

Morro Bay, California

People and Place

Location

Morro Bay, encompassing 5.2 square miles of land and 5 square miles of surface water, is located along California's coast in San Luis Obispo County. The community lies approximately 213 miles north of Los Angeles and 231 miles south of San Francisco. The geographic coordinates of Morro Bay, California, are: 35°22'39"N, 120°51'03"W.

Demographic Profile

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the population of Morro Bay was 10,350, a 7.1% decrease from the 1990 U.S. Census. In 2000 the gender structure was evenly divided with slightly more females (52.3%) than males (47.7%). The median age in 2000 was 45.7, ten years higher than the national median of 35.3 for the same year. According to the same data, the age structure of Morro Bay was relatively evenly distributed with 17.4% between the ages of 0 and 19, 50.4% between the ages of 22 and 59, and 24.2% of the population was 65 or over. For the population 18 years and over, 89.6% had a high school education or higher, 25.0% had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, and 9.4% earned a graduate or professional degree. The highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma or equivalency for 24.3% of the population, which is significantly higher than the national average of 13.2%. In 2000, 69.2% of the population lived in family households.

The 2000 U.S. Census shows that the racial composition was predominantly White (89.4%) and Asian (1.8%). Black or African American, American Indian and Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander each constituted less than one percent of the population. Overall, 4.1% classified themselves as belonging to some other race and 2.9% of the population identified themselves with two or more races. A total of 11.4% of the population identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Approximately 7.2% of the population was foreign-born, a high percentage of those coming from Mexico.

History

Morro Bay took its name from Morro Rock, an ancient landmark towering 576 feet above the entrance to the Bay. Morro rock is one of nine extinct volcanic peaks which run in a straight line for 12 miles. In 1542 Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo dubbed the rock "the Gibraltar of the Pacific" and Spanish galleons sailing the coast used Morro Rock to identify Morro Bay's safe harbor. The town of Morro Bay was founded in 1870 and a wharf was built, soon to become the bustling "Embarcadero." The town grew quickly as schooners flocked to the Embarcadero for trade in wool, dairy products, potatoes, and barley. Boats entered the harbor through channels on the north and south sides of the rock, but these entrances were dangerous due to erratic winds and surging tides. This resulted in competition from nearby Port Cayucos. Many ships called at this deep water port rather than face the dangers of Morro Bay's entrance. By the 1930s Morro Bay had developed as a community, and attention was turned towards improving the harbor. Quarrying on Morro Rock itself provided the materials for a jetty closing the north entrance of the harbor and a breakwater protecting the south entrance. The south channel was then dredged, resulting in a safe entrance to Morro Bay.

The Embarcadero bustled as commercial fishermen soon began landing vast catches of albacore, cod, and salmon. By 1939 Morro Bay's population had soared to 400, and a year later

the U.S. Navy began operations there. The facilities fell into disrepair shortly after WW II. In 1968 Morro Rock was designated as a State Historical Landmark and is now protected against any human alterations.¹ In the 1940s an abalone fishing industry developed in and around Morro Bay. Although abalone stocks have dramatically declined, Morro Bay remains a significant fishing port with landings of halibut, rockfish, sole, and other species. The community now combines the fishing industry with coastal tourism.²

Coastal Chumash Indians had settlements in and around the Morro Bay area. Chumash hunters, fishermen, and foragers fully exploited their marine, coastal, and river resources. In unique redwood-planked boats, known as *tomols*, they regularly transported resources from their offshore islands to the mainland. These mariners imported specialized stone blades and drills manufactured on the islands, plus marine resources such as shark, bonito, and halibut. Chumash fishermen used a variety of nets, traps, baskets, hooks, spears, and plant poisons to catch or stun fish and catch seals and sea otters. On the coast they collected abalone and mussels, and the Chumash trade network passed raw marine materials such as fish, whale bones, and oils to the interior.

Portuguese conquistador Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo first encountered the Chumash in 1542, but it was not until 1772 that five Catholic missions were established within the Chumash Nation. After the secularization of the missions in 1833, the Chumash population fell into severe decline. In 1901 the U.S. government allocated 75 acres along Zanja de Cota Creek near Mission Santa Ynez to the surviving Chumash community. Today the Chumash have their own business council, a thriving bingo operation, and a federal housing program on their small reservation. There are approximately 5000 people who now proudly identify themselves as Chumash Indians.³

Today Morro Bay State Park features a natural bay habitat and lagoon. The Park has opportunities for birding, fishing, hiking, and sailing. The park museum features exhibits on both natural (geology/oceanography) and cultural (Native American) features of the area. The park also has a small marina and a pristine marsh that supports a flourishing bird population.⁴ Along the waterfront Embarcadero tourists will find the Morro Bay Aquarium. This family-owned, non-profit aquarium was built in the 1960s, and became a rehabilitation center for marine mammals in 1984. It currently features a harbor seal and three sea lions, as well as 14 tanks filled with local marine life.⁵

Tourism is an important component of the contemporary economy of Morro Bay. The Morro Bay Harbor Festival is an annual celebration of the Central Coast's unique food, wine, lifestyle and working waterfront. The festival actively promotes an appreciation of waterfront heritage and resources, while building community pride and a shared commitment in making Morro Bay's harbor a commercial stronghold. The festival offers food, drink, music and numerous marine and harbor-oriented educational activities. "Since its inception, a primary goal of the festival has been to... focus public awareness on the special value of Morro Bay's harbor and its environment."⁶

Infrastructure

Current Economy

The City of Morro Bay is the largest employer in the area.⁷ According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 49.7% of the potential labor force was employed and there was a 3.8% unemployment rate (calculated by dividing the unemployed population by the labor force). A total of 48.3% of the population over the age of 16 were not in the labor force. In 2000 approximately 21.8%

worked in “Educational, health and social services” while 14.8% worked in “Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services.” The local, state, or federal government employed a total of 24.5% of the civilian population in 2000; however none were reported as working in the “Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and mining” industries. Only 3.7% of the employed civilian population over the age of 16 was involved in “Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting” according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

Morro Bay’s per capita income in 1999 was \$21,687 according to the U.S. Census, while the median household income was \$34,379. In 1999 a total of 13.0% of the population was below the poverty level. This is comparable to the national average of 12.4% for the same time period. In 2000 there were 6,251 housing units in Morro Bay, 79.8% of which were occupied, 20.2% were vacant. Of the occupied housing units, 55.6% were owner occupied and 44.4% were renter occupied. Over three-quarters (77.5%) of the vacant housing units were for “seasonal, recreational, or occasional” use.

Governance

In 1964 Morro Bay became a general law city and elected its first 5-member City Council. The City is still governed by the Council including the Mayor, a City Manager who carries out Council policies, and three additional members. Morro Bay has a 7.25% sales and use tax rate. San Luis Obispo County levies a 9.0% lodging tax rate, which earned the County \$4,229,463 in revenue for the 2000-2001 fiscal year.⁸

California state law assesses commercial vessels, charter boats, and oceanographic research vessels at 4% of their full cash value.⁹ Vessels registered in California with either the Department of Motor Vehicles or the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) are assessed property taxes by the county tax collector where it is moored.¹⁰ Some commercial vessels are also subject to a Ballast Water Management Fee of about \$500 per voyage.¹¹ California levies a fuel tax of \$0.18 per gallon, a portion of which goes toward marine safety and education programs and boating facility administration and development.¹²

The State of California levies landing taxes that must be paid by fishermen and fish processors involved in the retail sale of fish products. These taxes vary by species and range between \$.0013 and \$.0125 per pound of fish.¹³ The California Department of Agriculture also administers two commodity commissions, the California Salmon Council and the California Sea Urchin Commission, which charge fees for marketing and lobbying on behalf of fishermen involved in these specific fisheries.¹⁴

A California Department of Fish and Game Marine Region Field Office and a U.S. Coast Guard station are located in Morro Bay. Foster City, approximately 211 miles away, is the nearest city that holds Pacific Fisheries Management Council meetings. The nearest National Marine Fisheries office is over 200 miles away.

Facilities

Morro Bay is located northeast of San Luis Obispo on U.S. Highway 1. San Luis County Regional Airport is about 19 miles from Morro Bay. The nearest major international airports are in Los Angeles and San Francisco, 213 and 231 miles respectively.

The public school system in Morro Bay consists of two elementary schools and one high school. Water and sewer services are supplied to area residents by the City of Morro Bay Public Works Department. Public safety is provided by the Morro Bay Police Department and health

services are administered by three hospitals that are within about 15 miles of Morro Bay. There are over two dozen inns and hotels in Morro Bay.

The Morro Bay Marina has 24 moorings, 16 slips, and offers a variety of services for recreational vessels. The Morro Bay Yacht Club offers an additional six mooring balls and a 150-foot dock for transient yachts. The City of Morro Bay manages the Morro Bay Harbor. The harbor stretches along 1½ miles of coast and was originally built as base around WWII. There is a rich history of abalone harvesting and shark fishing in Morro Bay. Fishing, both recreational and commercial, has always been the nucleus of the port, but today the port primarily draws tourists for recreational fishing. The harbor has 150 off-shore moorings, approximately 50 slips for commercial vessels, and roughly 400 berths.¹⁵ The commercial slips are subsidized by the City of Morro Bay. The Morro Bay Commercial Fisherman's organization has received two grants from the Santa Barbara County Fisheries Enhancement Fund in order to "asphalt two areas for storing fishing equipment and repairing nets at the Morro Bay harbor" and to "upgrade computer system of offshore weather patterns and water temperatures."¹⁶ Additional moorage is available at Morro Bay State Park's small marina.

Morro Bay is home to additional marine-related organizations and facilities. The Morro Bay National Estuaries Program encompasses the principle wetland system on south central coast of California. This estuary serves a critical environmental function and provides the eelgrass beds and wetlands that serve as a habitat for a number of migratory birds and nursery for juvenile off-shore marine fish. There are a number of community organizations in Morro Bay, including Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization. An aquaculture facility is also based in Morro Bay, specializing in pacific oysters, bay mussels, and manila clams.

Involvement in West Coast Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Landings were delivered to Morro Bay by 249 commercial vessels in 2000. In the same year, landings in Morro Bay were made in the following West Coast fisheries (data shown represents landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing): coastal pelagic (173.6 t/\$42,462/8), crab (1.8 t/\$5779/17), groundfish (157.3 t/\$839,790/134), highly migratory species (592.5 t/\$1,507,833/94), salmon (154.8 t/\$573,072/70), shrimp (69 t/\$1,104,912/16), and other species (21 t/\$64,943/80).

There were 62 commercial vessels owned by Morro Bay residents in 2000, 31 of them participated in the Federally Managed Groundfish fishery. Morro Bay had five vessels participate in the 2003 Groundfish Vessels Buyback Program. According to recorded data the number of vessels owned by Morro Bay residents in 2000 that participated in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: crab (0/0/7), groundfish (0/0/NA), highly migratory species (NA/0/NA), salmon (0/0/28), shellfish (NA/0/NA), shrimp (NA/0/5), and other species (2/0/0).¹⁷

In 2000, six federal groundfish permits were held by six community members. In the same year, recorded data indicates that the number of Morro Bay residents holding permits in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: coastal pelagic (0/0/5), crab (0/0/6), groundfish (0/0/41), highly migratory species (NA/0/14), salmon (0/1/42), shellfish (0/0/NA), shrimp (2/1/21), and other species (0/1/59).¹⁸

According to available data, there were at least 292 commercial fishing permits registered to Morro Bay residents in 2000. Of those, 286 were registered state permits. Recorded data indicates that the number of state permits held by Morro Bay residents in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: coastal pelagic (0/0/11), crab (0/0/6), groundfish (0/0/50), highly

migratory species (NA/0/28), salmon (0/1/76), shellfish (0/0/NA), shrimp (2/1/35), and other species (0/5/71).¹⁹

All large commercial processors have left Morro Bay, and landings are usually taken to processors in nearby Atascadero or Salinas. According to an employee of the Morro Bay Harbor Department, the commercial fishing culture of Morro Bay is rapidly disappearing.²⁰

Sportfishing

A number of charter vessels operate out of Morro Bay targeting albacore tuna, rock cod, salmon, and other species. Many of these charter vessels also offer seasonal whale watching tours. In 2002, at least 36 charter businesses serviced sport fishermen and tourists in Morro Bay; by 2003 that number had dropped to 27. There are two license agents selling sportfishing licenses in Morro Bay. In 2000 San Luis Obispo County residents purchased: 43,399 resident sportfishing licenses, 40 nonresident sportfishing licenses, 52 sport salmon punch cards, and 30 abalone report cards. In the port group consisting of Avila Beach and Morro Bay, 12 commercial passenger fishing vessels served 17,759 anglers in 2000. These vessels reported 123,441 landings composed of more than a dozen species. Rockfish (unspecified) and Albacore tuna accounted for 93.9% and 4.6% of the landings respectively.

Subsistence

Local tribal and nontribal community members might be engaged in subsistence fishing in the Morro Bay area. However, specific information on subsistence fishing in Morro Bay is not discussed in detail in this Community Profile due to the lack of available data. The California Department of Fish and Game uses the term “recreational” to refer to fishermen that do not earn revenue from their catch but rather fish for pleasure and/or to provide food for personal consumption. Therefore information on subsistence fishing in California is captured, to some degree, within the above sportfishing data.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

In 2000 there was one vessel owned by a Morro Bay resident that participated in North Pacific fisheries. This vessels made landings in the North Pacific salmon fishery, but specific information (landings in metric tons/value of landings) is confidential.

Four Morro Bay residents worked as crewmembers aboard vessels involved in North Pacific fisheries in 2000. In the same year, one community resident held a single state permit (salmon Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission permit) for Alaska fisheries.

Sportfishing

While the majority of the charter boats in Morro Bay target West Coast fisheries, 19 Morro Bay community members purchased Alaska sportfishing licenses in 2000.

¹ Ernest & Allen internet advertising. 1997. History of Morro Bay, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.morrobay.com/History/index.asp> (access date - September 2004).

² WorldHistory.com. 2004. Morro Bay, California, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.worldhistory.com/wiki/M/Morro-Bay,-California.htm> (access date - September 2004).

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- ³ Houghton Mifflin Company. No Date. Encyclopedia of North American Indians: Chumash, [Online]. Available: URL: http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/naind/html/na_007400_chumash.htm (access date - September 2004).
- ⁴ State of California. 2004. Morro Bay State Park, [Online]. Available: URL: http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=594 (access date - September 2004).
- ⁵ Ernest & Allen. 1998. Morro Bay Aquarium, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.morrobay.com/morrobayaquarium/> (access date - September 2004).
- ⁶ Morro Bay Harbor Festival. 2004. Morro Bay Harbor Festival, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.mbhf.com/> (access date - September 2004).
- ⁷ City of Morro Bay Harbor Department employee. Morro Bay, California. Pers. commun. 21 September 2004.
- ⁸ State of California. 2004. California Counties Transient Lodging Tax Revenue, [Online]. Available URL: <http://www.sco.ca.gov/ard/local/locrep/adhoc/county/0001cotranslodgtax.pdf> (access date - July 2004).
- ⁹ State of California Board of Equalization. No date. Property Tax Rules, Rule 151. Vessels Subject to the Four Percent Assessment, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.boe.ca.gov/proptaxes/pdf/r151.pdf> (access date - July 2004).
- ¹⁰ California Department of Motor Vehicles. 2003. How to register a vessel, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.dmv.ca.gov/boatsinfo/boatreg.htm#how> (access date - July 2004).
- ¹¹ State of California Board of Equalization. 2004. Ballast Water Management Fee, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.boe.ca.gov/sptaxprog/bllstweb12.htm> (access date - July 2004).
- ¹² U.S. Department of Transportation. 2001. Provisions Governing the Distribution of State Motor Fuel Tax Receipts: California, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hwytaxes/2001/california.htm> (access date - July 2004).
- ¹³ State of California. No date. Fish and Game Code Section 8040-8070, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycod?section=fgc&group=08001-8070> (access date - July 2004).
- ¹⁴ State of California Department of Agriculture. 2004. List of Marketing Programs, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.cdafa.ca.gov/mkt/mkt/mktbrds.html> (access date - July 2004).
- ¹⁵ Pacific State Marine Fisheries Commission. No Date. California State Counties, [Online]. Available: URL: http://www.psmfc.org/efin/docs/communities_2004/communities_pages65_84.pdf (access date - September 2004).
- ¹⁶ County of Santa Barbara. 2004. Fisheries Enhancement Fund, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.countyofsb.org/energy/mitigation/fef.asp> (access date - November 2004).
- ¹⁷ 'NA' refers to data which was not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.
- ¹⁸ 'NA' refers to data which was not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.
- ¹⁹ 'NA' refers to data which was not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.
- ²⁰ City of Morro Bay Harbor Department employee. Morro Bay, California. Pers. commun. 21 September 2004.