

Anchovy: The Ocean's Superfood



Northern anchovy are small, schooling forage fish found from British Columbia to Mexico. The central sub-population of northern anchovy off California and Mexico is a critical source of food for a vast array of larger fish, seabirds and marine mammals.

California's Fishery

Anchovy is one of the largest fisheries in the state by volume, with current annual commercial catches ranging from 5,000 to 20,000 metric tons (mt) and historic catches well over 100,000 mt. Like other forage species, anchovy are a boom and bust fish, subject to rapid population fluctuations. Fishing pressure can exacerbate the degree of decline during natural population decreases, and inhibit the ability of the anchovy population to recover. While a small amount is sold for human consumption, the bulk of the anchovy catch is used as bait or exported as feed for livestock and fish farms.

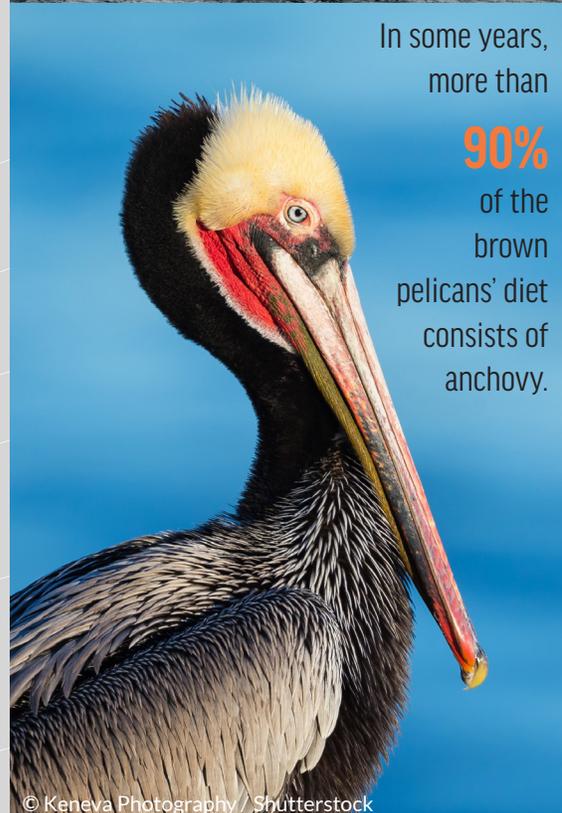
Ensuring Enough Food for Wildlife

Anchovy are one of the top food sources for humpback whales, dolphins, brown pelicans, California sea lions, many fish species, and other marine life. Forage fish such as anchovy are integral to the health of ocean food webs. During a recent collapse of anchovy and sardines, from 2013-2016, thousands of California sea lion pups stranded on beaches, malnourished and dehydrated. Without enough food to eat, females were unable to produce enough milk to feed their pups and had to spend more time at sea away from their pups in search of food. Over this same period, brown pelicans struggled to reproduce at all and those that did abandoned their chicks by the thousands, resulting in unprecedented nesting failures.



Left: From 2013 - 2016, starving sea lions beached in record numbers.

Top right: A humpback whale feeds on anchovies. **Bottom right:** King salmon rely heavily on nutrient-rich anchovies. Many populations of king salmon on the U.S. west coast are struggling or endangered.



In some years, more than **90%** of the brown pelicans' diet consists of anchovy.



The Problem

History tells us, and science confirms that the anchovy population can decrease by more than 90 percent in a matter of years. Because anchovy populations can fluctuate greatly and collapse rapidly, fishery managers must actively manage the population. This means setting annual catch limits based on the most current estimates of abundance that prevent overfishing, and ensuring enough anchovy are left in the ocean to support the species that rely on them. Unfortunately, that is not how the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) manages the population.

In May 2019, NMFS issued an annual catch limit for the central sub-population of northern anchovy that will remain in place indefinitely, even when the population collapses in the future. In setting the limit, NMFS once again dismissed multiple scientific sources indicating this catch level will exceed sustainable limits when the population collapses. Setting catch limits without reference to the current population size puts anchovy at risk of overfishing. This could leave wildlife without enough to eat, sending cascading effects through the ecosystem, and harming the long-term sustainability of the fishery.



Left: A brown pelican flies over San Francisco Bay. Right: Schooling northern anchovies.

The Solution

The long-term solution to ensure a healthy and robust anchovy population is to manage the population using the most recent, up-to-date scientific data available. This means utilizing the annual population estimates scientists already produce to set an ecosystem-based annual catch limit. The catch rule should account for the needs of predators reliant on anchovy for food, close the fishery when the stock is at low abundance, and include a buffer that prevents overfishing.



A female California sea lion and pup.

For more information visit our website

<https://usa.oceana.org/responsible-fishing/northern-anchovy>

On **November 23, 2016** Oceana, represented by Earthjustice, filed a lawsuit against NMFS challenging the proposed 25,000 mt catch limit.

- **January 18, 2018** — A federal judge finds that NMFS violated the law because its anchovy catch limit did not use best available science and failed to prevent overfishing. The decision strikes down current catch limits and requires the agency to issue new limits based on the best available science.
- **February 15, 2018** — NMFS responds by asking the judge to limit the ruling to the annual catch limit, which would have allowed the agency to continue ignoring two other critical management measures – allowable biological catch and the overfishing limit – that together with the annual catch limit prevent overfishing and ensure enough fish are left in the ocean to sustain anchovy-dependent species.
- **June 14, 2018** — The federal judge confirms the original decision requiring NMFS to use the best available science when issuing a new catch rule, including allowable biological catch and the overfishing limit.
- **June 2018 - January 2019** — NMFS and the Pacific Fishery Management Council ignore the court's decision and refuse to propose a new catch limit.
- **January 18, 2019** — In response to NMFS's failure to issue a new catch limit as ordered in the January 2018 decision, the judge directs NMFS to issue a new catch rule within 90 days.
- **May 31, 2019** — In response to Oceana's court victory, NMFS publishes a new rule that continues the "set it and forget it" approach to anchovy management. This approach continues to ignore the best available science and fails to prevent overfishing.
- **June 28, 2019** — Oceana files a new lawsuit challenging the final rule.