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Responsibility

U.S. West Coast abalones listed at risk of extinction on the IUCN Red List

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By Responsible Seafood Advocate

Climate change, kelp forest loss and overfishing threaten West Coast abalones

All seven of the abalone species that populate the U.S. West Coast are now listed as critically endangered or endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) **Red List** (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/>) of Threatened Species. These listings were based on an assessment conducted by a University of California, Davis researcher.

IUCN listed six abalone species – red, white, black, green, pink and flat – as critically endangered. The northern abalone, also known as threaded or pinto abalone, is listed as endangered.

The IUCN Red List is considered the world's most comprehensive inventory of the global conservation status of species. While the listing does not carry a legal requirement to aid imperiled species, it helps guide and inform global conservation and funding priorities.

“We hope this listing will highlight the dire status of these species,” said Laura Rogers-Bennett, lead researcher and a senior environmental scientist at the University of California, Davis. “I hope this assessment will trigger a real concern and investment in these species now before the population numbers get so low that they’re really hard to bring back from the brink of extinction.”



All seven of the United States' abalones that live on the West Coast are now listed as critically endangered or endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Photo courtesy of the University of California, Davis.



(<http://penverproducts.com>).

Abalones have long provided nourishment, cultural significance and ecological benefits for people, wildlife and the environment. Red abalones have been a mainstay of West Coast shellfish aquaculture industry with a recreational diving fishery in Northern California. But abalones are in decline through overexploitation, disease and climate change.



Aquaculture Exchange: George S. Lockwood

With his book, “Aquaculture: Will it Rise to Its Potential to Feed the World?” hot off the presses, the pioneer abalone farmer vents on U.S. aquaculture regulations but remains deeply optimistic about fish farming.



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Along the West Coast, these giant sea snails with their iridescent shells have been hit particularly hard by overfishing, the decline of the kelp forest, warming ocean temperatures and other impacts.

Rogers-Bennett said restoring kelp forests and reducing climate impacts are key to helping abalone recover. Kelp is their main food source, and its decline is intricately linked with theirs. When weakened by starvation, species are more susceptible to environmental changes like landslides following fires, ocean acidification and increased storms.

“These populations’ vulnerabilities have increased due to climate change, and that’s what’s pushed them into threatened categories on the IUCN Red List,” she said.

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