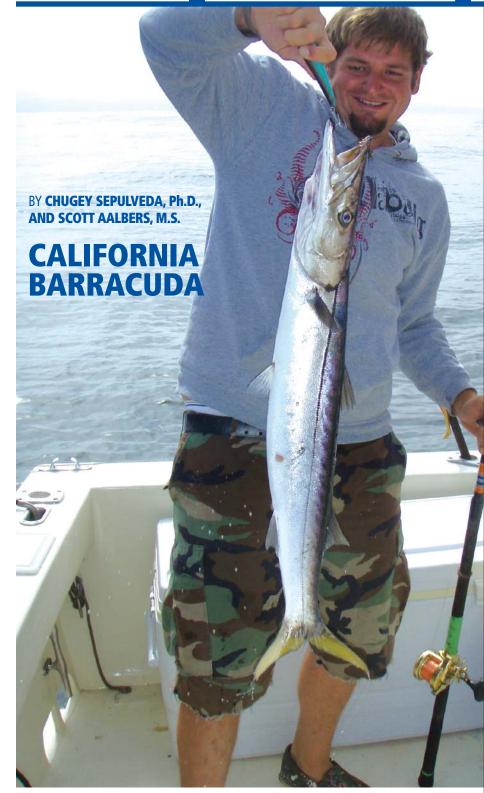
Pleger DIER Species specifics Environmental Research DIER Species specifics



alifornia barracuda is a common inshore species, with resident and migratory schools patrolling the coast and offshore islands. As an ambush predator, sharp teeth and quick bursts of speed provide the barracuda with the essential tools for targeting small schooling fishes (anchovies, sardines, mackerel) and squid.

Barracuda are also preyed upon by a variety of predators (especially at small sizes), including California sea lions, several species of sharks, and giant seabass. Although migratory schools of adult barracuda often move quickly through Southern California waters, juvenile barracuda play an important role in the inshore ecology kelp forests.

Growth

Particularly in their first year of life. when they can reach up to 14 inches in length, barracuda are relatively fastgrowing. Females reach sexual maturity at around 22 inches in length and at an age of two to three years. As with many pelagic species, the barracuda is highly fecund, with larger individuals capable of releasing more than a half-million eggs per spawn.

With a lifespan of approximately 12 years of age, fish up to 17 pounds (47 inches) have been documented (the California state record is 15.5 pounds). Spawning season extends from March to August, when large schools migrate through our waters. At that time barracuda can be found both feeding and spawning throughout the productive inshore waters of the Southern California Bight.

Aggregations are commonly found around coastal kelp forests, with packs of larger individuals travelling a few miles offshore in association with schools of baitfish. Adults typically move northward along the coastline as water temperatures increase during the late spring and early summer. Catch rates are higher and extend farther north along the California coast during warm-water years.

Fisheries

Although the California barracuda is considered only fair eating by many, when treated properly and kept on ice, they can provide excellent table fare. California commercial harvest began in the late 1800s and peaked in the 1920s at around 2,700 tons landed by gill net, purse seine, and troll fisheries. The purse seine fishery for barracuda came to an end in the late 1950s, and currently,



only small-scale gill net and troll fisheries still operate in Southern California.

Today, the barracuda supports vast recreational landings and ranks consistently among the top species caught aboard Southern California commercial passenger fishing vessels (party boats), with some years resulting in over a million fish caught annually. Recreational landings decreased considerably in California following the 28-inch-minimum size limit instated in 1971.

Primarily caught by recreational fishers while trolling, casting jigs, or fly-lining live bait, these streamlined predators are notorious for their sharp cutting teeth, making wire leaders essential for anglers targeting barracuda with bait.

Proper handling should also be used to ensure minimal damage to fish that you plan to release. The best way to release an undesired or short barracuda is to never touch it at all; rather, use a release tool (e.g. slime hook or bait shaker) to invert the embedded hook and pop it free from the fish's lip. Also, pinching the barb on an iron helps minimize the damage you may inflict to the jaws of a fish that you intend to release.

As with several species that we have written about, the barracuda is another coastal fish that is primarily landed by recreational fishers and plays an integral role in several recreational industries; thus, any conservation efforts (e.g., reduced limits and minimizing injury to released fish) that we choose to employ will only help strengthen our local stocks and provide future opportunities.

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