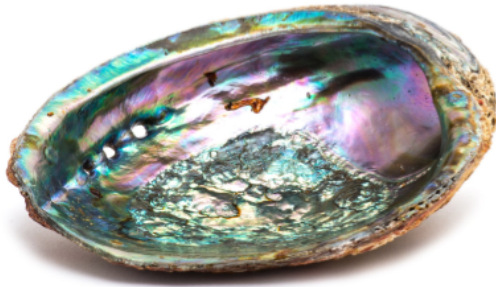


Abalone in Morro Bay: The Rise and Fall of One of the Town's Largest Industries

Abalone are a mollusk known for their beautiful iridescent shells and succulent meat. The fishing, preparing, and serving of abalone has a long heritage in Morro Bay; however, the modern scarcity of wild abalone has diminished its popularity. Today, abalone can be obtained by recreational divers and from abalone farms, but commercial diving and fishing is illegal. Unfortunately, these sources are unable to meet the demand for abalone, making it a scarce dish in California restaurants with a much higher price than in the early 20th century. This shortage is in stark contrast to the abundance of abalone that once populated the coastal waters of California.



The iridescent inside of an abalone shell from *Shamans Market*, www.shamansmarket.com/products/abalone-shell-4-5-5-5-inch?variant=148428947467.

Abalone has been harvested by Native Americans along the California coast for thousands of years. The Native Americans would use them as a source of food, as well as using their shells to create fishing hooks and decorations. During the late 19th century, Chinese and Japanese fisherman would harvest abalone from the intertidal zones along the coast, dry them, and ship them to Asia.¹ Thousands of abalone could line the beaches at any time being laid out to dry in the sun.



150,000 abalone drying on a beach in Cayucos, CA from Aston, Frank. *Abalones at Cayucos Wharf*, c. 1910, History Center San Luis Obispo County.

Transitioning into the early 1900s, Californians began to resent the amount of abalone that was being exported out of the state. The Japanese Point Lobos Canning Co., operating in Cayucos, produced an average of seven and a half tons of abalone every day.² Their divers would use diving suits to dive deep in the ocean and collect the abalone from the underside of rocks. These fishing practices led to a dwindling population of abalone. As a result, in 1917, a bill was passed in California that banned the exportation of abalone meat out of California, with assemblyman Carleton Green explaining that, "Japan has been getting a large part of our

¹ Middlecamp, David. "Still under threat today, California abalone has a long history of struggles." Print. The Tribune. 26 Dec. 2017.

² "Greene's Abalone Bill is Approved." San Luis Obispo Telegram. Print. 25 May 1917.

abalones.”³ Following this legislation, the number of abalone began to rise again, as there were fewer people harvesting abalone.



Harold Elmore's fishing boats from *Some of the Elmore Boats*. c. 1940, Old Morro Bay.
<http://www.oldmorrobay.com/haroldelmore.html>

The rising numbers of abalone led to the growth of a booming abalone business in small coast side towns such as Morro Bay. Many people were drawn to join the industry, including Harold Elmore and the Pierce Brothers. Elmore moved to Morro Bay as a teenager in the 1920s, where he bought abalone fishing boats and started his own abalone shop⁴ and the Pierce Brothers owned Pierce Brothers Wholesale Abalone on 580 Monterey Ave in Morro Bay, which is now a residential area.⁵

San Luis Obispo County doubled in population between 1900 and 1940, in large part due to the allure of the promising abalone fishery along the coast in Morro Bay.⁶ During this time, abalone canneries opened all along the California coast, including one in Morro Bay, and one slightly further south on the Pacific Coast Railroad wharf.⁷

Unfortunately, the unregulated growth of the industry could not be sustained. The popularity of abalone resulted in concerns about wild populations. In response, regulations were passed throughout the 1920's and 30's that limited the amount of abalone allowed to be harvested per day.⁸ These regulations did not do enough to slow the growth of the industry, which continued to increase its total yields until peaking in 1957.



The Pierce Brothers sitting atop a mountain of abalone shells from Hathaway, Pat. "California Abalone Industry." *California Views: The Pat Hathaway Photo Collection*, caviews.com/Abalone%20Industry.html.

By the early 1970's various species of abalone had their populations depleted, resulting in dramatically declining yearly yields.⁹ To compensate, much stricter daily catch limits and size restrictions were implemented in 1973 and 1976, reducing the allowed daily catch limit to only

³ "Greene's Abalone Bill is Approved."

⁴ "Morro Bay and Abalone." Old Morro Bay, www.oldmorrobay.com/abalone.html.

⁵ Hathaway, Pat. "California Abalone Industry." *California Views: The Pat Hathaway Photo Collection*, caviews.com/Abalone%20Industry.html.

⁶ Landwehr, Lynne. "County Timeline." History in SLO County. Web. 2004.

⁷ Middlecamp

⁸ "Historical Summary of Laws and Regulations Governing the Abalone Fishery in California." *Ocean Science Trust*, 16 May 2018

⁹ Neumann, Anna. "An In-Depth Look at Abalone: Part II - A Brief History on Abalone Fisheries and Regulations." *Reef Check*, 26 Feb. 2015

“four abalone per day, in combination of species, statewide.”¹⁰ These restrictions were not enough and both abalone populations and abalones caught continued to decline. By 1996, “abalone catch had fallen to 229,500 pounds; roughly 4% of the peak catch and the commercial fishery was closed statewide.”¹¹

Abalone fishery in Morro Bay and throughout the California coast has been responsible for a lot of the growth in population, community and culture. Beginning with the Native Americans, the practice of harvesting and eating abalone has continued into modern times. While overfishing in the early 20th century threatened the entire abalone species, legislation has allowed abalone to begin to



The Abalone Farm in Cayucos, CA from *The Abalone Farm - Cayucos, California*. www.abalonefarm.com/page/3/.

thrive once again in California oceans. In response to the outlawing of commercial abalone fishery, abalone farms have arisen to continue to provide abalone to consumers without harming the wild populations. One of these abalone farms, called The Abalone Farm, can be found in nearby Cayucos, California. Although the abalone fishing industry has come and gone in Morro Bay, its presence had a large impact in shaping the city into what it is today.

¹⁰ “Historical Summary of Laws and Regulations Governing the Abalone Fishery in California.”

¹¹ Neumann

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