

## THE RISE AND FALL OF COMMERCIAL FISHING IN MORRO BAY

Nested in the heart of California's Central Coast, Morro Bay attracts fishermen and tourists alike. At its peak in the 1950s, Morro Bay fisheries harvested roughly 11 million pounds of sardines and 5.4 million pounds of abalone. Today, the fishing industry continues to play a large role in the Morro Bay industry, bringing in about \$7 million worth of fish, squid, and crab.<sup>1</sup> However, like many other fishing communities around the world, Morro Bay had to struggle to find the balance between the growth of the fishing industry and sustainability.

In the early 1900s, abalone made up the largest portion of seafood harvested in the Central Coast. Morro Bay soon established itself as a principal abalone processing port, which gave way to operation plants owned by divers and fishermen.<sup>2</sup> For example, the Pierce-Paladini operation plant was originally an abalone processing plant that expanded to become a national seafood processor. At the same time, sardine, groundfish, salmon and albacore fisheries started to emerge, allowing fishermen to expand on their variety of seafood catches. The growth of fisheries in Morro Bay



*Figure 1: Members of the Pierce-Paladini operation plant sitting on top of harvested abalone shells in 1932. (Courtesy of Steve Rebuck)*

increased the activity with the Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessel (CPFV) which took visitors and locals out to sea to participate in fishing activities. This is one of the earliest examples of how other industries in Morro Bay became incorporated with fishing.

After the end of World War II in 1945, Japan's economic recovery resulted in an increased demand for abalone and prompted divers to continue overharvesting the shellfish.<sup>3</sup> By the 1960s, abalone harvests began to decline altogether. Meanwhile, newly discovered small fish and groundfish fisheries made rockfish and hagfish staple commercial commodities that stimulated the growth of the fish industry. The growing use of conveyor machinery on piers in Morro Bay also accelerated the off-loading of catches, especially for small fish such as sardines and mackerel.

<sup>1</sup> "Economic Impact Report Working Waterfront Edition July 2015" Lisa Wise Consulting, [https://www.morro-bay.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/7690/LWC\\_MB-Econ-Impact-Report-2014\\_Final?bidId=](https://www.morro-bay.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/7690/LWC_MB-Econ-Impact-Report-2014_Final?bidId=)

<sup>2</sup> Castle, Roger, et al. *Morro Bay*. Arcadia Pub., 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Middlecamp, David. "Still under Threat Today, California Abalone Has a Long History of Struggles." *The Tribune*, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 26 Dec. 2017, [www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/photos-from-the-vault/article191358329.html](http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/photos-from-the-vault/article191358329.html).

The fishing industry grew rapidly in response to the higher demand and so did its negative impacts on the ecosystem. As the popularity of groundfish skyrocketed, fishers in Morro Bay developed unsustainable practices to increase their yield. They used a new method called trawling, which involved dragging a net over the seafloor to catch any marine life that was caught underneath.<sup>4</sup> For three decades, this tactic was the primary means to catch fish and millions of pounds of seafood were caught annually. However, fish were being harvested faster than they could repopulate and the sea habitats along the Central Coast were quickly raked up.<sup>5</sup>



*Figure 2: Trawling was commonly used as a fishing method. (Courtesy of the San Luis Obispo County Historical Society)*

Over the years, several actions have been taken to mend the Morro Bay fisheries. In 1981, fishermen Joe Giannini and Ed Ewing crafted a Morro Bay law known as "Measure D" to protect the local fishing industry.<sup>6</sup> This measure created a Commercial Fishing Zone along the Embarcadero north of Beach Street for the purpose of commercial and noncommercial recreational fishing activities. More recently, the Morro Bay Community Quota Fund was formed in 2014 to manage both quotas and permits in an effort to rebuild Morro Bay's fishing industry and make it more environmentally sustainable.<sup>7</sup> The fishing permits are only released to farmers who can show that they can fish in a way that can protect the environment and the Morro Bay economy, which is a step towards mending the fisheries. Fishing was previously open to all licensed fisherman who were able to use any gear of choice. However, the quota and permit funds can now be used to experiment with new fishing gear designs that will minimize environmental damage by only catching targeted fish species.

<sup>4</sup> Zaludek, Michelle. "One Fish, Two Fish, Dead Fish, New Fish: How Fishing Has Changed on the Central Coast, and How Cal Poly Is Involved." *Mustang News*, Mustang Media Group, 16 May 2016, [mustangnews.net/one-fish-two-fish-dead-fish-new-fish-fishing-changed-central-coast-cal-poly-involved/](http://mustangnews.net/one-fish-two-fish-dead-fish-new-fish-fishing-changed-central-coast-cal-poly-involved/).

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, Nick. "Local Fishermen Criticize Federal 'Catch Shares' System." *The Tribune*, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 27 Dec. 2013, [www.sanluisobispo.com/news/business/article39464697.html](http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/business/article39464697.html).

<sup>6</sup> "Are Morro Bay Officials Attempting to Chip Away at Measure D?" *Cal Coast News*, 22 Aug. 2016, [www.calcoastnews.com/2016/08/morro-bay-officials-attempting-chip-away-measure-d/](http://www.calcoastnews.com/2016/08/morro-bay-officials-attempting-chip-away-measure-d/).

<sup>7</sup> Sneed, David. "Morro Bay Group Makes Move to Help Mend Fisheries." *The Tribune*, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 30 June 2014, [www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/environment/article39490152.html](http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/environment/article39490152.html).

The implemented measures helped revive the Morro Bay marine population and is the reason why the fishing industry remains prominent in their economy today. In 2014, earnings at the dock exceeded 8.3 million dollars — the highest earnings that Morro Bay has seen since 1995.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3:** The front of Giovanni's Fish Market. (Courtesy of Google Maps)

The quotas helped form Morro Bay's image of a seaside town that serves the community with locally caught seafood.<sup>9</sup> Giovanni's Fish Market, Tognazzini's Dockside restaurant, and other seafood restaurants all showcase how the city thrives on fishing. Restaurants are just the tip of the tourism iceberg, as Morro Bay also attracts sport fishers, kayakers, and people who simply want to enjoy the views of Morro Rock and the calm waters of the bay.

The long history of commercial fishing, dating back from the beginning of abalone divers to today with local restaurants serving the fishermen's catches, showcases how fishing shaped this town into a modern day tourist destination. Not only is the fishing industry of Morro Bay a powerful link to the past, but it is also an integral part of the city's identity and provides a great sense of pride for its local residents.

<sup>8</sup> "Economic Impact Report Working Waterfront Edition July 2015" Lisa Wise Consulting, [https://www.morro-bay.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/7690/LWC\\_MB-Econ-Impact-Report-2014\\_Final?bidId=](https://www.morro-bay.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/7690/LWC_MB-Econ-Impact-Report-2014_Final?bidId=)

<sup>9</sup> "Economic Impact Report Working Waterfront Edition July 2015"

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Figure 3: Giovanni’s Fish Market. (Courtesy of Google Maps) Castle, Roger, et al. *Morro Bay*.

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