

Environment

Conservation 'home run'

Fishery rebounds in rare West Coast success story

WARRENTON, Ore, Dec 28, (AP): A rare environmental success story is unfolding in waters off the US West Coast.

After years of fear and uncertainty, bottom trawler fishermen - those who use nets to scoop up rockfish, bocaccio, sole, Pacific Ocean perch and other deep-dwelling fish - are making a comeback here, reinventing themselves as a sustainable industry less than two decades after authorities closed huge stretches of the Pacific Ocean because of the species' depletion.

The ban devastated fishermen, but on Jan 1, regulators will reopen an area roughly three times the size of Rhode Island off Oregon and California to groundfish bottom trawling - all with the approval of environmental groups that were once the industry's biggest foes. The two sides collaborated on a long-term plan that will continue to rehabilitate the groundfish industry while permanently protecting thousands of square miles of reefs and coral beds that benefit the overfished species.

Now, the fishermen who see their livelihood returning must solve another piece of the puzzle: drumming up consumer demand for fish that haven't been in grocery stores or on menus for a generation.

"It's really a conservation home run," said Shems Jud, regional director for the Environmental Defense Fund's ocean program. "The recovery is decades ahead of schedule. It's the biggest environmental story that no one knows about."

The process also netted a win for conservationists concerned about the future of extreme deepwater habitats where bottom trawlers currently don't go. A tract of ocean the size of New Mexico with waters up to 2.1 miles (3.4 kilometers) deep will be off-limits to bottom-trawling to protect deep-sea corals and sponges just now being discovered.

"Not all fishermen are rapers of the environment. When you hear the word 'trawler,' very often that's associated with destruction of the sea and pillaging," said Kevin Dunn, whose trawler Iron Lady was featured in a Whole Foods television commercial about sustainable fishing.

**Damage**  
Groundfish is a catch-all term that refers to dozens of species that live on, or near, the bottom of the Pacific off the West Coast. Trawling vessels drag weighted nets to collect as many fish as possible, but that can damage critical rocky underwater habitat.

The groundfish fishery hasn't always struggled. Starting in 1976, the federal government subsidized the construction of domestic fishing vessels to lock down US interests in West Coast waters, and by the 1980s, that investment paid off. Bottom trawling was booming, with 500 vessels in California, Oregon and Washington hauling in 200 million pounds (91 million kilograms) of non-whiting groundfish a year. Unlike Dungeness crab and salmon, groundfish could be harvested year-round, providing an economic backbone for ports. But in the late 1990s, scientists began to sound the alarm about dwindling fish stocks.

Just nine of the more than 90 groundfish species were in trouble, but because of the way bottom trawlers fished - indiscriminately hauling up millions of pounds of whatever their nets encountered - regulators focused on all bottom trawling. Multiple species of rockfish, slow-growing creatures with spiny fins and colorful names like canary, darkblotched and yellow eye, were the hardest hit.

By 2005, trawlers brought in just one-quarter of the haul of the 1980s. The fleet is now down to 75 boats, said Brad Pettinger, former director of the Oregon Trawl Commission who was key in developing the plan to reopen fishing grounds.

"We really wiped out the industry for a number of years," Pettinger said. "To get those things up and going again is not easy."

In 2011, trawlers were assigned quotas for how many of each species they could catch. If they went over, they had to buy quota from other fishermen in a system reminiscent of a carbon cap-and-trade model. Mandatory independent observers, paid by the trawlers, accompanied the vessels and hand-counted their haul. Fishermen quickly learned to avoid areas heavy in off-limits species and began innovating to net fewer banned fish. Surveys soon showed groundfish rebounding - in some cases, 50 years faster than predicted - and accidental trawling of overfished species fell by 80%. The Marine Stewardship Council certified 13 species in the fishery as sustainable in 2014, and five more followed last year.



Jud



In this Dec 11, 2019 photo, a worker prepares to dump a bucket of fish onto a conveyor belt for sorting after the fish were unloaded from a bottom trawler containing rockfish and other groundfish species in Warrenton, Ore. (AP)



In this May 13, 2019 file photo, a red wolf roams its habitat at the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, NC. Wildlife advocates have returned to court to prod the federal government to jumpstart recovery efforts for the critically endangered red wolf, while North Carolina Gov Roy Cooper issued a sharply worded letter urging further action. (AP)

Conservation

North Carolina governor urges action

Red wolves court battle reignites

RALEIGH, NC, Dec 28, (AP): The fight over the critically endangered red wolf has returned to court as North Carolina's governor sought immediate help for the dozen or so remaining in the wild and federal biologists planned to transfer wolves into the recovery area for the first time in years.

In late November, Gov Roy Cooper sent the secretary of the interior a sharply worded letter warning that, with no more than 14 known wolves in the wild, "the American red wolf is on the brink of extinction." He noted that in 2019, no litters of red wolf pups were born in the wild for the first time in the history of the reintroduction program.

Red wolves once occupied much of the Eastern US but were driven to near extinction by trapping, hunting and habitat loss before they were reintroduced to North Carolina in 1987. Their range is limited to five North Carolina counties. Another 200 live in captive breeding programs.

Cooper wrote in the Nov 22 letter that "changes in management strategies over the last several years have diminished the wild population to a dangerous level. This population decline has occurred despite the availability of proven conservation strategies, such as coyote sterilization and captive wolf reintroductions."

The letter follows a lawsuit filed earlier this year by the Center for Biological Diversity asking a judge to force the Fish and Wildlife Service to commit to a deadline for a new recovery plan and another by the Southern Environmental Law Center seeking documents pertaining to red wolf decision-making.

The Fish and Wildlife Service issued a statement in November saying it plans to begin updating the recovery plan in 2020 by appointing a panel of scientists to advise them on the process.

"Although an updated recovery plan is not yet in place, the Service has engaged in recovery efforts and continues to do so," the statement said.

Promote

Fish and Wildlife Service Field Supervisor Pete Benjamin said at a Dec 10 meeting with community members in eastern North Carolina that its biologists planned to move two wolves into the recovery area from a Florida refuge to promote breeding, according to the Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife, which had staff members attending. A third wolf, a male, will be moved within the North Carolina recovery area to pair with a female, the groups said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service didn't respond to email and phone messages asking questions about the wolf pairing and other aspects of the recovery.

Moving the wolves from Florida could help diversify the wild gene pool in North Carolina, but much more recovery work is needed, said Heather Clarkson, the Defenders' Southeast outreach representative. "These ... pairs are great, but they're just not enough," she said in an interview. Conservation

groups say the red wolf population has declined sharply as the government abandoned proven recovery methods. After red wolves were reintroduced to North Carolina, the wild population grew beyond 100 and remained stable through 2012. Wolf numbers were bolstered by releases of captive-born pups and sterilization of coyotes that competed for space. But those tactics were halted in 2015 amid pressure from conservative politicians and landowners who deemed wolves a nuisance.

The most recent round of litigation over the wolves comes more than a year after environmental groups won a November 2018 court victory when a federal judge ruled the Fish and Wildlife Service had violated the Endangered Species Act by failing to effectively conserve the species. The agency backed off of a plan to shrink the territory from its five-county area and said shortly after the ruling that it would review red wolf management. But in the year since, the agency has said little about its long-term plans.

The lack of action spurred the most recent round of lawsuits.

"It's just so frustrating that they've done so very little at the same time that the population numbers are plummeting. It's a really scary situation out there. We could see the extinction of the red wolf," said Collette Adkins, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity who's suing over the lack of a new red wolf plan. "They've had a court order telling them to do more, and in fact, it seems like they're doing less. It's really frustrating."

Discovery

**Aussie defends climate stance:** Australia's embattled prime minister defended his government's climate policy, as authorities warned that the wildfires ravaging the country's most populous state could fester for months.

Around 200 wildfires were burning in four states, with New South Wales accounting for more than half of them, including 60 fires not contained. The disaster has led to renewed criticism that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's conservative government has not taken enough action on climate change.

Morrison rejected calls to downsize Australia's lucrative coal industry. Australia is the world's largest exporter of coal and liquefied natural gas. "I am not going to write off the jobs of thousands of Australians by walking away from traditional industries," he told Channel Seven.

Morrison made the rounds on several Australian television networks Monday morning in the aftermath of his much criticized family vacation to Hawaii during the wildfire crisis.

He eventually cut short his vacation and returned to Sydney over the weekend before visiting evacuation and emergency control centers and the families of two firefighters killed battling blazes last Thursday southwest of Sydney.

"We all make decisions. You do as a parent, I do as a parent. We'll seek to balance our work life responsibilities and we all try to get that right," Morrison told Channel Seven.

Video posted on Facebook by firefighters in South Australia state and shared with The Associated Press shows a firefighter giving water to a thirsty koala Sunday as fires raged in Cudlee Creek, a town 40 kilometers (25 miles) northeast of Adelaide, the state capital.

More than 3 million hectares (7.4 million acres) of land has burned nationwide during a torrid past few months, with nine people killed and more than 950 homes destroyed.

About 850 homes have burned in New South Wales, which last week was paralyzed by a seven-day state of emergency amid catastrophic conditions. There is expected to be some desperately needed relief this week for New South Wales, with cooler conditions forecast. The state's Rural Fire Service commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, however, painted a bleak long-term picture.

"We've got to keep in mind that we're not expecting any rainfall to make any meaning-



Morrison



Fitzsimmons

ful difference to these fires until January or February," he said. "That's still a way to go. We're still talking four to six weeks at best before we start to see a meaningful reprieve in the weather."

Morrison's coalition government won a surprise third term in May. Among its pledges was to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26% to 28% by 2030 - a modest figure compared to the center-left opposition's pledge of 45%. (AP)

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