen at times. They are so numerous – overpopulated – they wreak havoc not only for our anchovy fleet but many other fisheries as well. You should ask the Monterey harbormaster for photos of sea lions overflowing the docks of Monterey harbor and the boat launch ramp. Believe me, the single seal bomb that I observed in the video did not harm the seal, nor other marine life. It certainly did not chase away whales, nor harm the bird life that appeared by the “thousands” in your photograph.

Perhaps the part of your call to action that I find most disturbing and inaccurate is this:

“We are obviously letting anchovies go the way of sardines, Atlantic cod, herring, and salmon. With thousands of California sea lion pups starving to death and a multi-million whale watching industry taking place right in your backyard, why are you fine and passionate people of Monterey Bay allowing this to happen?”

This statement is sensational, and tragically incorrect. You are using your reputation as a renowned nature photographer to falsely attack hard-working fishermen, and an industry that has been the foundation of Monterey’s fishing culture and economy for more than a century.

Anchovies and sardines are not “going” anywhere. Both species have natural fluctuations driven by the environment – certainly NOT by fishing pressure. Management of all coastal pelagic species is ultra precautionary: acknowledging their importance as forage, our harvest control rules restrict fishing limits to no more than 25 percent of the biomass estimate—another layer of precaution in addition to the network of Marine Protected Areas that now exists in California, several of the MPAs in Monterey Bay. In the case of sardines, the harvest fraction is even lower. This leaves at least 75 percent of the fish in the ocean.

You mention sea lion pups starving to death – this happened in southern CA, not Monterey Bay. According to numerous observations, the sea lion population may have reached the limits of the ocean’s carrying capacity – and Mother Nature is not kind.

While sea lion pups and birds were in distress around the northern Channel Islands, specifically Anacapa, fishermen were seeing thousands of tons of anchovy on the coast between Santa Barbara and Ventura – well within foraging distance for these species.

You applaud the multi-million dollar whale watching industry, but what about Monterey’s fishing economy, also valued at many millions of dollars, and also a big tourist draw. Coastal pelagic species, including anchovy as well as sardines and squid, account for as much as 90 percent or more of commercial fishery landings in Monterey Harbor, valued as high as 76 percent of total ex-vessel revenue. Wetfish values to Moss Landing are similar. California’s “wetfish” industry has always relied on a complex of species and has been able to switch from one to another during their periods of abundance—until now, when the fishery is facing unprecedented, and unjustified, pressure from environmental extremists whose millions of advocacy dollars fuel anti-fishing campaigns like this one.

Anchovies are abundant now, and our local fleet and markets need this fishery to keep boats afloat and processing doors open. We value the City of Monterey’s support for these local fisheries. Yet by your statements, you seek to destroy this historic industry.

If you value the truth, I invite you to correct the inaccuracies in your earlier post. You owe it to honest, hardworking fishermen and Monterey’s historic wetfish industry to set the record straight.

Sincerely,



Diane Pleschner-Steele
Executive Director

Anchovy Collapse: Another Manufactured ‘Crisis’ Where None Exists

By D.B. Pleschner

If you follow news about Monterey Bay, California, you’ve undoubtedly heard the recent outcry by environmentalists in the media, claiming the anchovy population in California has collapsed and the fishery must be closed immediately.

The current controversy stems largely from a study funded by environmental interests that claims an apocalyptic decline of 99% of the anchovy population from 1951 to 2011.

However, fishermen have seen a surge in anchovies in recent years. Data collected at the near shore Southern California Coastal Ocean Observing System (SCCOOS) stations and other recent surveys also document a big upswing in anchovy numbers. For example, a 2015 NOAA Rockfish cruise report found that “... catches of [Pacific sardine and northern anchovy] larvae and pelagic juveniles were the highest ever in the core [Monterey Bay to Point Reyes] and north and still relatively high in the south.” Yet the recent study bases its conclusion on outdated historic anchovy egg and larval samples, not recent observation.

Outdated data didn’t stop extremists from seizing on the study to manufacture an anti-fishing crisis for anchovy where none exists. They’re now lobbying the Pacific Fishery Management Council for an emergency closure of the small anchovy fishery in Monterey Bay, saying the current anchovy catch limit of 25,000 metric tons is dangerously high.

In reality, anchovy management employs an extremely precautionary approach, capping the allowed harvest at 25 percent of the estimated population. Josh Lindsay, policy analyst for the National Marine Fisheries Service that enforces the fishing cap, says, “We took the overfishing limit and told the fishing fleet that they could only catch 25,000 metric tons. That’s a pretty large buffer built into our management.”

Wetfish fishermen fish on a complex of species, including sardine, mackerel and squid. Anchovy is a small – but important – part of the complex, a fill-in for Monterey fishermen when other species are not available. Environmental extremists ignore the fact that the anchovy harvest has totaled less than half the allowed limit in the past two decades. The light effort is one reason why NMFS has not formally assessed the species since 1995, focusing limited research dollars on more active fisheries.

The big increase in anchovy abundance in nearshore waters in recent years has precipitated a record whale-watching spectacle in Monterey and along the central coast. Despite allegations to the contrary, whales and other marine life gorging on anchovies are oblivious to the fishery. In October 2013, for example, Monterey Bay had record sightings of humpback whales, while fishing vessels caught more than 3,000 tons of anchovy.

Consider reports from fishermen:

Corbin Hanson, a southern California fisherman, saw a large volume of anchovy show up on the southern CA coast beginning around 2011. He says, “The largest volume of anchovy I’ve ever seen was running up coast from Point Conception to Monterey this summer – miles of anchovies.... We couldn’t escape them. We drove through hundreds of thousands of tons in one night this summer. Other fishermen saw the same thing I did – whales, birds, seals all gorging on anchovy.”

Tom Noto has fished in Monterey for more than 30 years, one of only about eight fishermen who fish anchovy in on the edge of Monterey canyon. He says, “Anchovies like to dive deep. Our sonars mark schools that are hundreds of feet thick, but our nets just skim the surface of these schools.... They’re are everywhere, but we only fish them in Monterey Bay.”

Fisherman Neil Guglielmo told the Santa Cruz Sentinel, “I’ve been fishing anchovies since 1959, and I don’t see any problem with the anchovies for the whales. ...The [claim] that we’re scaring whales or catching their food source is ridiculous.”

When the Pacific Fishery Management Council convenes on November 15, to discuss anchovy, we hope sanity and best available common sense will prevail, in addition to “best available science.” Council members need to incorporate evidence of recent anchovy (and sardine) recruitment into future management decisions.

D.B. Pleschner is executive director of the California Wetfish Producers Association, a nonprofit dedicated to research and to promote sustainable Wetfish resources.

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