

# Marine Life in Whatcom County

## ↻ Fish Series ↻

### Rockfish

#### Description:

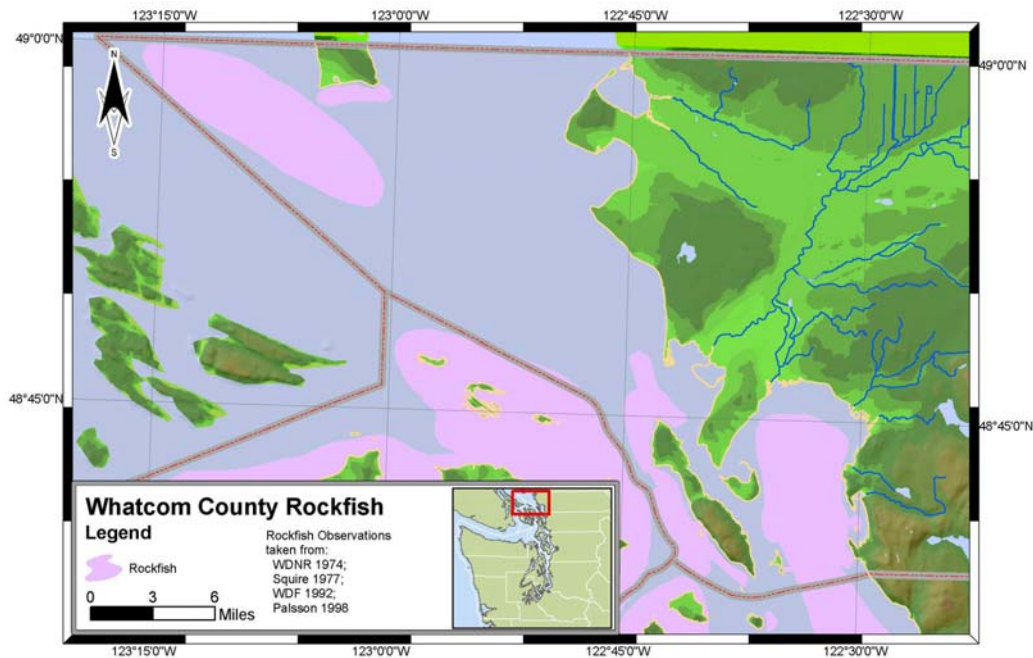
Rockfish (*Scorpaenidae*) are a large family of long-lived, slow-growing fish with large heads and mouths and prominent spiny fins that are mildly poisonous. Shallow water species are generally brown and mottled; deeper water species are generally reddish.



Copper rockfish / Wayne Palsson, WDFW

#### Distribution:

There are over 35 species of rockfish that inhabit waters from Japan to Alaska to northern Baja California. Adult rockfish are found around rocky reefs, walls, slopes, or pinnacles. Copper and quillback rockfish (*Sebastes caurinus* and *S. maliger*) are found in shallow waters, and redstripe rockfish (*S. proriger*) at varying depths. The smaller Puget Sound rockfish (*S. empaeus*) is also found in Whatcom waters. Once settled in suitable habitat, many species migrate very little, staying in the same location most of their lives.



This Whatcom County map shows areas where rockfish have been found. This map is based on data compiled by Washington Department of Natural Resources, *Washington Marine Atlas* (1974); Squire and Smith, *Anglers' guide to the United States Pacific Coast* (1977); Washington Department of Fisheries, *Technical Report 79* (1992); and Palsson et al., *Puget Sound groundfish management plan* (1998). The map was created by People For Puget Sound.



Quillback rockfish / Wayne Palsson, WDFW

**Reproduction:**

Rockfish eggs are internally fertilized and their young are born free swimming. A mature female quillback rockfish gives birth between winter and spring to over half a million young which float on and feed in tidal currents, settling in sheltered bays and inlets. Quillback rockfish live up to 95 years (coppers to 50 years) and become sexually mature after about six years with reproductive capacity increasing with age and size.

**Ecology:**

Rockfish are opportunistic predators feeding on bottom-dwelling crabs, shrimps, and other fish. As they grow, juveniles move from shallow, rocky vegetated areas to the deeper rocky habitats used by adults. Some species like quillback and copper rockfish seldom migrate as adults and, as a result, are easily located and overfished.

**Economic Value:**

Quillback and copper rockfish, once abundant, were an important commercial species harvested as "rockcod." Rockfish are harvested by native tribes for subsistence and cultural purposes and a very limited commercial harvest continues in the Strait of Georgia. A market exists for live rockfish in British Columbia where they are sold at premium prices to Asian eateries. Rockfish are still an important sport fishery, caught by pole and line or speared. Sometimes they are caught inadvertently when salmon fishing.

In the 1970s, sport fishing for bottomfish like rockfish was encouraged by state fisheries managers in lieu of salmon fishing and led to severe overfishing and depletion of the rockfish population.

**Current Status**

- The status of rockfish populations in the Strait of Georgia and San Juan Islands is not clear; however, populations of rockfish in Puget Sound are in depressed condition due to a dramatic decline in abundance or size over the last 25 years.
- Quillback, copper and brown rockfish in Puget Sound were petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act in 1999 but not listed due to the Federal government's judgment that their populations, although declining, were not determined to be distinct from larger Pacific populations.
- Sport fishing limits have been reduced from five rockfish per day to one fish.

**Sources:**

*Protection and Restoration of Marine Life in the Inland Waters of Washington State*, James West

*The Rockfish of the Northeast Pacific*, Milton Love et al.

*Marine Wildlife of Puget Sound, the San Juans, and the Strait of Georgia*, Steve Yates

*2002 Puget Sound Update*, Puget Sound Ambient Monitoring Program

*2002 WDFW Sport Fishing Regulations*

*Marine Resources of Whatcom County*, Anchor Environmental

**For more information:**

Whatcom County Marine Resources Committee  
(360) 676-6876  
<http://whatcom-mrc.wsu.edu/MRC/index.htm>



This fact sheet was funded in part through a cooperative agreement with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of NOAA or any of its sub-agencies.



NORTHWEST STRAITS  
marine conservation initiative