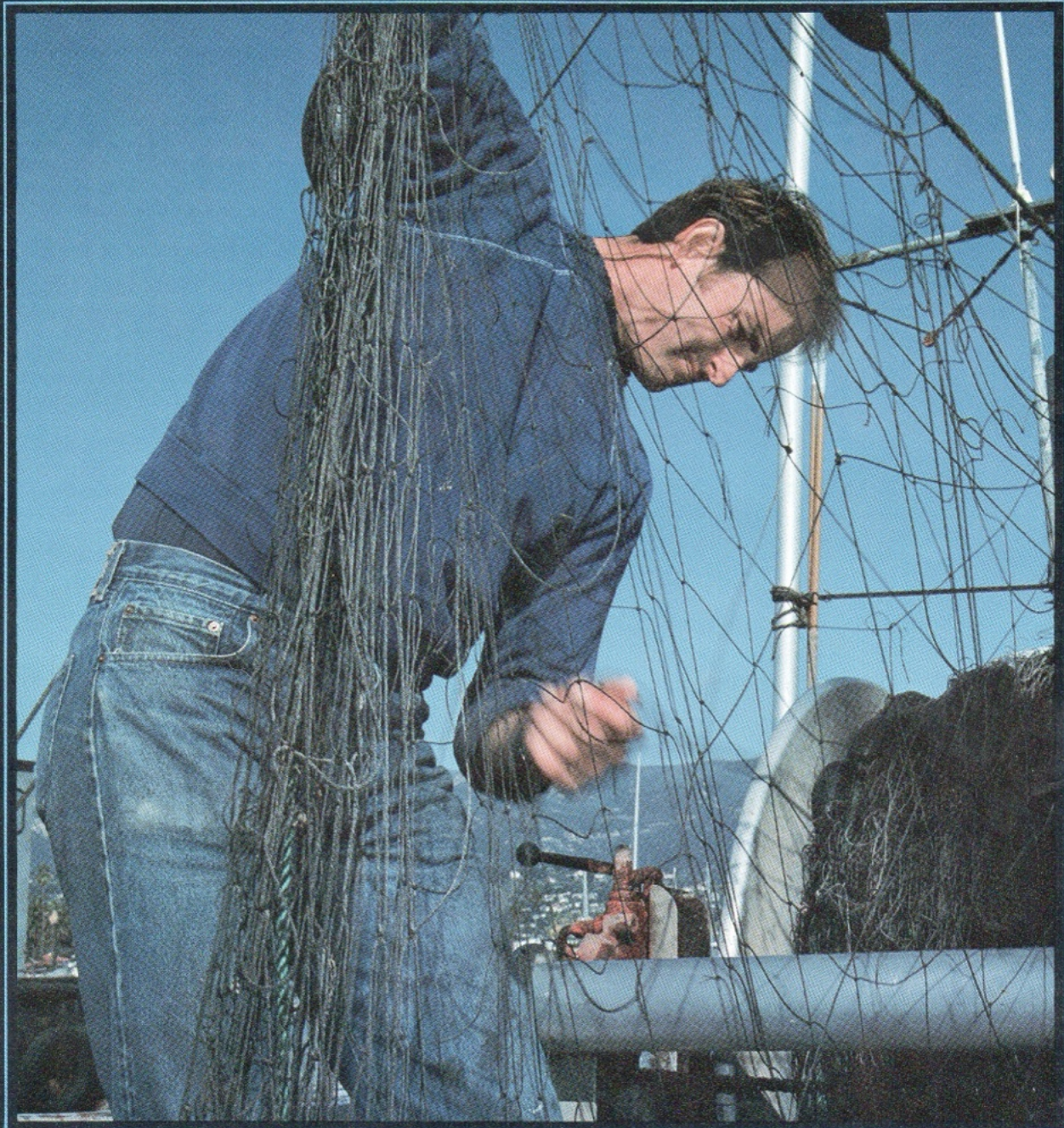


Pacific Fishing

March 1983 \$2.00

Salmon Enhancement, Part II
Bering Sea Herring
The Wild King Salmon

Inshore Gillnetting





D. B. PLESCHNER

“You have to love fishing. The financial reward is small motivation when you look at the work effort,” Phil Beguhl says, a high-pitched chuckle punctuating his words.

It is 5:30 a.m. and Beguhl is in a jocular mood as he sideslips the Santa Barbara harbor buoy and throttles into the channel against a slight swell, heading up the coast to pull the catch from yesterday’s set. If things go well, he will be back in port without bucking the afternoon wind bump.

The predawn mist clings like a blanket, and a freshening breeze crawls down the neck and numbs the hands. Deckhand Chuck Arellanes stands at the bow watching the fire—the phosphorescent trails of bait fish streaking the water. Beguhl mans the wheel, legs splayed, a ski cap pulled snug over his ears. He is at home here, an artist in his element. His *forte* is



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halibut—the most challenging and lucrative of all California inshore gillnet fisheries, and the subject of a growing controversy on the California coast.

Halibut are the bread-and-butter fish for coastal gillnetters like Beguhl and his angular, likable partner, Dan Gaither. At about \$1.70 a pound, every fish represents \$10 or more in the fisherman's wallet. Unlike Pacific halibut which weigh up to 800 pounds, California halibut peak at 72 pounds. A legal, 22-inch fish weighs around 5 pounds and the average catch weighs 10. Thus it takes a lot of fish, and work, to fill a box, but California halibut are among the high-dollar fish at market.

California halibut are yearlong residents in sand-bottomed coastal waters ranging from the intertidal zone to about 50 fathoms, although most of the catch is taken inside 11 fathoms. They are non-schooling, unpredictable, elusive fish. Indeed, fishing halibut takes lore acquired only by years of dedicated observation, and a fisherman's trade secrets can spell the difference between profit and loss as gillnet competition increases.

Beguhl and Gaither developed a sixth sense for halibut by trolling from Boston whalers along the Santa Barbara coast. As the story goes, Gaither brought in a healthy load one day several years ago. Beguhl took one look and asked, "When are we going?" Gaither shot back, "Tomorrow." From that day they became a team.

Gaither remembers catching 700 pounds of halibut on a good day with rod and reel. "We spent time out there," he reminisces. "We learned what to look for—certain conditions at different times of year. At a specific time of the day with the tide and bait running a particular way, we could expect to find halibut at a certain place." They caught a lot of fish.

"You develop a feel for the ocean," Gaither reflects. "You can sense it. I've seen fish disappear in five minutes. The birds are there, the bait. Suddenly they're gone and you don't catch another fish." Then there were long, blank days when the men stayed out on a hunch. Just as suddenly, the halibut would start feeding. "They'd go nuts," Gaither exclaims, adding, "They feed at different hours. It's like a treasure hunt."

Successful rod and reelers, the men figured that with their knowledge of the resource they could do better with a net. Gaither bought the *Hula Girl* in

1979, a 29-foot stern cabin, square bow McCauley hull, and Beguhl agreed to work it. Typical of inshore gillnetters, the boat is small and versatile, capable of changing fisheries at the whim of fish and market simply by switching nets. At \$6,000 a full reel, the men have acquired separate gillnet sets for surface and bottom sea bass, bonita, and barracuda, two trammel net sets for halibut and angel shark, and a drift gillnet for thresher shark and swordfish. The thresher drift net requires a special permit. For the inshore nets, the men hold two of 275 general gillnet permits issued in 1982 in Southern California.

Beguhl and Gaither, both in their thirties, represent today's fishing generation. But they differ in two important ways. They deploy less net than 80 percent of their commercial counterparts, and they catch more halibut than nearly all of them. They landed over 35 thousand pounds of halibut alone in 1981 and are consistently among the top five halibut boats in California.

"Ninety percent of this fishery is knowing what's where," Beguhl expounds to the dawn air as the *Hula Girl* nears the first net, a half hour run from the harbor. The men had been drifting for thresher the last three months, but the big fish disappeared and the processors needed angel shark, a product Beguhl is eager to supply, although at \$.35 a dressed pound, it is marginally profitable. So the men switched gear to the three-wall trammel net Beguhl prefers for halibut and angel, since both species inhabit similar reef-bordered sand channels.

Targeting for angel but hoping for halibut even though the peak season, between May and July, had passed, Beguhl set four gangs of net. Each gang was suspended with cork line across the top edge, lead line along the bottom, and anchor weights at each end holding it on the ocean floor. Today the men would explore, moving gear and studying the signs, getting a feeling for the fish. "Halibut and angel move in and out on different schedules for different reasons, sometimes together and sometimes not," Beguhl explains.

As the rising sun paints the sky crimson, the men pull the first gang, attaching the lead line to the empty reel and operating the spring-loaded hydraulics, working into the current to maintain tension on the net and bring it up straight. Where most fishermen average 20 to 30 pieces of net, Beguhl

fishes 15 pieces, each 45 fathoms long by 28 meshes deep and arrayed 4 pieces per gang. But he carries one short gang, a small net for more precise placement between reefs, areas he calls surgical pockets. "There's an art and a science, a whole wealth of knowledge in every set," he declares. "It's not just throwing a rag in the water, it's surgical placement of the net for the best results."

Besides keeping constant track of tide, current, water temperature, moon phase, bait—anticipating the moves of his fish—a gillnetter must know how and where to set not only to make his catch but to avoid a lot of extra work. "You have to adjust for conditions and know what the dirt is like in an area so you don't spend all day cleaning your net," Beguhl says. He looks for things like big swells, drift kelp from kelp-cutting operations, and spider crab migrations. Spider crabs, like fish, move out in a swell, a time to avoid setting in shallow water near a large crab population. Picking the long-legged, bent-nosed nuisances out of the net is drudging, unproductive labor.

Then he studies the current because the set, like the pull, is made against the prevailing current or wind, whichever is strongest. Normal currents run parallel to the beach, but not in some places, and cross currents push dirt like drift kelp into the net. "Nobody's going to tell you where to set and fish clean," he comments. "You pay the price and you learn. You have to be a quick study, read the signs to tell what's happening before it happens." He grins, adding, "But you make mistakes anyway."

Fishing clean with a trammel net is an art in itself. Constructed of one or two outer walls of 25-inch mesh and an inner, longer, saggy curtain of 8-inch stretch mesh, the trammel traps the halibut or angel in a net sack. Because halibut swim powerfully in reverse, they can free themselves from a standard gillnet. But swimming into a trammel, they entangle their heads in the small mesh, driving the inner curtain through an outer wall. The mesh collapses behind them, bagging them and blocking their escape. Angels, although not backpeddlers, are caught the same way.

"There's a special knack to getting fish out of a trammel net," Beguhl observes. "Each species goes in with a different pattern. There is nothing random about it." Because of the extra time and skill involved, and the





D. B. PLESCHNER

trammel's tendency to pick up dirt, many halibut fishermen have switched to suspended, or trammelized, gillnets. These single-walled nets are threaded with a vertical string interwoven at intervals to prevent them from expanding to full height, giving the nets added slack, again trapping the fish in a bag of mesh. Single-walled nets fish cleaner, Beguhl concedes, but the trammel is a more efficient tool, more effective catching larger fish while offering a little more protection from seal predation.

Beguhl's first 180-fathom gang of net illustrates what seals can do. The day's initial halibut is scarcely recognizable; all that remains is a 4-inch piece of backbone which deckman Arellanes removes with a frustrated grin. But the net yields 10 angels, no small fish of any denomination, and comes up amazingly clean, containing a few assorted skates, rays, crabs, and a couple of shovel-nosed guitarfish. Still alive, these last are tossed back. "They're good eating," Beguhl says, "but there's no market for them. Only a few years ago, there was no market for angel."

Heading up the line to the second gang of nets, Beguhl points out an overhanging cliff that once contained a natural gas seep. He remembers roasting hot dogs in the flames as a boy. But as he talks of his adventures and his interest in the history of sport-fishing, a passion that encompasses an extensive collection of antique fishing tackle and several reels predating the Civil War, his senses are keen to the signs around him.

His second net is a 6¼-inch mesh gillnet set for leopard shark and incidental sea bass. He says, "I still set a net once in a while to keep my hand in the art." Today the net hauls in three leopards, no sea bass, an abundance of drift kelp, and again, no small fish.

Further up the line, still only an hour's run from the harbor, the third net yields the first whole halibut of the trip. Beguhl declares, "Some days we catch 100 of them and don't even get excited. But when the first fish of the day comes in chewed up, it's a pain because you know the whole net's probably going to be that way, and you still have to do the work."

Protected by federal law, proliferating marine mammals gnaw

The men clean their catch on the ride to the harbor.

a sizable gash in commercial catches; halibut fishermen blame harbor seals. "The seal problem is worst around and below Santa Barbara, but now it's spreading up the line," Beguhl comments. "Someday we won't be able to fish here anymore." He figures expenses, then exclaims, "For this boat alone, seals cost at least \$10,000 a year. And that's avoiding them as much as we can."

Marine mammal interaction with gillnets in California prompted a flurry of legislation during 1982. Along the central coast, reported catches of seals and sea otters, and dramatic losses of marine birds, resulted in environmental outcries and legislation which permanently closed Monterey Bay inside 10 fathoms to gill and trammel net activity. Similar environmental problems also halted shallow-water net activity during the summer of 1982 along the San Mateo, San Francisco, Marin, and Sonoma County coastlines.

The incidental catch of marine birds is small along the Southern California coast. And of the estimated 2,000 marine mammals killed in Southern California in 1981, some 1,200 were caught in shark drift nets operating several miles out in the Santa Barbara Channel (prompting more legislation). Still, inshore gillnetting faces snowballing opposition.

Sportfishermen, the major opponents to inshore gillnetting, complain that gillnets are fencing in the coast. They trap too many sportfish, too many small fish, too many spawning fish. The most emotional argument alleges that lost nets fish forever, representing miles of entangled death. The bottom line: sportsmen think nets limit their own ability to catch fish. It is a classic battle of rights, a biopolitical problem caused by mushrooming human demand on a fluctuating natural resource. The tug-of-war poses a perplexing question, also the title of a TV documentary: "Whose Fish Are They, Anyway?"

"Commercial gillnetting has increased the last few years," comments Dennis Bedford, who is researching net operations for the California Department of Fish and Game. In 1980, the department instigated the gillnet permit program because of the surge in activity. In 1982, 372 general gillnet permits were issued statewide. That number is growing, Bedford notes, as more Vietnamese refugees enter the inshore fisheries. An influx of net boats persuaded officials in Orange and



Gaither and Beguhl weigh part of the day's catch.

Ventura counties to seek a temporary ban on coastal gillnets pending a study of their environmental impact. They asked the legislature to halt gillnet activity inside the 3-mile limit. Santa Barbara County supervisors also passed a resolution of concern.

Ironically, a biological phenomenon spawned much of the Southern California controversy—1981 was a banner year for halibut. Gaither explains, "A lot of squid moved in shallow and brought giant concentrations of halibut. Everywhere you put a net or dropped a hook there were fish." Statewide landings in 1981 totaled 1,254,604 pounds, double the average since 1964. Recent landings have lost ground, and sportsmen

blame gillnets.

The move to restrict gillnet activity has widespread implications because the lion's share of the halibut catch, as well as other inshore species like angel shark, comes from the south of the state. Thus the movement threatens not only the Southern California gillnet operations, but the statewide market for several species of fish. A net moratorium inside 3 miles, even inside 10 fathoms, would strangle the market supply.

Commercial fishermen believe the resource is not adversely impacted by the net take, and both Beguhl and Gaither have emerged as eloquent spokesmen for that belief. Beguhl especially, with a minor in fisheries at

college, several years as a commercial fisherman and a long-standing interest in sportfishing, brings broad-based knowledge and expertise to the controversy.

"An eight-inch mesh does not even catch all legal-size halibut," says Beguhl. "Over half don't get caught. Nets are so specific we have to have a separate mesh for each size class and species. If they were so indiscriminate, we'd need only one."

Gaither is imperative: fishermen do not lose halibut nets and they catch very few small fish. He says, "Out of 200 halibut, we might catch one short. Of the shorts we catch, most are alive and we throw them back." He attributes the 1982 decline in landings to natural cycles followed by all fish.

Voicing sport concern, Stan Radom, president of the Sportsmen's Council of Central California, points out that the inshore harvest is not regulated enough—there is no limit on the number of permits, boats, length of net, or maximum catch. Projected 1982 landings approximate 898,000 pounds—still higher than the 20-year average. Nevertheless, sport interests continue pushing for, in essence, a limited entry fishery.

Authorized by further legislation, Fish and Game biologists have begun a five-year study of the gillnet operations between Point Conception and the Mexican border, where 70 percent of last year's commercial halibut was caught. DF&G halibut specialist Bob Berger comments, "There's so little data to support the allegations, it is unfair to stop people from making a living."

Traveling to retrieve the last net, Beguhl muses, "You have to make a value judgment—consider the needs of people and the needs of the resource. Commercial fishermen are granted the privilege of fishing by proxy for the bulk of the population. Sportsmen fish for themselves. You have to find a balance to allow for the quality of life for mankind." A smile lights his eyes as he adds, "The quality of life for a lot of people improves with a nice seafood dinner."

It is early afternoon and a silver haze colors the ocean. Beguhl dons a safari hat to ward against the glare as he monitors the last pull. Set deeper than the rest at 70 feet, the net yields a few angels, a couple of halibut, and little more. Beguhl is not surprised.

With a full reel, he motors downhill and toward shore, flipping on the

depth finder. He watches the screen, surveys his landmarks, and studies the indicator intently. The needle begins to draw a straight line. Then just as the needle starts to climb, indicating the beginning of a reef, he throttles back while Arellanes readies the net marker buoys and anchor weights for the reset. Moments later, with the *Hula Girl* in reverse, Beguhl neatly places 180 fathoms of net on the line he metered. He repeats the process three more times in different locations, the forethought immensely complex, the action beautifully simple. It is that deceptively simple act that makes or breaks a gillnetter.

The illusion of simplicity comes, in part, from knowing how to hang a net. Where a thresher drift net hangs about 30 percent slack, a halibut net should hang 50 percent, 4 meshes every 16 inches, to be effective. If the net is too tight, it reacts like a chain link fence and fish bounce off. If it is too loose, it harvests mounds of kelp without a substantial increase in catch. Still, the real trick, the science, the art, is knowing precisely where to set.

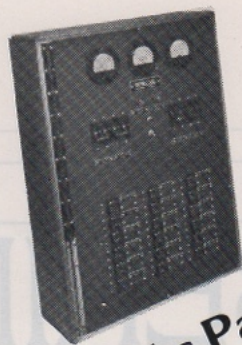
The last net set for the overnight soak, the men head for home, cleaning their catch along the way. The day's catch totals 28 angels, 3 leopards, and a few salable halibut—just over 400 pounds of fish. "You know, 400 pounds is not a very good day, yet we still got enough fish to feed a few hundred people," says Beguhl as he cracks a grin. "On a good day we can feed thousands, assuming they provide the potatoes and tartar sauce."

Unlike many trips, today's work was easy, although not very profitable. "Some days you make \$100, some days \$5,000," Beguhl says, his characteristic, good-natured hoot acknowledging the fisherman's variegated life, governed by wind, swell, and fish, moved by a challenge as old as man.

Back in port before 3 p.m. and watching the day's labor disappear into the processor's truck, Beguhl says, "Fishing is the last frontier, one of the last vestiges of free enterprise. With a little capital and a few years of hard work, a person can make something of himself." And fishing halibut embodies the state of the art, the challenge that rewards Beguhl and Gaither in gillnetting.

by D. B. Pleschner

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