

Marine Matters Ecological Almanac

Wildly Wonderful Rockfish

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A rockfish is not just a rockfish...there are reddish orange ones with yellow eyes, mottled black ones that school in hundreds, intricate navy and yellow ones, copper ones, yellow ones, green ones, blue ones and more! There are rockfish that live near the bottom in shallow kelp beds, rockfish that school in the water around kelp forests, and rockfish that live near the ocean bottom from the shallows to the continental shelf. All North Pacific rockfish belong to the genus *Sebastes*, from the Greek word for "magnificent". Their smaller tropical cousins include delicate lionfish and the deadly stonefish.

Rockfish are long-lived, late maturing fish. Yelloweye have been aged up to 117 years. Quillback up to 76 years. Copper up to 45 years. One roughey, a deep water rockfish, was aged at 205 years, holding title as the oldest individual fish ever recorded – of course, it may have lived to a riper old age if not for being "sampled". Some rockfish take 20 years or more to mature. As the breeding females get larger, they produce more and more young. When we think of fish, we generally think of them as laying fertilized eggs which then hatch – *Sebastes* are different. They bear live young. Free-swimming larvae released in early spring leave their birth place on a current and a prayer, hoping to avert hungry mouths and land on an appropriate place to live.

Rockfish have become recent celebrities in the saga of North Pacific fisheries. The debate arose south of us, where commercial and recreational fisheries have longer histories, and where shallower inshore rockfish are no longer as abundant as they used to be. Stories from the 1910s tell of expansive "pumpkin patches" – "garbage" yelloweye rockfish caught in the commercial lingcod fishery and left to die floating on the surface. The yelloweye was once considered the most abundant rockfish in the Strait of Georgia and now they are hard to come by.

South of the Canadian border, the situation is even more dire. Rockfish commonly sold as Pacific red snapper – yelloweye, canary and bocaccio – are in danger of extinction and tough fishing restrictions are under consideration to ensure their survival. In Puget Sound, commercial rockfish fisheries were no longer viable by the '80s and officially ended in 1994. Recreational fishing continued. The size of rockfish caught steadily declined, as did the numbers of mature fish.

For conservation and other reasons, small marine sanctuaries were established in the San Juan Islands through the '80s and '90s. News from these sanctuaries is that they now contain the majority of mature rockfish and represent the home ranges for many. From there, larval rockfish can spread to seed properties nearby, although it may be decades before the implications are understood.

The good news is that we are not there yet. Although there are undoubtedly localized areas around Haida Gwaii that have seen a decline in rockfish populations due to fishing pressure, there are also areas that still seem to have healthy populations. Local longliners who have fished here for decades still fish some of the same areas they have for years. Scientists from Washington figure that BC conditions reflect where they were 20 years ago. So now is the time to give serious thought to the future of magnificent *Sebastes* and their neighbours of the underworld.

I have been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to explore the underwater world around most of Haida Gwaii in my 9 years here. The sea surface around kelp beds still boils with feeding black rockfish schooling in the hundreds - their beady eyes staring at me when I intrude on their world. Juvenile tigers frolick in the shallows. Delicate chinias hover amongst kelp fronds. This I wish for generations to follow.