

OUR OPINION: Sea otters or more oil drilling?

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Imagine the welcome sight of sea otters off Stearns Wharf. Beyond the dollars from the tourist draw, otter colonies off our coast could be a boon to fish populations. Sea urchins feed off kelp. But if otters are here to control urchins, more kelp forests will come back to provide habitats for fish.

But unfortunately, Santa Barbara City Hall has a shameful history when it comes to these marine mammals. The city in the past has supported the federal government's no-otter zone south of Point Conception.

Otters ignore the nonsensical rule, with 90 to 100 living south of the point. Considered "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, people should be taking every action possible to help otters reclaim the territories where they once thrived before humans hunted them to near extinction.

Much of the public debate about otters has centered on their competition with commercial urchin hunters. But the bigger threat to the otters may be oil companies that want nothing to interfere with putting more rigs off Santa Barbara and Ventura.

For the time being, with the Bush administration in power, there's real risk of increased drilling in federal waters. Oil companies want to keep the no-otter zone in place as long as possible.

Why? Because proposals to drill north of the point would need to review the impact on sea otters. But because the otters under the law aren't supposed to be south of the point, the legalities are such that the oil industry could have an easier time gaining approvals for new drilling here.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Ventura has prepared an environment document that could lead the way for the elimination of the no-otter zone. But, reportedly, behind-the-scenes politicking in Congress and the Interior Department has held up its release. A Ventura office spokeswoman wouldn't directly answer whether the agency actually had printed up hundreds of copies of the document, only to have them yanked at the last minute.

Once the government finally releases the report, part of the discussion will include declaring an otter experiment on San Nicolas Island a failure, which, in turn, could lead to the elimination of the no-otter zone.

Officials in the late '80s moved 140 otters to this southern Channel Island to establish a colony protected from major oil spills elsewhere. Many died, some swam back to Monterey and San Luis Obispo counties, and 70 simply disappeared. Just 14 stayed. Thirty-two live there today.

The San Nicolas translocation plan was part of a 20-year-old deal that included creating the no-otter zone south of Point Conception. But times and circumstances have changed -- and the government should no longer link the two.

A spokesman for Rep. Duncan Hunter, an inland San Diego congressman, confirms that his office asked the Fish and Wildlife Service to delay release of the environmental document until the agency is sure that the report contains the "most accurate and reliable information" on the relocation program. For his part, Mr. Hunter's office says the congressman made the request after contacts with a lobbyist representing constituents in the sea urchin industry, not one with ties to oil interests.

In any case, the environmental choice couldn't be more clear. The return of sea otters or more oil drilling?

Otters, of course.