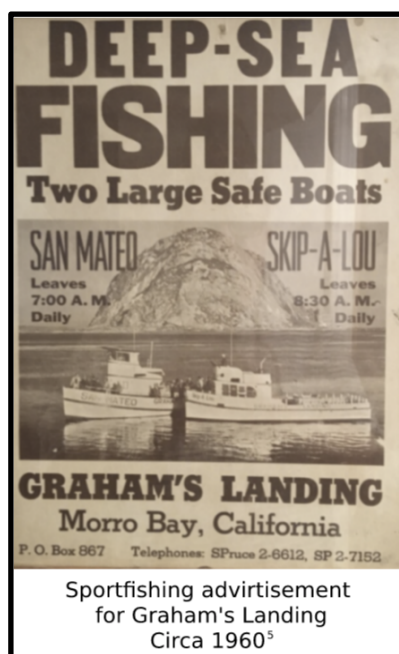


## Sportfishing in Morro Bay, 1950s-Present

Sportfishing is fishing for recreation or competition, typically for the sole purpose of personal enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> While sportfishing has been around for centuries, sportfishing in Morro Bay was established as an industry around the 1950s, due mostly to Joe Giannini- the town's founder and mayor.<sup>2</sup> Giannini, a commercial fisherman by trade, accidentally discovered the sleepy town of Morro Bay in 1946 while saving another fishing boat in peril. Immediately falling in love with the town, Giannini decided to make this land his home and put all his efforts into transforming the once unincorporated territory into the city that stands today.



As the city began to grow, Giannini gave up his life as a commercial fisherman and opened the Morro Bay Marine Supply Store on Market Street, which he operated until 1972. Commercial and sportfishing's prime in Morro Bay concentrated around the 1960s to 1980s. Giannini described this period of time as "unimaginable," saying that "...there would be 50 or 60 guys already lined up, waiting for gear [when they got to work in the morning]."<sup>3</sup> Sportfishermen filled the harbor; they set sail from various landings or docks as both the town and the tourism industry grew. James "Jimmy" Spencer, a past Captain of sportfishing boats in Morro Bay for many years, recalled that when he first started in the summer of 1970, there were about eight landings on the waterfront.<sup>4</sup> Sportfishing was a way of life for many people who grew up in this time in Morro Bay. Jimmy spoke of how before and after school he was always near the water, whether that be cleaning the boats or filleting fish. He shared how he and other young sportfishermen of the time felt about their trade: "When you were young like we were,

sportfishing wasn't even really a job. It was a fun job."

However, the industry began to change as technology developed and government regulations tightened. As these large sportfishing boats brought around 60 people out to sea three times a day, the sealife depleted. Observing the dwindling fish population, the government set limits on the amount of fish able to be caught and lowered the ones already in place. Jimmy Spencer described how back in his prime you could catch up to 20 rockfish and ten lingcod in one day;

<sup>1</sup> "Sportfishing Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary." *Collins English Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> Hansen, Vic. "Joseph Giannini." *Old Morro Bay*, Vic Hansen, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Hansen.

<sup>4</sup> Spencer, James. Personal Interview. 3 May 2019.

conversely, the limit is now ten rockfish and one lingcod a day.<sup>5</sup> Different areas have become off limits to fish in and one can receive major fines or lose their fishing license if caught in these zones. Back in the day, fishermen could fish wherever they wanted with little to no infringement on their area. All these regulations were created in the name of environmental conservation, but the new laws did take their toll on the industry.<sup>6</sup> Though the passing of time brought many regulations, it also brought new technology. Prior to GPS systems, fishermen would have to use landmarks (specifically Morro Rock and the Power Plant Stacks) to find ideal fishing spots. They used intuition to know at what depths to lower their lines. Now each boat tends to be loaded with ample amounts of radar equipment and fish locating devices to increase one's overall yield of fish.



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<sup>5</sup> Spencer.

<sup>6</sup> Chawkins, Steve. "Morro Bay Fishing Fleet Losing a Rock." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 11 March 2006.

“The history of Morro Bay is grounded in commercial fishing, and sportfishing is a way for people to connect to that and get into their roots,”



Current Sportfishing Boat The Endeavor  
pictured in Morro Bay Harbor (2019)

said Alena Gambit a prominent fisher operating out of Morro Bay for the past five years.<sup>7</sup> She explained how in Morro Bay, sportfishing used to be a niche community where fishing was passed down from generation to generation, and kids grew up running down to the dock each day after school. In recent years, she finds that fishing trips are bringing brand new, inexperienced tourists out to sea. Tourism has brought about a rebound for the industry, and many sportfishing boats have come back. With the shift in motivation for fishing, Morro Bay has become “so much more” than a town centered around fishing

culture, according to Gambit. She depicts fishing as “something tourists do when they visit, causing the sportfishing community to adapt to a new kind of clientele.” While this change has kept the sportfishing industry alive in Morro Bay, it does inherit some drawbacks. “The fish are getting smaller because they are being overfished. Tourists don’t think in terms of conservation, they think in terms of headcount,” Gambit explains. It is understandable that everyone wants to bring a prize back to shore after their first fishing trip, but the experienced fishermen honor the wildlife and often release their daily catchings. Gambit remains optimistic that this will not be the end of sportfishing. She hopes there will be an increase in educating tourists about conservation, allowing fishing to be more sustainable passtime in Morro Bay.

The industry is now bouncing back, but in a way that incorporates the nostalgic type of old sportfishing and the new tourist centered version. Today, you can get a taste of the history of Morro Bay by taking any version of a sportfishing trip through several landings. Enjoy the open seas, fresh air, and joys of catching your own fish right off the coast of this lovely city.

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<sup>7</sup> Gambit, Alena. Personal Interview. 3 May 2019.

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