

CALIFORNIA CAN LEARN FROM BAJA OCEAN POLICIES

Today, the governor's Fish and Game Commission will make an ocean conservation decision that can be historic. It can establish an ocean legacy by creating a network of marine reserves from San Francisco to Santa Barbara.

For inspiration, commissioners can look down-current. On Mexico's Baja California peninsula, marine reserves are becoming a reality. For example, a group of halibut fishermen representing more than 80 percent of fishers in their community, Puerto Adolfo Lopez Mateos, have banded to create a Fisherman's Reserve at one of North America's hottest ocean hotspots.

The extensive Magdalena Bay complex is known as the San Francisco Bay of the south. The waters off of the bay teem with life and productivity. Upwelling and nutrient-rich outwelling from the mangrove-lined bay result in plankton-rich waters that give rise to swarms of millions of pelagic red crabs -- literally turning the ocean red with these palm-sized animals. That's where it all begins.

Tuna, halibut, squid, sea turtles and whales feed on these crabs. Birds flock to the area as do dolphins and sharks. Fishermen, too.

Miles of gill nets set on the sea floor to catch California halibut and other bottom fish work well. Too well. Halibut numbers are down. Worse, in chasing down the remaining fish, thousands of sea turtles are caught. Most die. Marine mammals such as dolphins and sea lions, as well as non-food fish and invertebrates, are also among the casualties.

The twist: Fishermen have responded by joining scientists to document the problems. They've tracked 40 turtles and counted thousands of dead ones. They've experimented with new net configurations.

Their conclusion: They want a special no-fishing zone that overlaps with the core of the hotspot. This weekend they've organized a sea turtle festival. Visitors from Japan, U.S. and Cuba will attend. They've also sent a delegation to Mexico City to lobby for the reserve.

Fishing won't cease for these men, and by working with scientists, not only will this plan help sea turtles, it's cost effective to set their nets closer to shore, away from the hotspot.

In California, ecological sustainability and economic prosperity are viewed as competing rather than complementary objectives. Sound science is overlooked or maligned for political gain and stakeholders with more in common than they think battle each other.

Hopefully, the governor's Fish and Game Commission will learn from Baja California's lesson in conservation.

-WALLACE J. NICHOLS