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BARRED SAND BASS (*PARALABRAX NEBULIFER*)



The barred sand bass is a very important near-shore resource that consistently ranks among the top three marine sport fish caught by Southern California anglers. Sand bass are a staple for many inshore and bay anglers and are a primary target of local commercial passenger fishing vessels (CPFVs).

During the summer months, sand bass landings increase dramatically when fish aggregate over sand flats to spawn. During the spawning aggregations sand bass are very aggressive and can be taken on a wide variety of baits or artificials fished both along the bottom or mid water.

Barred sand bass are opportunistic feeders that prey on a variety of small fishes and invertebrates; including anchovies, sardines, midshipman, crabs, clams, squid, and octopus. Although sand bass are at times voracious feeders, they grow relatively slowly after their first year of life. The majority of male sand bass reach sexual maturity within two to four years and approximately nine inches in length, while most females mature at around 10 inches. Sand bass approach maximum size at around 26 inches in length and have been reported to attain weights in excess of 15 lbs. To date, the oldest aged individual was 24 years.

Like many other members of the family *Serranidae* (bass and groupers), large numbers of adult sand bass aggregate each season to spawn at specific locations. A few well-known sand bass spawning aggregation sites include the sand flats off Imperial Beach, San Onofre, Del Mar, Huntington Flats, and Santa Monica Bay. These aggregations are well known by the recreational fleet,

as most of the sand bass landings occur while the fish gather over the spawning grounds in the early summer.

Similar to kelp bass, the commercial take of sand bass has been prohibited since 1953. Concern from managers over increasing sand bass catch and effort during the mid 1950s led the California Department of Fish and Game to introduce a 10-fish bag limit and a 12-inch minimum size limit on the recreational fishery in 1959. This size regulation was put in place to ensure that legal-sized fish (five- to seven-year olds) have at least one opportunity to reproduce before being harvested. Sand bass take regulations proved to be effective for decades; however, annual CPFV catches continued to increase in the 1980s and reached a peak of 736,000 fish in 2000. Despite continued fishing effort in recent years, catch rates are now on the decline, and it is beginning to appear that these 50-year-old regulations may need to be revisited. Lower catch rates coupled with the routinely echoed saying of many anglers, "What are you going to do with ten sand bass, anyway?" suggests that, maybe, we should consider more stringent catch restrictions (i.e., reduced bag limit or larger minimum size).

Intense fishing pressure on spawning aggregations has unfortunately led to the overexploitation of many stocks

around the globe. Fortunately, here in Southern California many recreational anglers have a strong catch-and-release ethic for the local bass species and have a tendency to release the larger, more fecund spawners. Additionally, it may be that the abundant barred sand bass stocks of northern Baja California serve as a larval source for the Southern California region.

What can we do? Reproductively active males are easily identified by golden-yellow crescents under their eyes and are usually shedding milt from their vent when captured on the spawning grounds. If looking to promote conservation and still fill a bag limit, one suggestion might be to only keep the males and to release the larger gravid females. Because sand bass are only taken in the recreational fishery, we have the most to gain from a healthy fishery and nobody to blame if it continues to decline.

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