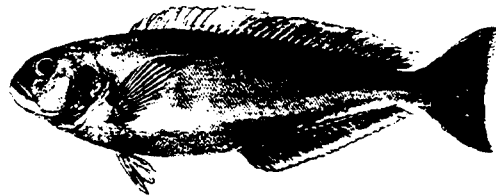


landings of whitefish were made in 1926, when 368,000 pounds were recorded in southern California. Some of these fish may have been caught off Baja California. Landings since then have declined, but the value of ocean whitefish catch almost tripled from 1978 to 1989.

Annual catches made from commercial passenger fishing vessels ranged from 22,000 to 84,000 fish from 1977 through 1989. Most of these fish were caught near the Channel Islands and at offshore banks, particularly Cortez and Tanner Banks near San Clemente Island. They are caught exclusively with baited hooks, and no special fishing regulations pertain to their catch. The vicinity of the Coronados Islands off Mexico is a favorite whitefish fishing area for sport fishermen.

It is a food fish favored by sportsmen, and the small amount of ocean whitefish that is landed commercially is sold in fresh fish markets. It makes excellent sashimi, being comparable in flavor and texture to any of the most esteemed white-fleshed fish used for this purpose. In Japan, species of tilefish similar to ocean whitefish command premium prices in the fresh fish market. In fact, several years ago, two longline fishing vessels were sent from Japan to fish for ocean whitefish at offshore banks near southern Baja California. Unfortunately, here in California ocean whitefish has acquired a mixed reputation because a few bitter-tasting individuals turn up every now and then. The cause of the bitter flesh is unknown, but these fish are evidently restricted to shallow waters, especially near kelp beds. Smaller individuals make excellent aquarium pets, as they are hardy, handsome, active, and alert when placed in tanks.



Ocean whitefish, *Caulolatilus princeps*.

Status of Biological Knowledge

Ocean whitefish are attractive fish with robust, elongate bodies. They are white below and light brown on the back, with fins marked with blue and yellow streaks and yellow margins.

The range of ocean whitefish is from Vancouver, British Columbia to Peru or possibly to Antofagasta, Chile, and the vicinity of the Galapagos Islands. In California, it is common south of Pt. Conception and rare to the north. Its depth range is 30-450 feet, and its principal habitats appear to be near offshore islands and over shallow banks, at depths of 50-150 feet.

The southern California population of ocean whitefish is derived from central and southern Baja California. No information is available on the timing or the size at which most of these fish migrate northward. It is also not known if the fish move south again to spawn, or if any spawning occurs off California.

Fish close to spawning have been found in Baja California from October through April. Most larvae occur within 100

OCEAN WHITEFISH

History of the Fishery

Ocean whitefish (*Caulolatilus princeps*), is a popular sport fish in southern California, is also a commercial species, but landings in recent years have been rather low. The greatest

miles of the central Baja California coast. These larvae are found throughout the year, but their numbers peak in summer. Pelagic juvenile stages barely one-half inch long have been found far offshore from Baja California. Juveniles move inshore by the time the fish reach 2.5 inches or so. At an age of six years whitefish are 20-21 inches long and weigh three to four pounds, while at age 13, which is about their life span, they average around 25 inches and 7.5 pounds. Ocean whitefish may grow to a maximum of 40 inches and 12 pounds.

Ocean whitefish have a relatively small mouth, and accordingly they feed upon small animals, including shrimps, crabs, pelagic red crab, octopi, squid, and various fishes, especially anchovy and lanternfish. They are usually encountered over rocky grounds, and anglers find that they usually take baited hooks before the lures reach bottom.

Young ocean whitefish are eaten by a number of fishes, including albacore tuna. Older stages are prey for giant sea bass, sharks, and no doubt other large fishes. Otoliths (carbonates) of whitefish found in middens at San Clemente Island attest that this fish was an important food fish for Native Americans.

Status of Population

Because the center of distribution of ocean whitefish is far to the south off central Baja California, the numbers of ocean whitefish near southern California have never been very high. The decrease in commercial landings after the mid-1940's may not reflect reduction in availability or abundance of ocean whitefish, but rather a disinterest by the market. No information is available on the size of the populations, either in southern California or in Mexico.

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