



# species specifics

**T**he largest inhabitant of the California near-shore ecosystem, the giant seabass (commonly referred to as "black seabass") can be found from Humboldt Bay to the tip of Baja California and throughout much of the Sea of Cortez. Giant seabass were once classified among the groupers (*Serranidae*), but a recent

study has re-classified them as members of the wreckfish family (*Polyprionidae*). Although giant seabass are relatively slow-growing, they may attain sizes of over seven feet in length, and individuals from the northern Sea of Cortez have been reported in excess of 600 pounds.

Critical biological and life history information is incomplete for the giant seabass. It has been estimated that their lifespan may be in excess of 100 years. Based upon incomplete age-growth studies and the size of individuals observed within spawning aggregations, it is believed that females reach sexual maturity at around 8 to 10 years of age and a size of approximately 60 to 80 pounds. Like some grouper species, giant seabass establish site-specific spawning aggregations each summer between June and September. Spawning aggregations typically occur over shallow rocky outcroppings that often support productive kelp forests. Some of the well-known giant seabass spawning aggregations include La Jolla kelp, Barn kelp, Long Point (Santa Catalina Island), Anacapa Island, and Ensenada Grande in the Sea of Cortez.

A formation of spawning aggregations that are relatively predictable in time and space was likely a key factor in the over-exploitation of this species throughout much of its range. Aggregations of mature individuals were a prized target of big game, spear, and commercial fishers prior to a California-imposed

moratorium on the harvest of giant seabass in 1981. Also aiding the recovery of this species was the closure of state waters to inshore gill nets (inside of three nautical miles) in 1994.

Like most fish species, mature giant seabass broadcast large quantities of gametes (eggs and sperm) into the water column, where they are fertilized externally. Fertilized embryos hatch after one to two days and drift within the plankton for approximately one month before settling out on the bottom as juveniles. They are occasionally encountered by divers over sandy or muddy bottoms in 30 to 90 feet of water, although information on juvenile habitat utilization is limited. Juvenile giant seabass appear remarkably different than adults, with a reddish-orange coloration and large black spots along with disproportionately large pectoral fins.

Juveniles feed on a variety of small fishes and invertebrates, while adults have the potential to consume a large range of prey items. Favored prey includes squid, lobsters, skates, rays, small sharks, bass, barracuda, whitefish, sheephead, and mackerel. Because giant seabass have a very large, protrusible jaw, this species can literally vacuum-up most prey by simply flaring its operculum outward. Recreational fishermen targeting sand bass or halibut over soft bottoms incidentally catch juvenile giant seabass, while adults are occasionally hooked while fishing live

mackerel or squid around rocky reefs, squid spawning grounds, or outside kelp beds.

Accurate data on the number of giant seabass caught and released by recreational anglers since the 1981 moratorium is not available; however, it seems apparent to those who regularly fish the islands and kelp beds that there has been an increase in the number of giant seabass interactions over the past few years. Thus, it is important that anglers be informed of the appropriate methods to handle and safely release a giant seabass if they do hook one. When the fish is brought to the surface, giant seabass have an enlarged gas bladder that becomes easily over-inflated, even in relatively shallow water. It is unnecessary to deflate the gas bladder with a needle because these fish generally have enough strength to swim down under their own power. An exhausted giant seabass may need a minute to recuperate from the long fight, but you can typically assist in this process by moving the fish back and forth in the water to circulate water over the gills. For release, first remove the hook, or cut the line at the leader if the hook is embedded deeply. Once the fish begins to recover, turn it right side up, and propel it downward with a head-first push. Usually, giant seabass will give a couple of big kicks and disappear out of sight in a hurry, but you may need to try this several times if the fish continues to

## GIANT SEABASS (STEREOLEPIS GIGAS)

BY CHUGEY SEPULVEDA, PhD,  
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PHOTO BY SCOTT AALBERS

float belly up.

If the fish seems incapable of swimming down under its own power, you can strap an inverted barbless hook to a heavy weight (a spare dive weight) and attach the rig to a heavy line. This inverted barbless hook can be pinned through the corner of the mouth and the fish descended to the bottom. When the rig is retrieved, the inverted hook will pop free, and the fish can swim off at depth with a recompressed gas bladder.

Incidental hooking mortality rate is unknown for giant seabass, but it has been suggested that even a negligible catch-and-release mortality rate (less than five percent) could have a considerable impact on the recovery of a long-lived species, like the giant seabass. Continued incidental mortality from commercial and recreational fisheries may explain why California giant sea bass populations have still not fully recovered from their over-exploited state; however, this species is clearly showing signs of recovery in Southern California.

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