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On World Oceans Day, celebrate the little fish, unglamorous but essential

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Guest Columnist

By



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Today is a day to celebrate the ocean's intrinsic majesty and the bounty it provides. Let's celebrate **World Oceans Day** this year by honoring the ocean's little fish. Hardly the charismatic sea otter or awe-inspiring humpback whale, forage fish are the unglamorous and underacknowledged little fish -- sardines, herring and squid.

Aptly called forage fish, because of their role as a food source for everything else larger than they are, these fish also indirectly support ocean-based tourism and recreation sectors that provide 400,000 jobs and \$18 billion in revenue to California, Oregon and Washington, according to the National Ocean Economics Program.

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Photo

A school of sardines swims in one of the aquariums at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, in Monterey, Calif., in this March 4, 1998 file photo.

But these little fish are in trouble.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has more than doubled the U.S. sardine catch level from 50,526 metric tons in 2011 to 109,409 metric tons in 2012, despite the fact that agency scientists determined Pacific sardine are in steep decline and at risk of collapse.

Pacific eulachon, a type of smelt, are now listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. In 2010 alone, more than a million eulachon were killed in the pink shrimp trawl fishery off the West Coast.

Spawning populations of herring off Oregon are way down, and some spawning populations in Washington's Puget Sound are in critical condition or have disappeared entirely.

Meanwhile, demand for forage fish is increasing as aquaculture and agriculture expand worldwide. Most of the forage fish catch is not consumed directly by humans, but is sold in global markets, where the fish are ground into meal for farmed fish, chicken and pigs. Expansion of aquaculture and agriculture can increase pressures on wild forage fish stocks, and forage fish that are not currently fished may soon become commercially targeted.

That is why the Pacific Fishery Management Council, the federal entity responsible for managing most West Coast fisheries, will decide later this month how to protect currently unmanaged forage species. The council should prevent development of new fisheries for forage fish until a plan is in place and appropriate benchmarks are set that would allow a sustainable fishery to commence without adversely affecting the role these species provide as prey to other marine life. The council must initiate a process to amend its fishery management plans to protect forage fish and ensure a healthy ocean food web.

We know forage fish are worth more in the ocean, where they can fulfill their crucial ecological role as prey for whales, seabirds, and commercially and recreationally important fish, than when they are ground up. We also know that when forage fish populations collapse, so do populations of the predators dependent on them, plus critically important industries, revenue and jobs.

This year's Oceans Day theme is "Youth: The Next Wave for Change." The future of ocean conservation will soon be in their hands, but we must leave them something to work with. We hope federal fisheries managers use this opportunity wisely and make changes now to protect the ocean food web.

*Ben Enticknap is the Pacific project manager for **Oceana** and is based in Portland.*

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