

Prized sea snail not at risk of extinction, federal officials say

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The National Marine Fisheries Services has decided not to grant federal protection to the pinto abalone, a prized six-inch sea snail whose population has severely declined in Northern California.

The federal agency's decision is in response to separate petitions submitted last year by a pair of conservation groups that requested that the sea snail be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The pinto abalone is considered a treasure on the West Coast.

The sea snail's mottled red and green mother-of-pearl shell is used for decorative purposes while its large muscular foot is a culinary delicacy.

The national fisheries agency said a team of experts evaluated the pinto abalone's status and assessed its risk of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of the species' range, which stretches from Alaska to Baja California.

"Over-harvest and inadequate enforcement has impacted the abundance and [population growth](#) of wild populations, but not to the point that the species is likely at risk of extinction now or in the foreseeable future," the agency said in a statement.

The agency's conclusion is a setback for conservationists who hoped a federal protection would provide long-term relief for the pinto abalone.

"While I'm still reviewing the decision, it is discouraging," said Brad Sewell, a senior attorney for the National Resource Diversity Center, which submitted a petition. "I don't know if the agency is going to wait until the species nears extinction, and if that's the case it's a poor strategy."

The [sea snail](#) once supported commercial, recreational and aboriginal fisheries along the coast, including Canada and Alaska.

But climate change, ocean acidification and poachers have decimated the population, conservationists say.

"The pinto abalone has virtually disappeared from its historical range in Northern California and is declining in its Southern California range," the Center for Biological Diversity wrote in its August 2013 petition.

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