



The Oregonian

IN MY OPINION Greg Higgins

The depleted rockfish population off the Pacific coast is bad news -- for chefs, for coastal communities, for the ocean itself. But marine reserves could help

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Greg Higgins

Our fishing waters are in trouble again. And so are your dinner plates. In the past few years it's become clear how dangerously low some populations of groundfish are -- canary rockfish, bocaccio, Pacific ocean perch and others.

These fish are an important group for culinary uses and are often sold as red snapper, Pacific sea bass or rock cod in restaurants and stores.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council's drastic reductions in groundfish quotas for the waters off Oregon, Washington and California are hitting hard on already troubled fishing communities. These radical cuts in quotas, fishing seasons and the size of the fishing fleet are just quick fixes.

It's time to take a step back. We must consider what approaches can help restore balance to our overburdened marine ecosystems. The unproven theory is that simply reducing fishing will, of course, allow the gradual recovery of the threatened key rockfish species.

But it will take other thinking to change this cycle if we are truly aiming for a sustainable relationship between us and the sea. We're simply too efficient at capturing our ocean prey.

These species, like the salmon, are clear indicators of our successes and failures to sustainably manage our region's fisheries. Estimates vary over how much time is needed for the recovery of these rockfish, but one thing is clear -- many don't reach productive breeding status until 10 or more years of age. Why not enact, right now, other measures we know will ensure protected areas and fish populations?

One approach is using marine reserves -- tracts of key breeding habitat, set aside as natural reserves to ensure stable stocks of all species. Within these protected areas there is no fishing, dumping, drilling or other activity that would jeopardize the natural ecological balance.

Marine reserves are currently used in many areas of the globe, greatly benefiting fishing and conservation concerns. Fish populations thriving within the protected areas can move to surrounding waters to revitalize their once dwindling numbers.

Given sound management practices, these once again abundant fish and other marine life can help to speed the economic recovery of coastal communities. Rejuvenating fisheries -- both sport and commercial -- can help reinvigorate our coastal towns, their harbors and waterfronts. That also brings tourism.

The Oregon premiere and discussion of the film "Common Ground: Oregon Ocean" (7 p.m. Tuesday at the Newport Performing Arts Center, and 7 p.m. Wednesday at Portland's Hollywood Theater) provide an opportunity to see firsthand some dramatic undersea

footage taken off the Oregon coast pertaining to these issues.

In this captivating documentary, amazingly lush and diverse underwater communities are filmed as well as those drastically impacted by overfishing. Jane Lubchenco and Mark Hixon, marine biologists from Oregon State University, present a clear scientific picture justifying the need for us to move ahead with a plan for marine reserves.

If we are to succeed, scientists, policymakers, regulators, fishermen, conservationists and citizens must come together for discussion and legislation to make marine reserves a reality. These reserves can help restore a harmonious relationship between our communities and our sea -- it's up to us Oregonians to make them happen here at home.

Losing these wonderful fish from our dinner tables would be regrettable, but losing them from their ecosystem is unthinkable.

Greg Higgins is the chef and owner of Higgins Restaurant & Bar in Portland. He travels the country promoting sustainable food choices.

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