Working Waterfront

San Diego Bay's Resources help sustain the people of San Diego and the world.

Pre-History ❖ 9000BP
Native Americans gather shellfish, hunt sea mammals, and use hook, line, and net to capture fish in San Diego Bay and nearshore waters.

1542 ❖ Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo discovers San Diego Bay for the Spanish crown.

Sport fishing based in San Diego has always been a source of fish stories. Hotel del Coronado, Sea Bass, 1905.

San Diego Bay mapped by the Spanish in 1782.

Current map of San Diego Bay shoreline.

Various cultures brought their own fishing traditions and technologies to San Diego Bay. And as the fishing industry grew–it was the risk, strength, and endurance needed to harvest the sea which inspired the evolution of these technologies.

1870 ❖ Italian immigrants are predominant in the fishing industry.

1880 ❖ Chinese fishermen build fishing junks made from California redwoods.

Fishing Boats, Entrance to San Diego Harbor

1882 ❖ The Chinese Exclusion Act blocks Chinese immigration to the United States. Portuguese immigrants fill the economic roles previously dominated by Chinese.

Early 1900s ❖ Japanese immigrants fish in San Diego Bay. They bring technology that expands the tuna fishing industry: barbless hooks, bamboo poles, mass produced lure, chumming, and refrigerated boats. Japanese immigration restrictions imposed 1907.

1905 ❖ Portuguese bring gasoline engines to expand the range of fishing vessels, allowing the commercial harvest of tuna for the first time. The Portuguese come to San Diego as a result of a fungal disease decimating vineyards in Portugal's Azores Islands.

1912 ❖ The U.S. Navy establishes an air base on North Island adjoining the resort town of Coronado, with three airplanes and three pilots. Thus begins the long tradition of San Diego's support of the Navy and the Navy's reciprocal contribution to the community.

1906 ❖ Italian fishermen fleeing the economic aftermath of the Great San Francisco Quake settle in San Diego and fish with a 'pranzella net,' which is dragged along the sea floor, enabling the harvest of rockfish and other fishes not normally caught with hook and line.

1915 ❖ Croatian immigrant, John Nicholas Vitalich, purchases the Coronado Fish Company and renames it Chesapeake Fish Company to reflect its retrospective business, Chesapeake oysters. It currently is operated by long-term employees who are close to the family.

1927 ❖ Nineteen new tuna boats make San Diego their home port. They include diesel engines with ranges up to 6,000 miles and cork-lined hulls for refrigeration.

1960s ❖ Hydraulic net haulers and nylon nets increase fishing efficiency.

1963 ❖ The Port of San Diego is created by an act of California legislature as a special government entity to manage San Diego Harbor, and administer the public lands along San Diego Bay.

Early 1960s ❖ Coronado citizens lobby for environmental controls on dumping and their efforts inspire passage of state and federal clean water legislation. Bay health is in decline until a sewage treatment system comes on line and sewage is diverted from the Bay into the Pacific Ocean.

1980 ❖ The commercial fleet harvests 202 million pounds of fish, 96% of which is tuna.

Mid-1980s ❖ Tuna fishing in the eastern Pacific starts to decline due to environmental pressures, regulations, and costs associated with a decreasing stock.

The U.S. Navy and Port of San Diego jointly lead scientific studies and management of San Diego Bay's natural resources. They work to provide the clean water and healthy habitats the Bay's abundant fish and wildlife need.

The Chesapeake Fish Company is a living example of a working partnership with San Diego Bay's natural resources. A family business since 1915, the company's harbor-side location is perfect for dozens of independent fishermen arriving from local waters, and from Baja California. Look in the windows behind you to see how the product is processed and then shipped into the local and national markets.

This sign is the actual size of a 550 pound blue fin tuna!

2000 ❖ Now a healthier bay, commercial catch of fish in the San Diego area stabilizes at 3 million pounds. Tuna is still the highest dollar value, with swordfish, spiny lobster, and thresher shark also caught.

The Working Bay requires caretaking. The Navy, Port of San Diego, and local businesses together provide stewardship of the Bay's natural resources.

Today ❖ A healthy San Diego bay supports an abundant amount of marine life essential to the fishing industry. It also serves as an agricultural and manufacturing trade center; a transportation hub; a base for sport fishing fleets–as well as Naval vessels; and lastly a port of call for tourism and recreation.

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