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News



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Posted on Sat, Feb. 08, 2003

ABALONE NURSERY

Kelp beds help rockfish population

By ELISABETH NADIN
Herald Correspondent

There's something fishy going on under Wharf 2.

Art Seavey, co-owner of the Monterey Abalone Co., isn't just growing expensive marine gastropods in the barrels and cages hanging from the pier scaffolding. He's also helping researchers with their fish studies.

Young rockfish find shelter in and around the red abalone barrels, and oceanographer Jerry Norton of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association and marine biologist George Isaac of the Department of Fish and Game are monitoring their growth.

Rockfish, sometimes called Pacific red snapper, are a type of groundfish caught by bottom-trawling fishing boats; bocaccio is one of the familiar species. Rockfish have an uncommon trait for marine fish: They give birth to live young, rather than laying eggs. The larvae swim from deeper water to nutrient-rich nearshore areas like piers, where they feed on baby shrimp, crab eggs and other small fish.

"Down at the abalone farm they have those cages with kelp in them, and they make a very rich environment," said Norton. "The fish take up residence around those cages."

Norton monitors the number of baby rockfish that make it from their birthplace in deeper water to the pier. From 1970 to 1995, said Norton, the number of rockfish off the Central California coast had declined by 80 percent.

"Some of them have become depleted because they haven't found exactly the right conditions every year," Norton said.

But recent studies show rockfish might be making a comeback.

"Beginning in about 1999, there's been a turnaround in abundance, and we've seen much more at the abalone farm and around piers," Norton said.

Norton thinks the recent increase in numbers of rockfish is due partly to the amount of nutrients along the Central California shore.

Places like the Monterey Abalone Co. can play a part, providing the fish an endless buffet and a protected environment in which to grow. Workers at the Abalone Co. also help researchers track the number of fish that make it to shallow water each year.

Norton is happy to have the assistance of co-owners Seavey and Trevor Fey and harvester Lance Scott. "Something that works out nicely is that when they pull up their cages to clean them and add food, they sometimes trap the little fish, and they save them for me," said Norton.

Isaac, of the Fish and Game Department, has also been studying rockfish collected from among the Monterey Abalone Co. barrels for the past three years. After he looked at several areas where he thought the baby fish might be abundant, he finally looked around the pier.

"Sure enough, we found a lot of rockfish," said Isaac.

Isaac monitors the rate of rockfish growth by looking at a bone in the fish's ear. The earbone grows in layers, like tree rings, and Isaac is trying to figure out how often layers are added. The information will be used for routine monitoring of the age of fish that go to market. "If ages are dropping down to a point that they're being caught before they are able to reproduce, then we can sound an alarm," said Isaac.

For Seavey, helping scientists is a welcome opportunity to do more than just run a business. Seavey began growing seafood commercially, on his father's advice, after he earned a master's degree in ecology from the University of California at Davis. But his interest in science is still strong.

"I miss the experimentation and research," he said. "But I enjoy that people love the food I produce."

The red abalone grown by Monterey Abalone Co. are sold primarily to Monterey-area restaurants. Places like Domenico's on Fisherman's Wharf, Club 19 in Pebble Beach and Bernardus in Carmel Valley, among others, serve abalone grown at Wharf 2.

Seavey has faced some criticism for his business, mainly from people who think kelp harvesting destroys sea otters' homes.

The Monterey Abalone Co. feeds its 200,000 abalone five tons of kelp from the Monterey Bay a week.

But kelp forests in the Monterey Bay are doing just fine, says one marine biologist. "If you cut the top of kelp, new fronds grow quickly to replace them," said John O'Brien, who helps the Department of Fish and Game survey kelp forests on the California coast each year. Conditions in the Monterey Bay are highly favorable to kelp growth, he said. "You probably can't harvest it fast enough to affect its growth."

The abalone farm has served as a home to other marine creatures over the years. In addition to rockfish, Seavey has seen shrimp, octopuses and lobsters that are far out of their range in the abalone barrels.

But Seavey sees so much abalone that he rarely even eats them anymore. "When I go home, the last thing I want to see is an abalone," he said.

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