

Telling 4 Stories

In Their Own Words

The collapse of California's salmon industry has left many looking for ways to survive

1. Commercial Fisherman

Tony Anello and his wife Carol own Spud Point Crab Co., a family business that includes a Bodega Bay café, purchasing and distributing fresh crab to Bay Area wholesalers, and commercial fishing. The collapse of the commercial salmon season has devastated his family's business.

"I've been a commercial fisherman since 1969," explains the 60-year-old Anello. "Our mainstay has long been salmon and crab. My son and my brother are also independent commercial fishermen."

For the second year in a row, the California Fish and Game Commission closed the commercial salmon fishery because of the limited numbers of returning adult salmon to their spawning waters.

"(The closure) took away 50 percent or better of my income," he says. "We were starting to get a good niche in the market and then suddenly we didn't have a product. Basically it stressed us out; we knew if something didn't happen soon we'd be in the crunch. But you can't just sit around and say 'poor me.' I come from an Italian family so I wasn't brought up that way."

Anello says the crisis forced him to change the business, knowing it was a matter of survival. The biggest change was when they turned to other forms of commercial fishing.

"It was devastating for us but we had to adjust," he says. "We had to diversify and capitalize on other things. It's what led me to fishing for slime eels. It was kind of funny. There's a lot of communication between

Stories by Kyle Orr

2. Tribal Leader

As the policy analyst for the Yurok Tribe in northern California, Troy Fletcher holds a vantage point few others have experienced. As the former executive director and as a tribe member, he said the relationship between the Yurok people and the Klamath River remains closely linked.

"The status of Klamath River fish has a tremendous impact on the Yurok culture and tribal society and communities," Fletcher says. "The Yurok people have lived on the Klamath River since the beginning of time."

The tribe is the largest in California with approximately 5,500 registered members. The reservation is 84 square miles and extends inland 44 miles from the Pacific Ocean to above the confluence of the Trinity and the Klamath rivers. The reservation crosses the Del Norte and Humboldt county lines.

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Photo by Robert Titus

Closure of the commercial salmon seasons in 2008 and 2009 has kept most commercial trawlers away from the state's coastal waters.

3. Farmer

It's all a question of water for Tim Miramontes.

Miramontes is president of the Yolo County Farm Bureau. Headquartered in his hometown of Woodland, the farm bureau is part of the California Farm Bureau, the state's largest agricultural organization. It has more than 85,000 member families in 53 county farm bureaus. Miramontes' chapter represents approximately 800 local farmers. The bureau is a voluntary, nonpartisan organization of farm and ranch families that seeks solutions to the problems that affect their lives, both socially and economically. Miramontes raises rice, beans, milo, sunflowers and canola in Yolo and Colusa counties.

Miramontes grew up in a farming family and has worked his own fields since 1997. He's given the question about restoring salmon habitat considerable thought; the amount of river water that regulators debate over each year affects his livelihood. As the head of the local farm bureau he knows decisions about water affect a lot of people in the agricultural industry.

The plight of the salmon is no more significant than the plight of the state's farmers, Miramontes said. He said the farmers hit the hardest are those northwest of Yolo County. They rely on a diversion dam in Red Bluff to retrieve water through the Tehama-Colusa Canal that flows into Yolo County. Farms there mainly raise almonds and are at 15 percent allocation right now—meaning they're only getting 15 percent of the water they usually get.

"I don't know how much of that water is allocated away because of salmon but I imagine it's a lot of it," Miramontes says. "There was a court ruling where environmentalists sued to take water away from the growers and give it to the salmon."

He says the issue of water determines who has crops. He's heard some farmers are merely trimming trees back to keep them alive. Others, he said, are spraying to keep fruit off. "Right now they're just filing for disaster payments from the federal government," he says. "They're not happy about it. When something affects your livelihood you're going to be upset. They think there should be a fairer allocation, a compromise of some sort. People do need to eat."



DFG File Photo

Environmental regulations and prohibitions make it complicated and more expensive to work much of California's rich agricultural fields.

Protecting and restoring salmon habitat directly affects farmers on the Sacramento River as environmental regulations and prohibitions make it more complicated and more expensive to work the land. "Farmers have to put fish screens on their pumps that are drawing water from the river," Miramontes says. "It's mandatory—everybody has to do it."

While grants are available to defer costs, the fiscal impact remains significant. Even small screens can cost up to \$90,000. And that doesn't include maintenance or upgrades required by a county assessor. Miramontes says, "Out of their pocket, farmers are paying about \$20,000 plus another \$500 in taxes per year. That's a lot of money in tough years."

No one wants to see salmon disappear, Miramontes says. It's a misconception to think farmers are against salmon.

"I know I don't want to see the salmon numbers going down—I like fishing for them," he says. "And it's not the water. Giving the fish more water like the environmentalist say hasn't worked. I think the state needs to update its set of rules on what they're doing because it isn't working. It needs to try something new."

Miramontes says farmers are frustrated over lawmakers' belief that regulation solves everything. "We're getting more regulations for water quality, more regulations for air quality and more regulations for endangered species," he says. "And it's always affecting the farmers. It seems like with all the regulations the government is driving agriculture out of California." 🐻

Commercial Fisherman

fishermen up and down the coast and we heard that some Asian cultures consider them a delicacy and they claim they're an aphrodisiac—who knows?"

Anello described how an international exporter described the business as simple. "And being that we were hurting (financially), we figured we'd better do something because once crab season closed..." He leaves the thought unfinished.

Anello spent about \$25,000 this year on traps, gear and permits. He estimates he brings in

about 20 percent of what he did when he fished commercially for salmon. It's barely enough to keep his two-man crew busy and cover the boat's insurance.

The end of the salmon market hurt the family's café as well, he says. "You gotta go with the flow and hope for the best," he says. "I thank God everyday for what I have because a lot of people have a lot less than we do."

Looking back, Anello says he was caught off-guard by the collapse because of the projected salmon numbers he'd been hearing.

"It's pretty difficult to see it deteriorate the way it did," he says. "Salmon fishing is

enjoyable—you run up and down the coast with a crowd you'd run with in Bodega Bay. You go out and you go fishing and you're independent. Now it's a sad scene, a very sad scene. There should be a lot more effort put toward restoration. Either the state or the feds need to go through the causes of the decline and take action. Uncle Sam gave us a subsidy last year but we can't live off that subsidy forever. We're not looking for handouts from the government anymore. That's not what we want. We want the salmon to come back. We want to work, want to fish. I'd like to see the salmon come back so I can go fishing before I'm too old to fish." 🐻

4. Sporting Goods Owner

When the Pacific Coast's salmon industry collapsed in 2008, it not only devastated commercial fishermen but it dragged down many industries like sporting goods, restaurants and supply stores.

When the state shortened the salmon sportfishing season to a fraction of normal, it nearly took down brothers Pat and Scott Kittle and their sporting goods store with it.

"If you look at the change from the full season in 2007 to the partial season in 2008," Pat Kittle says. "You'll see our numbers were down about 50 percent in our fishing department. That's especially true during the months that salmon season would have peaked in 2008, from mid-July through the first of September."

The siblings own the Kittle's Outdoor and Sport Co. in Colusa. They'd planned for years before they opened the store in 1999. Located a block off Colusa Sacramento River State Park, it offers fishing, hunting and camping supplies.

The decline in something as widespread and as popular as the state's salmon season affects nearly everyone who enjoys the outdoors, Kittle said. It certainly affects the merchants who cater to such consumers.

While federal financial aid was available for people whose businesses suffered by the collapse, the brothers choose not to seek government assistance.

Kittle says, "We could've received money from the taxpayer but we felt we could recover without taking that money—not to knock people who did—but we felt we could adjust."

'I'd hate to say that I know what the solution is because I don't. There are so many factors it's mind-boggling,'

*Pat Kittle,
Kittle's Outdoor and Sport Co.*

For their business, the brothers recognized that anglers unable to fish for salmon might fish longer into the striped bass season. They shifted what they could in their store's inventory and reallocated supplies. Others, Kittle said, weren't as lucky.

He drives to the Fort Bragg area often and sees the financial hardships many of the residents there have suffered.

"I know how important salmon is to those guys on the coast," he says. "First they had their lumber industry taken away and now the salmon. It's a bad scenario. There are guys on the coast who were just decimated by this. We had something to fall back on and they didn't."

Local businesses aren't immune. An annual expedition of Nevada residents who travel to the area for salmon backed out. The cancellation hurt the landings, the hotels, the grocery stores, the restaurants and other business.

Kittle warns there's no easy answer to the declining numbers of returning adult salmon.

In their business, he and his brother can't help but hear many opinions. Some may be worthwhile, some not. "I'd hate to say that I know what the solution is because I don't. There are so many factors it's mind-boggling," he says.

Kittle is still amazed when he watches salmon migrating in the rivers because of the massive effort needed to travel and survive so far and wide.

"Even though the coast has been hardest hit, the impact up and down the river here can't be discounted," he says. "And it's not just businesses, either. The more resources and recreational opportunities you take away, the more chances there are for kids to get in trouble. Fishing is mystical and kids get hooked—so they're not pursuing drugs or playing video games or talking on their cell phones. Instead they're outdoors." 

Tribal Leader

Having served as the tribe's fisheries program manager, Fletcher understands the impact facing the tribe during years of low abundance for the Klamath River fishery. During 2008, for the first time in state history, the California Fish and Game Commission closed the majority of the ocean and inland salmon seasons. The same closure continued in 2009.

Fishery experts say there are many reasons for the drop in numbers of returning adult salmon. Some of the reasons have occurred recently, some have been around for decades.

"The fish and the river—the natural environment—are part of our ceremonies, the social glue that holds our society together," Fletcher says. "When children and grandchildren are raised in our society part of the lessons they learn are fishing and fishing activities, and giving fish to

elders and spreading fish throughout the community. Those processes provide our young people with self esteem, a sense of self. When you take away the social glue of subsistence fishing and the health of the river, it can have negative impacts in many different ways; socially, economically and spiritually. When our people lose what makes us Yurok it has a negative affect."

According to Fletcher, the tribe holds federally reserved fishing rights on the Klamath River. This right entitles the Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribe to half of the harvestable surplus of fish. In 2009, the Yurok Tribe was allotted 24,720 fish, which Fletcher described as a fraction of the historical abundance. He says the Yurok people have always felt an obligation to protect and restore the health of the Klamath River and the fishery that comes from the river.

"What the Yurok Tribe has done

is to take that obligation, that historic obligation, and figure out how to make that work with the different situations we have to deal with in today's society," Fletcher says.

The answer, he says, is a collaborative effort through the involvement of those who are part of the basic community. "Involve the owners of dams on the Klamath, agricultural people, state and federal governments, commercial and sport fishermen, and other tribes," he says.

"We have biologists, we have lawyers, we have lobbyists, and we have a council and staff that work on fishery and water issues," he says. "What we have done is figured out how to restore the health of the river." 

Kyle Orr is an Information Officer with DFG's Office of Communication, Education and Outreach. This is his first story in OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA.