



**THE MENDOCINO BEACON**  
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# Don't let sea palms go the way of salmon

By Karina J. Nielsen, Ph.D.

What do sea palms and salmon have in common?

When is the right time to develop regulations that promote sustainable use of species we gather, fish and hunt from wild populations? After it becomes apparent demand is outpacing a species' ability to sustain itself in the face of environmental fluctuations and additional human impacts? Our iconic salmon are so scarce this year the entire fishery was closed. Imagine the headlines if instead we had determined how to fish salmon sustainably, and then managed our use accordingly. We can't go back in time and fix the salmon problem, but we have an opportunity to prevent another iconic albeit less well known species found only along the West Coast of North America (from north of Point Conception to Vancouver Island) from suffering the same fate.

## Community Forum

Commonly called the sea palm, and known to scientists as *Postelsia palmaeformis*, it is unmistakably recognizable: it looks like a miniature palm tree. Sea palm is sold locally at farmers' markets, natural food stores and food co-ops, by Whole Foods and through Websites including those of local gatherers. The demand is met almost exclusively by commercial gathering in Mendocino and Sonoma counties. Sea palm is one of the most economically valuable products in a small but apparently growing market for "wildcrafted sea vegetables."

How is commercial take being managed and is it adequate? California Department of Fish and Game regulations prohibit recreational gathering of sea palm, but commercial gathering is allowed with a \$100 permit for "edible seaweeds" and an obligation to report amount taken (but not by species) and location. Yet when gathered without regard to its biology, as has been observed in the past by CDFG biologists and those exploiting it, it may be quickly decimated.

Why are sea palms so vulnerable? Looking at where they live they

appear invulnerable, growing knee-high in patches on rocks where they bend and rebound with each crashing wave. An annual, they reproduce by shedding spores from their leaf-like fronds that settle within several feet and germinate into microscopic male and female filaments that produce reproductive cells. After fertilization, the few survivors develop into the next generation of sea palms. But here's the rub: cutting a sea palm at its trunk-like base is lethal and if cut before shedding its spores it will never reproduce.

Cutting them this way won't work for long, and reputable gatherers don't use this method. Instead they trim the leaf-like fronds leaving enough so they will re-grow, allowing the possibility of multiple trims per year, and claim this method is sustainable. It may be, but there is no regulation requiring this method be used and until recently no data to support or refute the sustainability claim; you just had to take their word. However, new data are becoming available: sea palms are being intensively studied in a rigorous, peer-reviewed research project funded by California Sea Grant to determine best practices for sustainable use. And the early results are very encouraging: the gatherers are on the right track.

The frond-trimming method done once, early in the season before they produce their spores (when they are most tender and tasty), has negligible impact on subsequent spore production. However, this is not the case when they are trimmed multiple times or even just once after they start to produce spores in mid-late summer. Instead, fronds re-grow more slowly (if at all) and spore production is sharply reduced. It would be wise for sea palm gatherers and CDFG to make good use of this information. Let's not give our sea palms the chance to go the way of salmon when we all know better.

*Karina J. Nielsen is an assistant professor of biology at Sonoma State University, principle investigator for a California Sea Grant funded study on sustainable use of sea palms, and member of the Science Advisory Teams for California's Marine Life Protection Act and Ocean Protection Council.*

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