

Malibu Surfside News

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Squid Bring Fishing Fleet to Malibu

BY SUZANNE GULDIMANN

It's an eerie sight, but it isn't the lights of a phantom city or evidence of a military exercise or alien invasion, instead it's the light boats of the squid fleet, close into shore this year at County Line, in pursuit of market squid.

According to the NOAA Fisheries Service, demand for market squid, *Loligo opalescens*, has escalated dramatically since the 1980s, making this small mollusk the most valuable fishery in the state.

California Department of Fish and Game marine biologist Dale Sweetnam is an expert on squid. He told the Malibu Surfside News in a phone interview that market squid usually spawn in large numbers off of the Channel Islands. "This year, for some reason, the squid want to be at the mainland," Sweetnam said. "A lot of it depends on water temperatures."

Asked if El Niño is a factor, Sweetnam replied, "We have an El Niño, but it's not extreme, we haven't been seeing red crab, or other tropical species migrating here. When it is extreme, the squid go away. Because it's mild the fisheries are doing very well."

According to Sweetnam, market squid live for less than a year—usually just six to eight months. The fact that they completely replace their entire population annually may help the squid to rebound from severe El Niño years or other environmental impacts.

"Unlike other fish species, market squid are not bound to a specific spawning location, but can spawn wherever conditions permit," Sweetnam said. "These squid are very prolific when the conditions are right."

In addition to water temperature, those conditions include nutrients, and water of a depth of 240-360 feet with a soft or sandy surface at the bottom. Sweetnam explained that the squid are harvested during spawning. Lights are used to attract the curious cephalopods. Nets are then deployed to scoop them out of the water.

According to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration statistics, almost all market squid are caught off the coast of California. In 2008, 84 million pounds were harvested by U.S. Commercial fisheries. Most are frozen and shipped to Asia, but some of the catch goes directly to fish markets or is sold as bait.

"It's really weird to be surrounded not by water but by a sea of millions of squid," a former squid fisher told The News. "They watch you with those eyes. They also squeak. If you don't take adequate precautions they'll clog your engine, all your pumps. It's like something from a science fiction movie."

According to NOAA, "many aspects of the life history of market squid remain unknown," making research and conservation planning vitally important.

Sweetnam told The News that the DFG sets a total catch limit of 118,000 tons annually, to ensure that overfishing doesn't occur, although current biomass is one of the things scientists still haven't ascertained. Fishing is not permitted on weekends to "give the squid a break."

The squid, Sweetnam says, are an important food source for a wide variety of marine organisms, including fish, birds and marine mammals, as well as an increasingly valuable harvest for humans.

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