

# FISHERMEN'S NEWS

*The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman*



## Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

*The following article is the opinion of the writers and does not reflect the opinions of Fishermen's News or Philips Publishing Group.*

## Greener Than the Greens

By Zeke Grader

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A few years ago, as I walked out of a long and heated meeting dealing with water flows for fish in the California Central Valley, one of the members of our fisheries/enviro coalition in those negotiations asked me if I'd ever worked for Greenpeace. "No," I responded, "what makes you ask?" "Well," she replied, "you just seemed more radical, more extreme, than the environmental representatives at the table."

My response was to explain to her that, unlike the "environmental representatives," the issue of fish protection for us was not about "doing good," but about protecting the basic economic interests of our members. "If there are no fish, there are no jobs. It's as simple as that." In the course of that late afternoon conversation I also explained to her my own frustration with government's unwillingness to address the root causes of many fish declines and, instead, just close down fisheries. In an even more agitated voice I described to her my frustration with a number of so-called "environmental" groups that I felt were too willing to compromise, often resulting in bad deals for both the fish and for fishermen.

I've never forgotten that

conversation. Of course, I was never with Greenpeace. I don't belong to any environmental organizations; my local public radio station gets what little charitable money I have to give.

That conversation has come to mind numerous times since – in various discussions, negotiations, legislation and lawsuits – as PCFFA and some other fishing interests have found themselves taking more "extreme" positions than many environmental groups were willing to take because the health and productivity of our fishery was at stake.

### Fishermen Leading the Way

Remember in 1988, when the Port of Oakland and the Corps of Engineers started dumping dredge spoils in ocean waters right in the fishery off Half Moon Bay? Most environmental groups had signed off on the proposal because it did not involve dumping the material in San Francisco Bay. It was the fishing industry – the Half Moon Bay Fishermen's Marketing Association, in particular – that objected, demanding a deep-water site for the muck. After a public protest that would have made Greenpeace proud, the Association won in court, and the dumping was stopped. What subsequently resulted was the establishment of the nation's first deep-water dredge disposal site (in 1,000 fathoms, well outside of the fishing

grounds) and a program for dredge material reuse, including the re-creation of wetlands. These fishermen's actions might have been more "extreme" than those of the environmental organizations, but they were environmentally sound and protected our fishing grounds.

Today, on the California coastline there are some marine conservation groups who appear all too willing to sign off on proposals by the oil industry to leave parts of old oil rigs on the sea floor, despite the clear legal obligation of the oil companies to completely remove their old rigs and clean up the sea bottom at the expiration of their leases. These companies, naturally, are looking at any way possible to get out from under the estimated \$30 million for removal and cleanup of each rig, and so have come up with a clever public relations pitch called "rigs-to-reefs." Fishermen in the affected Santa Barbara Channel area, along with the Environmental Defense Center, concerned with the restoration and utilization of fishing grounds and about navigation hazards, are still fighting this oil industry ploy. The question is, will they be undercut by other environmental groups anxious to compromise and to accommodate the oil industry for a few million in "mitigation" dollars? Here, again, is an example of the fishing industry being "greener than the greens" – or at least most of them.



My intent, however, is not to attack environmental groups, especially those who have been our allies in a number of battles, but to make a point about the role of the fishing industry in the protection of the environment. It may also help fishermen to better understand the nature of the environmental groups who are sometime allies and sometime adversaries.

### **Healthy Ecosystems Our Bottom Line**

The fishing industry relies on healthy ecosystems for abundant fish stocks. It relies on sound research and regulations to assure sustainably managed fisheries (that is, fisheries that can be passed on not only to our children but to the guy eventually buying your boat or permit!). And, it relies on clean waters to assure that fish harvested are marketable. All this should be a “no-brainer” for anyone in this industry, even though our industry is sometimes slow to act on such straightforward issues as habitat protection or fighting pollution.

But when we do act, and our actions are based on sound science or law, we should not be surprised when we find ourselves cast as more “protectionist” toward the environment than most environmental groups. Ultimately it’s not what side of the political spectrum others may think we are on, for any given issue that’s important; the main thing is that we are on the correct side – again, based on good science and law. The “green” that is driving us, after all, are the greenbacks derived from healthy fisheries – and that is the way it should be, for ecosystem protection only makes economic sense.

### **Building Relationships That Work**

The “environmental community,” like the fishing industry, is not a monolith. Over the course of more than three decades of working with environmental groups, I have found some to be solid and reputable – others

I have found to be naive, or flaky, or wantonly irresponsible. And some, frankly, are just in it for the money and will do or say just about anything to get funding.

Earthjustice has proven for us to be one such solid and reputable ally, representing fishermen and environmentalists alike as our attorneys on such issues as the enforcement of the Endangered Species Act to protect salmon habitat, enforcement of the Clean Water Act.

We also have worked closely with many Northwest regional and national environmental organizations to help build the Save Our Wild Salmon (SOS) coalition, which has become an effective advocate for salmon restoration in the Columbia Basin and which now includes many sportfishing and commercial fishing industry interests. Several other organizations work closely with us to restore salmon to the Klamath Basin and to coastal watersheds.

At the same time, there are also groups operating under the “environmental” rubric that simply cannot be worked with. In the quest for funds, some organizations will look for a villain, real or not, to base a campaign around. At times the fishing industry has been a handy target where there have been reports of marine mammal shootings, or overfishing, or dumping of bycatch. It doesn’t matter to some of these groups that it is just a small part of the fleet that may be engaged in unsavory activities, the whole of the fishing industry gets blamed. Sometimes it is just a matter of educating these groups. In other instances, however, there may be no interest on their part in correcting or clarifying their misstatements if the campaign is making them money.


Another type of group to be wary of is the one that always seeks consensus, or the “win-win” solution. While all of us like to believe it is possible for reasonable people to sit down together and come up with solutions that are

mutually beneficial, this is not always possible. Sometimes someone has to give and that’s not always pleasant. Too many times, I have watched some of this new breed of environmental group, flush with foundation grants, willing to sell out the protections needed for fish in order to get to their version of a “consensus.”

Finally, the most insidious type of groups claiming to be “environmentalists” are those ready to accept foundation or corporate funding to give “green cover” to corporations, particularly egregious activities by large corporations. Fisheries can be a very convenient target for a group working on behalf of a corporate sponsor seeking to deflect public attention from its own polluting or habitat destruction activities.

### **Finding Friends and Allies**

As an industry we need to continue to reach out and to build coalitions with environmental and any other groups we can work with. A successful effort to save, protect or restore fisheries is most often a coalition effort involving not only fishing, but other interests as well.

Whether working in a coalition or not, however, the important issue for us in the fishing industry is to not get distracted regarding where we are on some hypothetical political spectrum. What is important is that the industry take a correct and reasoned position, based on good science and law, that is good for the environment, good for the fish and, ultimately, good for the long-term sustainability of our fisheries. Then it should be no surprise that fishermen find themselves “greener than the greens.” 

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