

The Washington Post
WASHINGTON, D. C.
D. 525,018 SUN. 210,148

FEB 10 1976

By
Outdoors/C. Boyd Pfeiffer

Rock fish Decrease Called Cyclic

A cyclic decline in the rate of rockfish reproduction, more than any chemical pollution of the Chesapeake Bay, has led to the fall-off in fishing there, according to two scientists who study the bay.

Consequently, they say, rock fishing should improve in two to four years, although it likely won't reach the abnormally good levels of mid-1960s through the early 1970s.

Some groups of fishermen have claimed that polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) pollution of the bay has caused sterility in spawning rock and has killed the just-hatched fry. But Dr. Ted S. Y. Koo, chairman of the fisheries department of the University of Maryland's Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, and Dr. John Merriner, head of the ichthyology department of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, have concluded that the decrease in the number of rock is due to a natural dip in the fish's rate of spawning.

Dr. Koo's studies have led him to think that every six years a "dominant-year class" of rock is hatched. The large numbers of fish spawned that year lead to good fishing two to four years later when the fry have grown to the 12- to 16-inch size ideal for both sport and commercial fishing.

Dominant-year classes, according to Dr. Koo, have been spawned in 1952, 1958, 1964 and 1970, and should occur again this year. Thus, rock fishing should continue to be poor until at least 1976 but

then improve, says Dr. Koo.

Dr. Merriner, whose department keeps a close watch on bay pollution, says, "Fluctuations of rockfish in the Chesapeake Bay are caused by environmental factors on the spawning and nursery grounds that affect year-class strength."

Ben Florence, a biologist with the Maryland Fisheries Administration, thinks the excellent fishing cycle now ended was caused by

dominant-year classes plus abnormally large numbers of fish hatched in the normally "off" years of 1961, 1962, and 1966.

Surveys of commercial landings in Maryland confirm this. Catches of rockfish through 1969 were at a peak. By comparison, the 1971 commercial catch was down 2.6 million pounds, the lowest it had been since 1956.

Now the boom in rock fishing is over, the scientists

say, as reproduction trends return to normal levels.

But Dr. Merriner is concerned about the rock and other coastal fishes. He fears that increased sport fishing along the coast plus commercial fishing could adversely affect the future of several species.

Consequently, fishermen and biologists alike should continue to keep watch on the rockfish, especially on the small fish that are the barometers of the future.