

Californian's Agree - Protecting our Oceans is Possible Without Unnecessary Closures to Recreational Fishing

Field Research Survey Explores the California Public's and Recreational Fishermen's Attitudes Toward the Threats Facing the Ocean and Implementation of the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA)

Sacramento, CA (10/10/07) – Recreational fishermen want to protect the health of the ocean while preventing unnecessary closures to fishing along the California coastline. A coalition of recreational fishermen's organizations has united to ensure that people who fish and boat have a voice in the implementation and outcome of the MLPA Initiative process.

"The interests of the general public and recreational fishermen are aligned in this process. Both support scientifically-based management to protect California's ocean resources based on fact, not emotion," said Gordon Robertson, Vice President of the American Sportfishing Association.

Because of concerns about unnecessary closures of California's coastal fishing areas, California's recreational fishing community decided to examine public attitudes toward the MLPA Initiative implementation process. As part of that process, a state-wide survey sponsored by the American Sportfishing Association was conducted by California-based Field Research Corporation.

The survey results are posted at www.keepamericafishing.org/fieldsurvey.asp for public review. The results of this public opinion research suggest that the public and angler communities are aligned in their belief that the health of California's ocean environment can and should be protected without unnecessary closures of California coastal waters to recreational fishing.

Survey Findings in Brief

- Californians express high levels of concern about possible environmental threats to the world's oceans. The public's top concern relates to the pollution of the oceans, about which 59% report a great deal of concern. About half of the public also has a great deal of concern about two other threats – the conservation of ocean marine life and fish populations (51%) and the effect of climate change on ocean habitat and marine life (50%). California anglers express higher levels of concern about the pollution of the oceans and conservation of ocean marine life and fish populations than the general public.
- Sewage dumped into ocean waters and land-based pollutants that drain into ocean waters are seen as being the most serious potential threats to the ocean and marine life along the California coast, with greater than seven in ten considering them very serious. By contrast, only 9% of Californians feel recreational fishermen pose a very serious threat to ocean and marine life along California's coast.

- When asked directly, nearly all adults (86%) and anglers (93%) believe pollution poses a greater threat to marine life and fish populations than local recreational fishermen.
- When asked whether they believed recreational fishermen are good stewards of the environment and follow practices to help preserve marine life and fish populations, a similar 58% majority of adults answer yes.
- A majority of Californians rate current fishing management practices as being successful in conserving marine life and fish populations along the California coast, Statewide, 12% say they are very successful and 50% feel they are somewhat successful. Just 20% who feel they are not too or not at all successful.
- Very large majorities of both adults (83%) and anglers (74%) support the idea of establishing park areas in designated areas along the California coast, similar to national parks on land, where the ocean environment would be subject to greater protections, but where recreational fishing would be regulated but allowed.
- When Californians are asked whether a number of ocean activities should be banned, limited or not restricted at all if fish populations and marine habitat along the coast are in danger, residents tend to prefer imposing limits on these activities rather than a total ban.

Only about one in three residents (32%) report having heard about the Marine Life Protection Act, and of those aware, most initially think it is a good thing. Public support for the MLPA's ban on recreational fishing in designated areas along the coast declines significantly if alternative fishing conservation measures are available, such as limiting the months of fishing or the number of fish caught. Just 37% of the adult public favors banning recreational fishing in these areas, while 54% are opposed in this context. Registered voters are somewhat more opposed than the general public, opposing the ban by a 58% to 33% margin.

When general statements about the MLPA, fishing restrictions and the threats facing fish populations are posed to Californians, the results show a public strongly concerned about the threats facing the state's coastal fish population, but holding mixed views about the MLPA.

- There is widespread agreement (79%) that "California's coastal fish populations are in danger and this law is an effective way to try to do something about the problem."
- Yet, 61% also concur with a concern of many in the angler community that "under this law, local recreational fishermen could be prohibited from fishing in areas where there is no present threat to fish populations."
- About three in four (74%) also agree that "when deciding which areas off the California coast should be off-limits to fishing, the conservation benefits to fish populations and marine habitat should be balanced against its economic and social costs."

- Yet, 60% of adults also agree that the law is fair and balances the interests of all the various stakeholders involved in the issue.

There is a clear public consensus (90% agreement) that “any ban that is placed on recreational fishing in California’s coastal waters should include a provision which requires that bans be reassessed at some point in the future.” Large majorities also concur with a number of other statements relating to bans on recreational fishing. These include:

Any ban that is placed on recreational fishing in California’s coastal waters should only be imposed as a last resort where marine life and fish populations are clearly in danger.” (73% agreement)

- Recreational fishing is one of the state’s most popular individual and family activities and banning it in some of the state’s best coastal fishing areas will undermine its popularity.” (66% agreement)
- Banning or severely restricting recreational fishing from some of the state’s best coastal fishing areas will damage the economies of communities along the California coast.” (65% agreement)
- Recreational fishing has little impact on coastal fish populations, so banning it is not an effective way to protect the marine life and fish populations.” (61% agreement)

For complete survey results go to www.keepamericafishing.org/fieldsurvey.asp

Why Recreational Fishermen Are Concerned

California’s recreational fishing community has expressed concern that while the MLPA initiative process may have laudable objectives, precedent suggests that for practical purposes, closures are permanent with few if any opportunities to re-open debate and that closure does not necessarily equal protection. The public and recreational fishermen are skeptical that a recreational fishing ban will be an effective tool in protecting California’s ocean health.

“Recreational fishermen are interested in the recreational aspects of fishing – and generally have a minimal environmental footprint. We do not use or support equipment or destructive fishing practices that damage the environment such as bottom trawls, gill nets and long lines. It is in our own self interest to protect fish and sensitive habitat for our children and grandchildren. It’s clear from the Field Survey that the average recreational fisherman is as concerned, or more so, than even members of the general public,” said Bob Franko, Chairman of the Coastside Fishing Club.

What Does the Recreational Fishing Community Want?

Coalition members agree: a plan that errs on the side of conservation that includes: healthy, abundant, sustainable fish populations; habitat conservation, transparency and due process in public proceedings, and the principles of sound science are the most important elements of a workable conservation plan.

In addition, recognition should be given to the long-standing policy of the Federal government to allow public access to public lands and waters for recreational purposes consistent with sound conservation measures in addition to California's constitutional right to fish. (CA Constitution Article 1, Section 25). The California Ocean Protection Act clearly defines a recreational preference within marine protected areas in state law.

In fact, deliberation and consensus are the keys to ensuring that these ocean resources are not locked up forever. We just have one chance to get it right. A decision by the California Fish and Game Commission to implement Marine Protected Areas – especially no-take areas – without careful consideration could have disastrous consequences for regional economies, recreational fishermen, and potentially the environment.

Recreational fishermen are stewards of the environment and advocates for sustainable fishing and conservation and are often on the front line of ocean protection as first responders -- serving as an early warning system to alert environmental protection agencies about potential environmental damage.

History of the MLPA

The 1999 Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) mandated that the state of California design and manage an improved network of marine protected areas to, among other things; protect marine life and habitats, marine ecosystems, and marine natural heritage. Marine protected areas include marine reserves, marine parks and marine conservation areas.

To implement the original legislation the state created the Marine Life Protection Act Initiative, with its Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF), Scientific Advisory Team (SAT), and Regional Stakeholder Groups (RSG) to make recommendations to the California Fish and Game Commission who will decide which coastal areas are placed off limits to fishermen and the general public.

Currently, the BRTF is considering Phase Two proposals submitted by interested parties within the MLPA North Central Coast Study Region (Alder Creek/Point Arena in Mendocino County to Pigeon Point in San Mateo County). Phase One covered Pigeon Point to Point Conception.

California's recreational fishermen support the Blue Ribbon Task Force's mandate under the state's Marine Life Protection Act Initiative to examine the broad range of potential impacts – not just those from recreational fishing -- on California's coastal and ocean environment before Task Force members make a final recommendation to the California Fish and Game Commission.

About the Survey

A statewide survey of California adults and anglers was conducted on behalf of the American Sportfishing Association (ASA) by Field Research Corporation (Field). The overall objective of the survey was to examine public opinion about threats to ocean marine life and fish populations along the California coast, and the implementation of the state's Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA).

Field Research Corporation, based in San Francisco, is one of the oldest and most respected public opinion research organizations in the Western United States. The company regularly conducts surveys both in California and nationwide for a wide variety of clients in the public and private sectors. Its non-partisan, media-sponsored public opinion news service, *The Field Poll*, which has operated continuously since 1947, is considered one of the nation's pre-eminent state polls.

The American Sportfishing Association, based in Alexandria, Virginia, is a national trade association working to ensure fisheries resources and to promote recreational and sportfishing to the American public. Contact: Gordon Robertson at (703-519-9691).

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To download a copy of the Survey results, and to sign up for information updates regarding the ongoing California MLPA visit: www.keepamericafishing.org/fieldsurvey.asp

For more information about California's Marine Life Protection Act visit: <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa/>

Recreational Fishing Coalition Members: Coastside Fishing Club, Sportfishing Association of California, American Sportfishing Association, Southern California Marine Association and United Anglers of Southern California.