

## **Abalone, the Other, Other White Meat** Ranger Jim Serpa, 2005

The second you hit the water, the chill of it sends a blue bolt of frost throughout your body. The water visibility tends to border on crummy to worse. Of course, that's not even taking into account the dangerous waves that can dash you upon a razor sharp, barnacle-encrusted rock without a moment's notice. Just last week a diver near Fort Bragg was killed by a large White Shark while diving for these elusive mollusks -- three days after we finished diving just South of that same spot. I'm talking about diving for abalone, that delectable delight that still grows in abundance in the waters off Northern California.



If you have never tasted abalone, you might wonder why people go to such

extremes for this animal. If you have taste them, you know the answer. Thought by many to be the tastiest morsel found in the sea, the abalone has come upon hard times. Once so plentiful that you could go anywhere along the California coast and dive for your limit in a matter of minutes. Shells were found along the beaches as well as strewn in the back yards of the homes of many a diver. Abalone shell bowls and ash trays were common. Today a sports diver must go north of San Francisco and is limited to only one species, the red.

Biologically speaking, the abalone is a mollusk (snail). It has a beautiful shell on the inside that varies in color depending on what species you are dealing with. There were once about 8 species found in California including the red, green, pink, white, black, threaded, pinto, and flat. The only species legal to take today is the red, which also happens to be the largest species.

To be legal in size, it must be at least 7 inches long.

There are many reasons for the abalone's decline; these seven are the major culprits. In no particular order, they include:

1. **Over harvesting-** too many people taking too many abalone for too many years, enough said!

2. **Mortality by divers** attempting to harvest them. When cut the abalone bleeds to death. That is why many years ago, the specially designed abalone iron was mandated for use when taking abalone. In theory, this reduced the amount of abalone that were killed when people attempted to take them with crowbars, knives, screwdrivers and the like.

3. **Predation** by sea otters and certain fish species, including cabazon.

4. **Competition:** by sea urchins, in particular.

5. **Illegal harvesting** – poaching is taking a huge toll. Just recently in Mendocino County a large-scale poaching ring was caught with 500 to 700 abalones at one time. The environmental thieves were fined, their property confiscated, and they were given jail time. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. With abalone on the black market going for \$75 to \$100 apiece these people can make large sums of illegal money off these snails.

6. **Loss of habitat-** coastal development along with the pollution that is often associated with it have destroyed many areas that were once rich “abbing grounds.”

7. **Disease:** both natural and introduced disease by man.

This brings me back to what I was doing in Northern California in August. Each year we use camp hosts, Gene and Sheila's Holloway, home as a base of operation to go wine tasting and abalone diving. This year it was Special Event Coordinator Lori Coble's husband Russ, her daughters Stacy, Shari and Shawna and myself scouring the areas around Van Damme State Park for our limit, which by the way is three. No longer is the limit 5, which it was back in the early 1970's when I started diving for them off La Jolla. Wow, that makes me sound old doesn't it? Of course, I could tell you stories of how large and how many there were but instead I will tell you another story. Within a matter of only a very few years, I saw the numbers of abalone really drop. I was amazed and I stopped getting them as a way to help protect them, at least in my mind. It has gotten so bad down here in beautiful

Southern California, that to even see an abalone today is to “make” your dive.

Not so in Northern California. There are still large numbers of them, at least the huge reds. There are still places up there where the abalones are literally on top of each other.

Finally, if we don't protect that resource, we could see what happened here in So. Cal, happen there. Fish and Game have done their part by reducing the limit, both daily and yearly. No commercial harvesting is allowed. Only free divers may take abalone, so if you are on scuba, you're out of luck. This protects the brood stock in deeper water. They have stakeouts and even random roadblocks. But let's face it, there are more of the poachers than there are wardens, so lots get by illegally. Fish and Game depends on us sport divers to adhere to the rules and report any suspicious

activity we may see. Let's hope this works because the Holloway's would really hate to have us stop visiting every Fall.

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