

Squid industry having a 'banner year' in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, official says

By Zeke Barlow

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Squids may be small in size, but in Ventura County they mean big money.

Fishermen from all over the West Coast have come to the Santa Barbara Channel to lasso the invertebrates with nets, suck them out of the sea and turn them into cash.

Though the squid fleet descends on the channel every year, this season is proving to be one of the best in memory. Fishermen can net up to 60 tons a night as they light up the seas with high-intensity lights that make the fleet look like a floating football stadium.

"It's one of the top five seasons I can remember," said Joe Fernandez, a Ventura fisherman of 30 years who runs a light boat that attracts the squids. "It's well above average."

It cements the area's reputation as the backbone of the state's squid industry.

In 2008, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties pulled in \$14.2 million dollars worth of squids, which means about 440 million squids were caught. The fishing season for squids is year-round.

The area makes up more than half the total value for all squids caught in California. Squids made up 27 percent of the total volume for all fisheries in the state, and this year the percentage could go even higher.

"This is a banner year," said Diane Pleschner-Steele, with the industry group California Wetfish Producers Association. "We are scratching our heads about it because it was supposed to be an El Niño year."

Every weeknight, fishermen are jockeying for the best position in the water — with harsh words sometimes exchanged over the radio — as they try to find the hot spot. The competition is high because the stakes are; one good night can pull in as much as \$30,000.

"It can get pretty intense sometimes," said Jason Cochran, who comes from Washington to run the skiff that deploys the massive purse seine net that catches the squids.

A few boats capsize or sink in the state every year from carrying too many squids or

other such problems, which prompted the Coast Guard to start a program called Operation Safe Squid to prevent accidents.

Earlier this month, a woman nearly died off the Ventura County coast when she fell off a squid boat.

But as soon as she was rescued, the first thing she thought about was getting back to sea, because the folks who do it say it's a lifestyle that is too much fun to give up.

"Most men and women never win a gold medal, never win a championship," said Neil Guglielmo, an Oxnard fisherman who nearly retired but couldn't bring himself to sell his boat. "When we go fishing with a handful of boats out there, every night is like an Olympic competition. Sometimes you come in first or second, sometimes you come in last, but the next night you have at it again."

They follow the light

The waters off the coast and near the islands are good for squids. There are many sandy bottoms in 200 feet or less, where massive congregations of squids flock to spawn, said Briana Brady, an associate biologist who studies squids for the California Department of Fish and Game.

Squids are generally caught toward the end of their life cycle, which is only about 6 to 12 months, after they have sown the seeds for the next generation, she said.

The basic methods to catch them hasn't changed much since Chinese fishermen first started catching them in 1863. The fishermen would use a torch to help find their way as they paddled out to sea and quickly realized the squids were attracted to the light. Technology may have changed, but the basic premise of fishing at night and attracting the squids like moths to flames remains.

Fishermen on a light boat — a smaller vessel outfitted with up to 30, 1,000-watt light bulbs — head out to sea to find the squids using a host of technological gadgets. The areas off the Channel Islands, the Ventura-Los Angeles county line and near Oil Platform Gina are often the good spots. When the fishermen find a school of squids, they call in a boat with a massive purse seine.

As night falls, the light boats flip on their bulbs and the squids come running. The seiner boat sends out a small skiff, which circles the school and the light boat with the net.

The net is pulled tighter and tighter until the main boat can use a enormous vacuum to suck the squids from the sea.

Many say the light boat captain — who gets a 20 percent cut of each catch — has one of the more challenging jobs.

Not only do light boat captains have to find the squids but also the captains often will stay at sea for weeks to safeguard their hot spot.

"You've got to be a little crazy or just stupid," joked Natalie Artuner, 34, of

Washington, who grew up on the fishing boat of her father, Turk.

Fernandez said he hates doing those long stretches.

"You have campers and hunters," he said of the two types of light boat operators. "I'm not a camper."

Sustainable fishery debated

Pleschner-Steele said the fishery is sustainable for many reasons.

Because the squids are caught at the end of their life cycle, they have already procreated and aren't far from death, so the effect of removing them from the food chain is small. Because the squids are targeted, there aren't a lot of other kinds of fish that wind up in the nets, she said.

Fishermen have to take the weekends off to give the squids a chance to live and procreate without having to worry about nets. And although the fishery is capped at 118,000 tons a season by the Department of Fish and Game, the market demand is usually less.

"The exploitation rate is very small compared to the biomass," Pleschner-Steele said.

But Greg Helms, a program manager of the Ocean Conservancy in Santa Barbara, said there is no way to know how many squids are out there, so there is no way of knowing what is a sustainable amount to take.

"If you don't know what the virgin biomass is, then we can sit around and debate and argue it's sustainable or not, but we don't know," he said.

It's also unknown what impacts there may be on the fish such as white sea bass and yellowtail that feed upon the squids.

"To me, it is a question of doing the science first before we have this high of a level of fishing," Helms said.

Processing the squids

Many of the squids that are pulled from the sea end up at Mike Carpenter's factory.

Carpenter is the general manager of Sun Coast Calamari, one of the two squid processors in Ventura County.

Every year, about 6,000 tons of squids are hauled from the Port of Hueneme and trucked in 1,600-pound containers to his factory in Oxnard.

There, 120 workers sort the squids by shape, size, the length of the mantle and a host of other factors.

He sells to China, Japan, Greece and other countries, and they all have different wants.

The choicest ones are hand-selected and put in gift boxes in China, laid out like fine

cigars. Some customers want the squids super fresh; the tiny dots on the animal's skin that pulse when the squids are alive still throb at Carpenter's factory.

The majority of the catch heads to China, where a large portion is processed into calamari rings and sent back to the U.S.

But the squids caught in the U.S. have a certain cache in many countries and fetch a good price abroad. This time of year, there is a push to get the squids to China before the Chinese New Year.

Between the appetite for squids abroad and in the U.S., the squid business in Ventura County remains strong.

"The stars align well for squid here," Carpenter said.



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