

# CATCHING CALIFORNIA

New territory



TAGGING IS NOT JUST FOR INSTAGRAM – The author caught, tagged and released this healthy vermilion rockfish.





COLORFUL CABEZON on a recent fish tagging trip.



BY CLARA RICABAL

Catching California is about adventures in the field and on the water, and there are always opportunities to venture out into new territory. For me, rockfishing has been about taking home fillets of the tasty white meat, but I had a very different experience this past week as a volunteer angler for the California Collaborative Fisheries Research Program (CCFRP) on the Huli Cat out of Half Moon Bay.

Our trip was headed by an all-girls research team with lead scientist and statewide coordinator, Rachel Brooks, spearheading the voluntary voyage.

Nine volunteer anglers were on board with different levels of angling experience.

Not to worry, as both Captain Tom Mattusch and Captain Michael Cabanas were involved in every step of the way, from setting up rigs to descending fish.

The CCFRP has been in existence since 2007, utilizing local charter boats and volunteer fishermen to study four central California Marine Protected Areas (MPA). The program expanded in 2017 to include 10 additional MPA areas, and standardized scientific methods are used in all regions to provide consistency across data collection. CCFRP partners with six academic institutions — Humboldt State University, Bodega Marine Laboratories, Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, UC Santa Barbara, and Scripps Institution of Oceanography — to conduct fishery-independent, hook-and-line catch and release surveys.

According to the CCFRP website, “By sampling the same areas and employing identical methods year after year, CCFRP will be able to detect long-term changes in nearshore fish populations from the region.

Because CCFRP surveys began the same year that these MPAs were established on the Central Coast, initial differences in fish sizes and/or abundances are accounted for, unbiasing any inherent differences between protected and unprotected areas prior to 2007. With continued sampling, CCFRP will be able to determine whether any changes in fished and unfished populations are due to differences in area, season, year or level of protection: important factors to take into account when assessing the effectiveness of marine reserves.”

Once caught, each fish is identified, measured, tagged and released at their respective marine protected area (MPA) or reference site.

CCFRP has several goals:

- conduct scientifically sound research to better inform resource managers
  - collaboratively work with local fishing communities to collect fisheries data
  - provide rigorous baseline/monitoring data for the evaluation of MPA performance
  - better understand nearshore fish stocks and the ecosystems upon which they rely
  - educate the public about marine conservation, stewardship and research
- Volunteer anglers are an important part of the success of the CCFRP, and over the 14 years of the program, 851 volunteers have spent over 7,000 hours during 230 trips catching and releasing 76,746 fish, tagging over 23,000 fish from 53 different species.

Despite the pandemic, anglers landed 3,317 fish in 2020, tagging 387 prior to release. To maximize survival, the trips focus on depths of less than 120 feet, use barbless hooks, regularly change seawater, release fish within five minutes, only tag fish in good conditions and use descending devices when necessary.

After a beautiful trip down to the Año Nuevo State Marine reserve, we fished two marine protected areas, and then moved not too far along to try two public reference “grids.” Each “grid” is timed to be fished for 45 minutes. Anglers are assigned numbers with huge buckets at their feet full of fresh ocean water. Fish, once caught, are to be quickly but gently taken off hooks (handled by CCFRP scientists) and dropped in the bucket until they can be

taken to the measuring station.

Species are measured, recorded and then tagged prior to being placed in a milk crate and descended down. Extra care is given to those fish that experienced any barotrauma. Bulging eyes, protrusion of the stomach, and a bloating belly are signs that the fish may be unable to return to depth and must be recompressed. I am accustomed to this, as I perform fish “venting” or “fizzing” when fishing for black bass at deep-water reservoirs. All 466 fish caught on my trip, which included 13 different species of rockfish, were safely released back home.

I am really looking forward to my next sampling trip, hoping to study the Point Lobos MPA, another area that I admire from the views of my Jackson kayak when launching from a nearby beach in Pacific Grove.

Information on the program is available at <https://mlml.sjsu.edu/ccfrp/>.