

ANGLERS DE-BONE



Photos courtesy of Joel Greenberg

Seeing red, anglers packed California Fish and Game Commission meetings to oppose no-take zones.

Poor old Izaak Walton. The world's first philosopher of fishing must be turning over in his grave. In fact, the man who in 1653 penned the phrase, "God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling," is probably in high rotation these days.

After 350 years, Walton's seminal work, *The Compleat Angler* is still in print and fishing continues as an innocent and pleasurable pursuit for millions of Americans. But today, nothing is "calm and quiet" when it comes to managing the fish that support the sport of fishing, at least in saltwater.

A good example of this can be seen in California where last year the state Division of Fish and Game (DFG) drafted management measures for inshore waters in the form of 46 "marine reserves."

Environmental organizations like the Natural Resources Defense Council called the new areas where fishing would be cur-

tailed or severely restricted, "a good start," but anglers cried, "Hey, just a minute!"

That line in the sand became etched in stone last summer as California sport anglers began to fathom the full impact of



Fishing groups hit the road on bus trips to be sure they were heard at meetings.

the state's plans to implement the Marine Life Protection Act, passed in 1999.

According to Tom Raftican, president of the 40,000-member United Anglers of Southern California (UASC), the plan called for no-take marine reserves in 15% of the state's nearshore waters. But that

15%, Raftican maintains, represented 70% of the fishable waters there.

"They simply took the best habitat in southern California and locked us out," he says. "We agree that reserves are a legitimate fishery management tool, which is why we accept closures in certain areas. But this was just too much."

What was worse, says Raftican, a 10-member team of biologists drafted the plan in the form of a series of maps, and they did it without involving any "stakeholders," those with a vested interest in the issue.

In alliance with the Sportfishing Association of California, which represents charter boat operators, UASC created such brouhaha in the press, in legislative hearings and at DFG meetings that the agency finally withdrew the maps. On January 17, DFG announced a new process that would involve wide public participation in developing any new reserves. Regional panels, including stakeholders, are now part of the new approach and a draft master plan is due in January.

"People wanted to be at the table from the very beginning," reports David Bunn, DFG deputy director. "I would hope that now they will see that we've been listening."

NO-TAKE ZONE

An International Trend

A lot of people — anglers and others — are listening nationwide, even worldwide, to what's been happening in California as no-take reserves gain prominence in marine management circles.

Experience abroad with areas made off-limits to fishing, ranging from the Caribbean to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, led 161 marine scientists from 14 nations to sign a "scientific consensus statement" in 1997. The statement declared: "There is compelling scientific evidence that marine reserves conserve both biodiversity and fisheries, and could help to replenish the seas."

The statement also noted that "fully protected" reserves — meaning off limits to any fishing — could reverse the effects of widespread overfishing. But it went on to state that because of gaps in knowledge about how reserves work and the perception of taking something away from fishermen, "they are often vigorously resisted."

One organization that is vigorously bucking the trend toward wide-scale closures in the U.S. is the American Sportfishing Association (ASA), which represents the fishing tackle industry. According to Mike Nussman, ASA president, the impetus for creating no-take zones in the U.S. started in 1996 when Congress passed the Sustainable Fisheries Act which called for the restoration of 100 severely depleted fish populations.

"People in the environmental community are frustrated that some fish stocks are not being restored in what they view as an appropriate time period," Nussman reports. "So now they are pushing no-take reserves as the solution."

Nussman says the trend toward excluding sportfishing in problem areas started with no-take zones in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. "Then more reserves were proposed for the Gulf of Mexico, the Hawaiian Islands and of course, California. It's like a wave coming over us," he said.

The Natural Resources Defense

Council and the Ocean Conservancy, which calls reserves where fishing is eliminated or tightly restricted "the best approach for conserving marine resources," are helping generate that wave. They may have science on their side.

How to Measure Results

"Marine reserves work and they work fast. It is no longer a question of whether to set aside fully protected areas in the ocean, but where," said Dr. Jane



Family fishing trips on the Pacific coast of California could become off limits, if the best areas become reserves.

Lubchenco, a noted marine biologist at Oregon State University.

A three-year study at the University of California Santa Barbara supports Lubchenco's assertion. The study found that just one or two years of total closure in some reserves resulted in higher populations of larger fish and in a wider range of species than before.

Yet Nussman, Raftican and others say the jury is still out on no-take reserves. In fact, a study commissioned by ASA calls them an "ineffective" fishery management tool. After examining over 350 stocks of fish, Dr. Robert Shipp, chair of the marine sciences department at the University of South Alabama, concluded that no-take reserves "are generally not as effective as traditional management measures" like closed seasons, size restrictions

and bag limits.

No-take reserves don't work, Shipp reports, because fish move. Of the species he examined, most ranged over distances larger than any proposed no-fishing zone. In other words, you can close an area but once fish swim out of it, they can be caught and the benefits of the closure are nil, he maintains.

In the study, Shipp, who chaired the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, notes many positive uses for no-

take reserves, including protecting critical habitat areas, research into how specific ecosystems function and promotion of ecotourism. But for fishery management, permanent closure is unnecessary, he says.

Further light should be shed on no-take reserves and other types of marine protected areas, and how they affect sport fishing, next year at RecFish II, a national symposium on salt-water angling.

Slated for St. Petersburg Beach, FL, Feb. 23-26, the conference will focus

exclusively on this issue and how it will affect the future of sportfishing.

For more information on the conference, visit www.nmfs.noaa.gov and click on "Recreational Fisheries." ■

— By Ryck Lydecker

FREE TO FISH?

Many anglers are hoping Congress will build a breakwater against the tide of no-take proposals by passing the Freedom to Fish Act, now pending in both the U.S. House and Senate (H.R. 3104 and S. 1314). If passed, it would require managers to apply measurable criteria for rebuilding stocks as well as set timetables for recovery before closing any area to recreational fishing. For more information on the legislation, visit FreedomtoFish.org.