

Restore otters, clean water

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Voice from Santa Barbara: Robert M. Ferris

Otter habitat is polluted with harmful chemicals. Otters are infected by feline viruses passed to them by flushable kitty litter and they face parasites growing in the shoreline soup brewed by human activity. When we were children, many of us had goldfish as pets. We learned early that if we kept the water and bowl clean and clear, the fish lived. If not, the fish died.

We should remember and hold dear this simple lesson in habitat management as we contemplate the fate of southern sea otters. The Community Environmental Council agrees strongly with the News-Press that otters should be allowed and encouraged back into their historic haunts. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must release the long-awaited Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement immediately and should call the translocation experiment what it is -- a failure.

At the same time, our community must recognize that we need to do more than just put an end to the otter-free zone if otters are to survive here. We need to keep their "bowl" clean and clear. The biology here is pretty simple:

All critters need abundant, high-quality habitat to survive. All.

Otters seem to have abundant habitat -- certainly what they had in historic times. Yet more than 70 years after their "rediscovery," their numbers still hover at or around 10 percent of their former glory.

What gives?

The answer is that otter habitat is polluted with a number of harmful chemicals, as well as concentrations of nutrients well above natural levels. What's more, otters are becoming infected by feline viruses that are being passed to them through our use of flushable kitty litter.

Otters also are bombarded by parasites growing in the shoreline soup brewed by human activity. Who's at fault? We all are. The mental bumper sticker we should all keep in mind: Sea otter habitat begins in our back yard.

Of course, it won't be as easy as a seven-word slogan. For otters to really survive here, we need to take several actions.

First, we have to communicate our desires to have otters south of the Bight to federal authorities coming to town for field hearings on the SEIS.

Second, we need to work with shell fishermen and others with real or perceived issues to look for ways to mitigate actual impacts or thoughtfully facilitate career transition. We should benefit from experiences up north where sea otters are occasionally shot by folks who fear or hate them and are ignorant of the otter's beneficial impact on nearshore habitats. Three years ago, a male sea otter was found shot near Hendry's Beach indicating that sea otter fear and loathing is as alive in our region as it is up north -- and likely for the same reasons.

Third, we need to tell the sea otter's story. Yes, sea otters eat urchins and other shellfish -- but as a result, ecologically and economically important kelp forests thrive. Regardless of whether otters are called keystone species or whatever the term du jour, they play a similar role as their terrestrial relatives the wolves. Both animals in a sense are stewards of their respective forests; keeping grazers and browsers from overwhelming tall stands of vegetation.

Fourth, we need to raise awareness about the issue.

The City Council is in the process of writing a proclamation about otters in preparation for celebrating the

third annual Sea Otter Awareness Week at the end of September. This would be an excellent time for us to become better acquainted with the critter that could become our new neighbor.

And lastly, we -- all of us -- need to better manage our water and waterways. We have to treat water with more respect and distance ourselves utterly from the dictum: The solution to pollution is dilution. Dilution is not the answer, prevention is, and we need to simultaneously stem the flow of harmful chemicals from our agricultural operations, water treatment facilities, streets and rooftops. And we have to restore the natural function of coastal habitats, creeks, wetlands and watersheds so that sea otters find clean water and functioning habitats as they pack their bags and move south.

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