

The Chinese Shrimp Fishery

Watch the segment online at <http://education.savingthebay.org/the-chinese-shrimp-fishery>

Watch the segment on DVD: Episode 2, 33:03–36:05

Video length: 3 minutes 21 seconds

SUBJECT/S

Science

History

GRADE LEVELS

6–8
9–12

CA CONTENT STANDARDS

Note: This segment addresses Chinese immigration to California and thus supports the following fourth-grade standard. However, the content of the segment and the related discussions are more appropriate for older students and are recommended for grades 6 through 12.

Grade 4

History – Social Science

4.4.3. Discuss immigration and migration to California between 1850 and 1900, including the diverse composition of those who came; the countries of origin and their relative locations; and conflicts and accords among the diverse groups (e.g., the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act).

VIDEO OVERVIEW

Most of the fishermen in San Francisco Bay were immigrants from both European and Asian countries.



Chinese shrimp fisherman haul in a catch from San Pablo Bay (ca. 1880). (The Bancroft Library)

In this segment you'll learn that:

- different immigrant groups brought different fishing traditions from their home countries.
- Chinese immigrants fished in great numbers, especially for shrimp and smelt.
- Chinese fishermen were subject to discriminatory attitudes and practices prevalent in the 19th century.
- many factors contributed to the decline of the San Francisco Bay fishing industry.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

The first shrimp fishermen in San Francisco Bay were Italian immigrants; the eight boats in the early fishery (1869) used small-meshed seine nets, typically in deep water, and took 50 to 75 pounds of shrimp per haul. In 1871, Chinese immigrants introduced Chinese shrimp nets, large sunken nets that enabled much larger catches and led to a highly successful shrimp fishery. The immigrants used flat-bottomed fishing boats called junks that were built in traditional styles brought from China. However, instead of being constructed of various softwoods, with bamboo masts, as they were in China, the junks were constructed of redwood, which was readily available locally. The fishermen brought the shrimp to fishing villages dotting the coasts of the San Francisco and San Pablo bays. There, the shrimp were immediately boiled, screened for size, and set out to dry. In the early days of this fishery, there was a limited U.S. market for fresh shrimp—most of the catch was exported to China.

The Chinese were also the first to establish a commercial abalone fishery, another product with a limited U.S. market. Without predation from a sea otter population greatly reduced by fur hunters, abalone numbers in the mid-19th century were unnaturally high. Chinese fishermen recognized this opportunity and began harvesting shallow-water abalone from skiffs, dislodging them from the rocks and hooking them up with long poles. By 1879, annual harvests of mainly green and black abalone reached 4 million pounds. For many years, especially following the completion of the railroads that had employed many Chinese workers, Chinese Americans were the major labor force for the region's many fish canneries.

Chinese fishing practices generated much antagonism, especially over the fact that Chinese shrimp nets captured and killed vast numbers of young fish. Although this practice—along with many others—did contribute to the overall decline of the San Francisco Bay fisheries in the late 19th century and was a legitimate conservation management issue, deep-seated discrimination against Chinese immigrants was typical of the time, and this attitude was what fueled most of the complaints against the Chinese fishery. The video segment includes a quote that suggests fish and game

VOCABULARY

ebb and flow

the alternating movement of the tide out to sea (ebb) and toward the shore (flow)

estuary

a semi-enclosed body of water where fresh water and salt water mix

fishery

the industry of catching fish in a specific region; can be for commercial gain or recreation

immigrant

a person who comes from one country to live permanently in another country

smelt

small fish that resemble trout in appearance, but are smaller; most species of smelt live much of their lives in the sea and return to fresh water to breed

agents' attitude toward Chinese fisheries: "The beautiful beaches of Points Pedro and Pablo, where are the shrimp catchers' villages, are made fearful by the stench from myriads of decaying fish, and against this wasteful destruction it has ever been the duty of the fish patrol to act." The "myriads of decaying fish" and "wasteful destruction" referenced the traditional drying methods used to prepare fish for export and consumption; however, in reality, very little of the catch was wasted.

Immigrants of European descent could not compete effectively with the more successful Chinese practices and pressured the California legislature to put restrictions on Chinese fishing activities, including requiring the purchase of special licenses, banning the use of Chinese shrimp nets, limiting the fishing season, prohibiting the export of dried shrimp, and restricting the catch size. Abalone harvesting in less than 20 feet of water also was disallowed. In addition, the federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 limited the number of Chinese immigrants that could enter the country and restricted their ability to freely leave and enter the United States (even including fishing outside the three-mile limit on national waters). These laws created great hardships for and drastically reduced the productivity of the Chinese fishing community and ultimately drove them out of business.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY

- Review the multitude of reasons that San Francisco Bay fisheries declined in the late 19th century. (See also the viewing guide for "Fish Tales: Salmon and Herring Fisheries of San Francisco Bay.")

FOCUS QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

- How were the sailing crafts the Chinese used for fishing in San Francisco Bay different from similar crafts in China? *They were made of redwood, which was the wood available locally, instead of softwoods and bamboo.*
- What was the general attitude of whites toward people of color in the 19th century? *Whites thought they were superior to people of color.*
- Toward the end of the segment, Peter Moyle says, "You blame an undefendable minority for your problems." What "problem" is he referring to? *the decline of the San Francisco Bay fishery*

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- Consider visiting China Camp State Park in Marin County, California, to see the remains of one of the largest San Francisco Bay fishing villages of the 19th century and a replica of a Chinese sailing craft.
- Explore Chinese shrimp fishing practices of the late 19th century. What boats were used? How did the nets work? How were the shrimp processed? What happened to most of the shrimp?
- Have students research and report on the contentious attitudes between European and Asian immigrants that were typical of the late 19th century and the laws that were passed to limit the Chinese fisheries. Discuss the reasons for such legislation. Discuss how the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 affected the Chinese fishing industry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lori Mann is an environmental education consultant with 30 years' experience at the local, state, and national levels. She has worked extensively with curriculum development and review, has taught numerous environmental education courses and workshops, and served for 15 years as education director at Coyote Point Museum for Environmental Education in San Mateo, California.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

China Camp State Park brochure, California State Parks

<http://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/466/files/ChinaCampBrochure.pdf>

Review a short summary of the fishing history of China Camp State Park, the site of one of the largest and longest-lived Chinese fishing villages along the shores of the San Francisco and San Pablo bays.

Fish Bulletin No. 38: The California Shrimp Industry, Paul Bonnot, Division of Fish and Game of California, Bureau of Commercial Fisheries

<http://repositories.cdlib.org/sio/lib/fb/38/>

This detailed 1931 bulletin describes the fishing methods, catches, and issues associated with the shrimp fishery in California.

A History of Chinese Americans in California, National Park Service

http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/5views/5views3b.htm

Read an online book about the history of Chinese Americans in California from 1850 to 1900; in particular, the chapter on the 1850s introduces the Chinese shrimp fishing industry.

CREDITS

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VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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NARRATOR: By 1880, 92 percent of those surveyed in a census of the fishing industry on the Bay were immigrants: Italians in San Francisco's North Beach, Greeks in the North Bay, and, from the Pearl River Delta, the Chinese.

ACTOR "JACK LONDON": Wildest among the fisher-folk may be accounted the Chinese shrimp catchers. And where the tide ebbs and flows, the Chinese sink great bag nets to the bottom, with gaping mouths into which the shrimp crawls and from which it is transferred to the boiling pot.

PHILIP CHOY: If you look out into the Bay, you see these Chinese sailing crafts actually built by Chinese and also modeled after the ships that they had built in China, except they were built [with] redwood, which was available here.

JOHN MUIR: A lot of people couldn't believe we were going to try to build a boat out of redwood. There were a lot of challenges as far as coming up with the design. It was almost an extinct craft. So a lot of it was piecing together all the disparate, almost disappeared construction facts.

From a boat builder's perspective and a sailor's perspective, they're amazing vessels. It's a very exotic rig. Everything about them is from another place entirely ... from China. At the height of these vessels, the peak of this fishery, there were as many as 40 of these vessels out there fishing, and they were really one of the main fleets on the San Francisco Bay for years and years.

CHOY: If you understand 19th-century history, it was a very racist society. Absolutely. So there is the whites being superior and anyone of color is inferior. That was the attitude.

ACTOR "JACK LONDON": The beautiful beaches of Points Pedro and Pablo, where are the shrimp catchers' villages, are made fearful by the stench from myriads of decaying fish, and against this wasteful destruction it has ever been the duty of the fish patrol to act.

PETER MOYLE: The Chinese were out there as a conspicuous minority. They were fishing the small fishes. They loved to catch smelt, which they dried and ate, and shrimp and so forth. So they were just an easy target. You blame an undefendable minority for your problems.

NARRATOR: In fact, the Chinese were only one of the many contributors to what, by the end of the century, was an undeniable decline of the fishery of San Francisco Bay.

MOYLE: Virtually every fish that was catchable in the estuary was fished ... and fished pretty heavily.