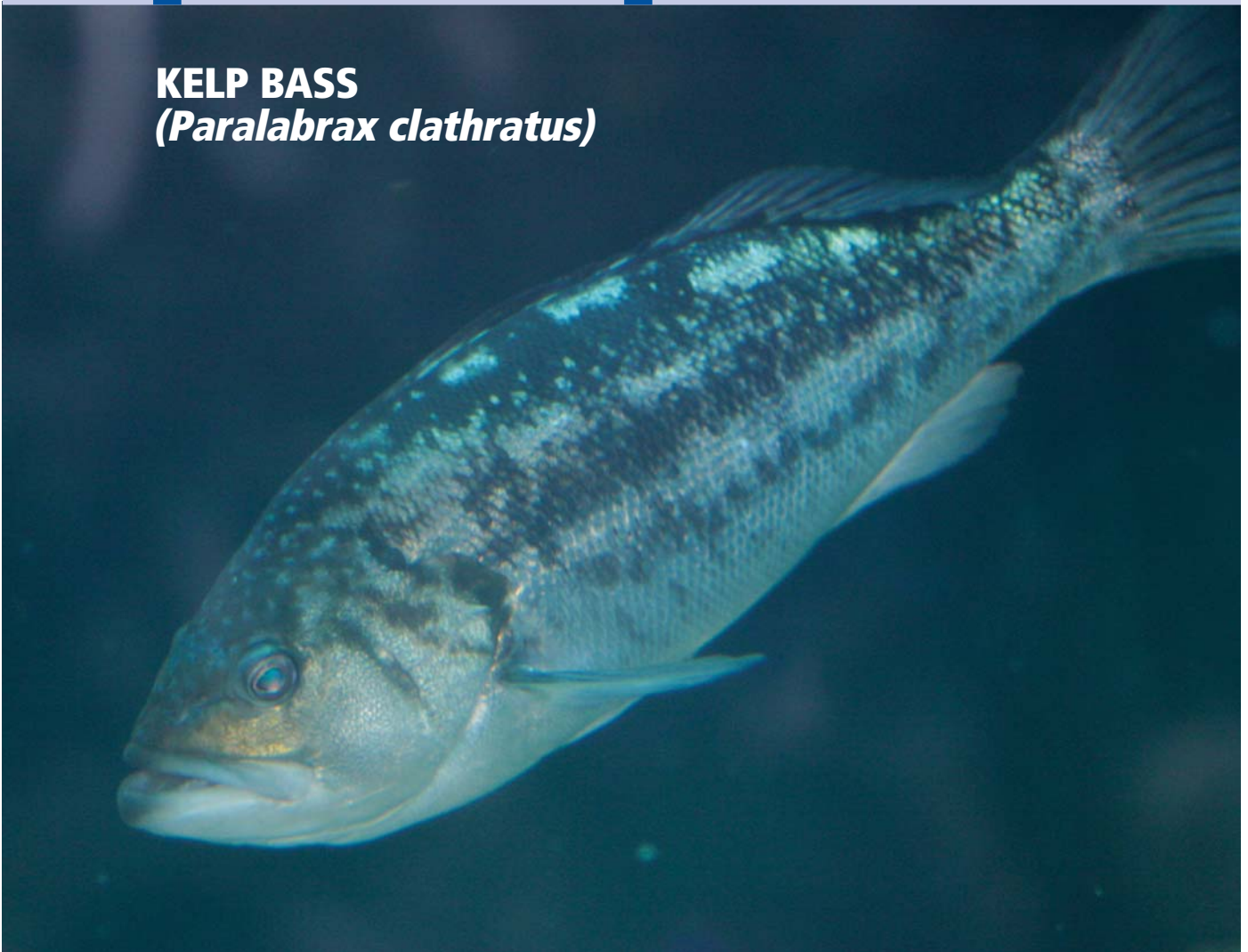




BY CHUGEY SEPULVEDA, PhD

species specifics

KELP BASS (*Paralabrax clathratus*)



Kelp bass (also known as *calico bass*) are an extremely important resource to Southern California recreational anglers. Everyone – from beginners on their first half-day trip, to seasoned anglers fishing plastics or casting surface iron – relies on the kelp bass for spring, summer and

fall action. In this column I will provide some biological and fishery information on the kelp bass and offer my personal insight with respect to a few conservation tips that might augment our future kelp bass fishery.

Initially, kelp bass were harvested by both recreational and commercial interests, with peak landings in the mid 1920s, with over 500,000 pounds harvested from local waters. These landings were for all “rock bass” as it wasn’t until the middle of the century that anglers started differentiating sand

bass from kelp bass. During the late 1940s the “rock bass” fishery was showing signs of decline, and managers implemented a series of regulations on the fishery. Most notable was the management decision to make the kelp bass exclusively a recreational species, with no commercial take. In 1959 the Department of Fish and Game introduced more stringent recreational regulations, ones that are still in place today (i.e., bag limit of 10 fish that need to be 12 inches or larger).

Why is there any concern over the

kelp bass? The data available suggest that the kelp bass population is stable; however, it also suggests that intense fishing has reduced the number of larger individuals in the fishery. So, basically, the fishery is healthy, but it primarily consists of smaller, just-legal individuals. I think that most people I know would agree with this conclusion. From the landings data it is also evident that the kelp bass population fluctuates significantly over time, with the overall abundance lower now than it was the late 1980s. Several factors may account for this, including shifting oceanic conditions and oscillations in the spawning biomass as well as juvenile recruitment. Another factor that we cannot underestimate is overall fishing pressure. I remember taking my 10-fish bag limit on an almost ritual

basis aboard the Newport half-day boats. These landings can really add up, especially when you consider that kelp bass do not grow very fast (a legal 12-inch fish is most likely four to six years old). Fortunately, the Fish and Game regulations are in place such that legal fish (12-inch) have had one or two seasons to reproduce before their harvest. This is probably the basis for the stable population and why they remain relatively abundant along our coastline.

Over the past several years, I feel that there has been a big push to release more and more kelp bass, especially the larger models that offer exponentially greater reproductive output when compared to smaller fish. Along with practicing catch-and-release, here are a few additional tips that might help in restoring our kelp bass fishery to what it once was.

A self-imposed reduction in bag limit is probably the best way to keep the fishery healthy. I hear it routinely among anglers: *Who needs ten calicos?* This is usually said on a slow day, when filling the 10-fish limit is a little difficult. I think it's time we start practicing what we preach. Personally, I feel that five kelp bass is a good number: it offers enough for fish tacos or ceviche and would also significantly reduce the overall harvest. We have to remember that kelp bass are relatively long lived (they can live up to 34 years), so any benefits from a reduction in take might not be seen immediately, but down the line is when we should benefit.

It doesn't take a scientist to realize that fishing pressure has an effect on the size of the kelp bass available along the beach. It just takes someone who's recently been to Clemente or down along Baja where fishing pressure is much reduced. Usually, it's pretty obvious that size and overall abundance are greater the farther you get from civilization. Because the kelp bass is only taken in the recreational fishery, we really have no one to blame, and we have the most to gain from a healthy fishery.

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