

A Fisherman's Story

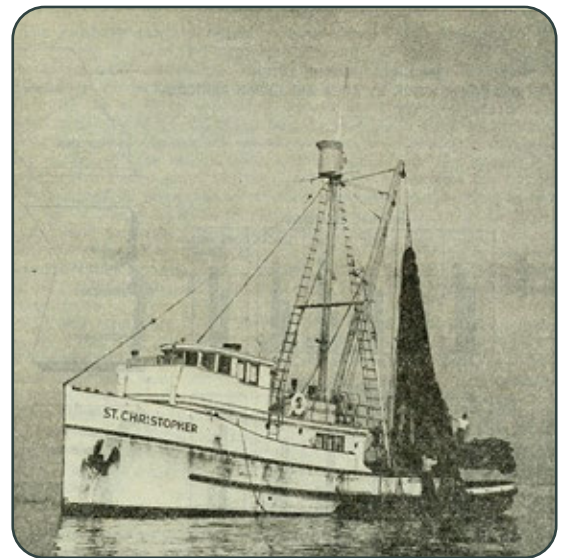
John Rogers grew up in a fishing family. His father owned a boat and supported their family of five by fishing for big fish, mostly tuna, off the California coast. John learned everything about fishing from his father, and it was only natural that he and his two brothers take over the family business when their father was too old to meet the physical demands of being a fisherman. John has seen his job change in many ways over the years, from the type of gear they were allowed to use, to the types and amounts of animals that showed up in their nets.

When John started working on the fishing boats with his family, he was nine years old. He helped out where he could, washing dishes, cleaning the deck, or managing the ropes (called *lines* in boat terms). His favorite thing to do was to be on the lookout for big groups of birds diving down and gathering at the surface of the water because that indicated a big group of fish was just under the water. Whenever this was spotted, they would quickly head over and drop their fishing lines into the water and try to catch as many fish as possible. The first tuna John hooked weighed more than he did, and almost pulled him overboard. Most of their trips lasted a month or more, and they had to preserve their catch with ice. They had to be careful; if the ice melted before they got back to port, they could not sell the fish, and the trip would have been a waste.

In the 1950s, they started fishing with nets. These nets were so specialized that John's father had to buy a special boat to be able to use these new nets. It was worth it. These nets, called purse-seine nets, allowed them to catch a lot more tuna. However, these nets didn't discriminate among types of fish, so they ended up catching dolphins and sharks, too—a lot of them. These animals were usually dead by the time they were pulled up in the nets, but since they were often not able to be sold in the fish markets, they were usually thrown overboard.

Later, changes were made to try and reduce the amount of dolphins and sharks that were accidentally caught in the nets. John remembers being frustrated with these changes and the extra money it meant he and his family had to pay to get new nets. However, he also remembers seeing a decrease in the number of dolphins and sharks caught. As the years went by, he noticed that the number of boats in the area fishing with these nets rose from about 5 to 50. They found they were catching fewer and fewer fish and it was getting hard to support their families. His own sons and daughters chose not to carry on in their father's footsteps, and he eventually sold his boat.

The areas in which commercial and recreational boats catch fish are known as fisheries. Beginning in 1933 in California, captains of fishing boats were required to keep a record of all the fish they caught. These records became known as fisher logs. The logs included not only the fish they were trying to catch, such as tuna, but also the bycatch, or the fish they did not mean to catch, such as sharks. A team of researchers from the Shark Lab at California State University, Long Beach, and the Monterey Bay Aquarium collected data from fisher logs and other sources such as state and federal management agencies, research institution records, and news reports. From these, they built a record of white shark catches in southern California. By analyzing data from these sources, these researchers tried to determine how shark populations have changed through time. Look at the graph of their research.



California Purse Seiner

Image by [California Department of Fish and Game](#) via Flickr.com
[Public Domain]