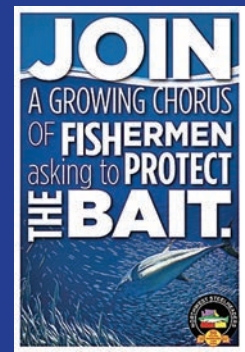


Protect the Bait!

“The Association of Northwest Steelheaders is leading the sport-fishing community to show the same concern and support for aggressive management of forage species ahead of the development of new fisheries.”



Norm Ritchie

Fishing was somewhat less than average on this pleasant July day. The seas out of Garibaldi, Oregon were only rolling a couple feet high with no wind waves. A very pleasant day on the ocean, but after several hours we had only found a couple keeper coho for four rods. We were on the hunt, paying attention to water temperature while looking for any sign of potential concentrations of our quarry.

This time of year top-level predators such as coho, chinook, and tuna are feeding and growing at a vigorous rate. Catching fish is a simple matter of finding them in the vastness of the ocean and putting food in front of them.

We look for seams or “rips” on the surface (lines on the ocean surface where changes in color, bands of flotsam, or other distinctions meander on the surface), and signs of “baitfish.” We may see tiny splashes

as these small fish break the surface in their effort to avoid being eaten. As often as not, these splashes are first seen by sea birds. Large bait balls of these “forage fish” draw in flocks of birds and seeing these concentrations of diving birds on the surface draws in the fishing boats.

Only the birds may know that these sardines, anchovies, candlefish or other species have made themselves available close to the surface. We know that the reason these fish have made themselves vulnerable to birds is because they are trying to get away from bigger predators below them. Those predators are what we are looking for. The most effective way to get noticed by the salmon is to circle just outside the birds that are over the ball of forage fish. Salmon and other predators key in on the stragglers as an easier meal.

Our strategy paid off. The birds were too involved with ravenously gorging down

what looked like small anchovies or possibly candlefish to pay much attention or show concern for our boat as we trolled in circles around them. It does not take much. A diver dragging down a dodger and a hoochie at nine to sixteen pulls was all it took to limit the boat in about a half dozen trips around the feeding frenzy that must have been going on below us. Most people will put chunks of herring or anchovy on the top hook of their hoochy skirt, but I found a chunk of shad works as well if not better. This came to me a few years back when herring was hard to come by. It was very expensive, if the bait retailers had it at all.

That shortage worried me. Not for having bait but for the salmon themselves. We have had some good years of salmon returns, credited in part to good ocean conditions. Most of what “good ocean conditions” means is plenty of forage fish for salmon and steelhead to eat. Harvest of herring eggs off piers and rocks for off-shore markets must be making a dent in what our salmon need to grow and build up fat reserves for their journey to their natal streams.

Recently I learned forage fish play another important role for out-migrating salmon and steelhead—as cover and diversion. A healthy population of forage fish keeps the attention of larger predators that would otherwise be after the smolts. The young salmon and steelhead also hide amongst the schooled baitfish. Are we doing enough to ensure we are leaving adequate forage fish in the ocean to provide for salmon, tuna, birds, and other dependant species?

Small-boat commercial salmon fishermen (the trollers) are already showing support for the protection of forage fish by asking managing agencies to, at minimum, not allow new fisheries until there has been a management assessment to determine the impact on the food chain, including impacts on salmon and steelhead. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (similar to the PFMC but for a different region) prohibited the direct harvest of many key forage species in Alaska beginning in 1998, with the strong support of commercial fishermen. On the West Coast,



How many dollars worth of forage fish (typically sold off the boat for less than 15 cents per pound) does it take to ultimately fuel the economic engine that is the Columbia sport salmon fishery? Forage species are worth more feeding game fish such as salmon, tuna, halibut and ling cod in the ocean than being processed into something else.



The author with son Daniel and Granddaughter Heidi with a good day's coho catch. We need to protect this heritage for future generations.

the Pacific Fishery Management Council took a similar approach by putting krill off-limits in 2006. The growing need of the ever-expanding aqua-culture production for fish food is a threat to our ocean-reared fisheries. This is just one of many potential uses for forage harvest.

In June the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (PFMC) took a positive step to protect and manage forage fish. They delegated a team of federal and state employees to do the groundwork necessary to prohibit new fisheries targeting forage fish. If they stick to the timeline laid out in their June meeting this work could be completed in time to begin the formal regulatory process in June 2013—a lengthy but reasonable schedule. In the mean time, they took a half step by requiring a 90-day notice before any targeted harvest of a species not already being managed. This is a move in the right direction but we need them to put requirements in a regulatory management plan that has the teeth to enforce the decision.

Unfortunately, it now appears that the timeline toward June 2013 is slipping. I fear this might put the 90-day notice rule at greater risk of only delaying and not stopping the expansion of forage fish harvest. The best of intentions mean very little without concrete

action to back them up.

The Association of Northwest Steelheaders is leading the sport community to show the same concern and support for aggressive management of forage species ahead of the development of new fisheries. We are asking to protect forage species not already being targeted in existing commercial fisheries so we are not asking to curtail any existing commercial fisheries or put any commercial harvesters out of work.

You and all our other sportfishing brethren need to take a moment to remind the PFMC members that you're paying attention, and that you expect them to fulfill their commitment to protect forage fish. Write to the council now, asking that they ensure work is done per their own timeline to have rules in place in June 2013.

Mailing address: Pacific Fishery Management Council, 7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101, Portland, Oregon 97220-1384 or email address: pfmc.comments@noaa.gov. Communications should be addressed to PFMC Chair Wolford and PFMC Executive Director McIsaac.

Follow the PFMC's progress and see what else needs to be done at <http://www.nwsteelheaders.org/conservation/forage-fish>.



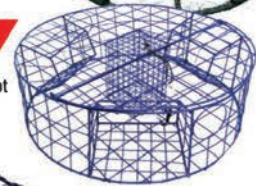
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