

Focus on the Bay: Baseline Surveys of New Marine Protected Areas

On Friday, September 21, 2007, California implements the most extensive set of marine protected areas on the West Coast. From Half Moon Bay south of San Francisco to just north of Santa Barbara, 29 new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) take effect. Established through the Marine Life Protection Action passed by the Legislature in 1999, the MPAs were designed to serve multiple purposes, including the protection of marine habitats and species, increased research, and increased recreational opportunities for divers and others. Thirteen of the MPAs are “no take” reserves that prohibit all fishing. These no-take reserves have been the center of controversy, as people want to know the impact of the MPAs on commercial and recreational fishermen and the ports and communities that depend upon them.

Fishermen and scientists from Half Moon Bay, Monterey Bay, and Morro Bay are working together to answer questions such as:

- Will the number and size of fish increase in the protected areas?
- Will the new reserves increase fish populations in nearby habitats? Or, will increased fishing pressure on the remaining open areas cause a net decline in those areas?

“We are combining the expertise of experienced fishermen about where the fish are and how to catch them with the statistical rigor of science,” explains Rick Starr, UC Sea Grant Advisor and co-principal investigator for the study. “Getting out on the water with fishermen and collecting data is the most effective way to address the important questions about how MPAs impact fishing and the health of fisheries.” This research builds on over four years of extensive discussion and collaborative efforts with fishermen along the Central Coast. “We have proven the scientific value of collaborative research with published results that satisfy the rigorous test of peer-review,” notes Dean Wendt, Associate Professor at California Polytechnic State University and co-principal investigator for the study. “Answers on key ways to enhance and sustain marine environments require years of data. Many factors in addition to fishing affect fish stocks—variations in currents, shifts in water temperature, and others. It takes time to establish meaningful trends.”

You can learn more about the Marine Protected Areas at the California Department of Fish and Game website (www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa/newsroom_083107.asp) and learn more about the collaborative fisheries research at: www.slosea.org/collaborative