

Dying Fishery: Sign of Nature in Trouble

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Tragic decline of the Chinook

Why should we care about the Bay fish?

Whole species and races of fish are dying off – victims of our refinement of nature in California. We can count the cost in jobs lost, the decline of a fishing industry that once fueled the region's economy and fed its people. We can contemplate the loss of such a wondrous creature as the salmon that travels thousands of miles, fighting currents, leaping waterfalls, to reproduce at the place of its birth – then die. And, scientists say, we can consider the possibility that the loss of such species can portend the loss of our own. Today, it is a scene that can only be imagined: Chinook salmon returning from three or four years of migrating in the North Pacific, massing outside the Golden Gate. Salmon running toward their home streams along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers in numbers so great they roiled the waters.

"The first explorers talk about how it looked as if you could walk across Carquinez Strait on the backs of the salmon," recounts Bay historian Malcolm Margolin.

To native Americans, as to the settlers who took their place, salmon represented wealth and food.

Now, after nearly a century and a half of polluting, damming and diverting the waters they need, the salmon are nearly as invisible as the native fishing communities that once depended on them.

The chinook, the king salmon of the Pacific Coast, can swim all the way to Vancouver Island. Yet it can't find a safe route in the San Francisco estuary to and from its spawning grounds.

Over the last 70 years, the fish have died in poor quality rivers, robbed of healthy flows by diversions of water for farms and cities. They're stopped by dams, pumps, pollution and warm water....

The decline of the salmon and the difficulties of other species in the Bay and Delta system are signs of a natural community in trouble.

Fisherman's view

Generations of Bay fishermen who have made a livelihood of fishing see the decline up close.

Joe Papetti, 29, whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather all threw nets for fish, says he won't push his future children to be fishermen.

"I'd like to see them do something that had a future," he says.

San Francisco Bay, the country's largest urban fishery, has seen such a decline in its annual herring run that this last commercial harvest in the Bay will be cut by more than half this year.

The herring fishery puts hundreds of people to work on boats and in processing plants. Estimates of the 15 million-pound harvest's value range from \$10 million to \$20 million a year.

Excerpted from "Dying Fishery: Sign of Nature in Trouble," by Jane Kay, "Bay in Peril," *Examiner*, October 1993, p. 9.

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