

Agency Seeks to Lift Otter Ban

Federal biologists call for ending efforts to keep them out of Southland waters. They compete with lobster and urchin fishermen.

By Sara Lin, LA Times Staff Writer

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After 18 years of failed attempts to keep sea otters out of most Southern California waters at the behest of fishermen, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday recommended abandoning the effort, saying the move would benefit the threatened species.

The agency also called for ending a program to relocate sea otters from Monterey Bay to San Nicolas Island, 60 miles off the Southern California coast. The program was meant to foster a new population of southern sea otters, but most of the relocated otters left the island, many taking up residence nearer the coast.

"The underlying message is, otters don't stay where we put them," said Greg Sanders, southern sea otter recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"From all we can tell, they all swam away," Sanders said.

Some swam more than 200 miles through shark-infested waters back to Monterey Bay. Others headed toward forbidden waters off the nearby Southern California coast.

Historically, California sea otters could be found as far south as Baja California. They numbered about 16,000 in the 1800s. The otters were nearly wiped out by 19th century fur traders, but about 50 survived in a remote cove off Big Sur. In 1977, they were declared a federally protected species. Today, there are about 2,700 California otters. The population has held steady in recent years.

Fears that a major oil spill could devastate the remaining population led federal scientists in 1987 to try to create a reserve population by moving 140 of the otters from the Central Coast to San Nicolas Island.

At the same time, federal officials struck a deal with fishermen who were angry about the crafty mammals dining on urchins and lobster. Congress designated Southern California waters an otter-free zone, and federal biologists promised to round up otters that strayed into waters south of Point Conception in Santa Barbara County.

Capturing an otter that strayed out of bounds was a daunting task. Divers wearing specialized equipment would sneak up on an otter while it was asleep. Although many were captured and relocated north, it is not possible to prevent them from swimming back south.

"Sea otters can't recognize lines across the water," said Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project. "To think that somehow we could whistle and they would come and jump into our nets so they could pleasantly be put back where they came from was just a crazy idea to begin with."

"You just can't tell a sea otter where to go," he said.

After finding dead otters washed ashore with bullet wounds, federal officials suspected that some fishermen took matters into their own hands.

For years, sea otter advocates and researchers have urged federal biologists to end the relocation. Defenders of Wildlife, an environmental group, recently issued a report that said that allowing sea otters back into their historical habitat in Southern California would help the population grow.

"Bringing sea otters back to Southern California will not only help put sea otters firmly on the road to recovery, it will also benefit our coastal communities" by attracting tourists, said Jim Curland, a spokesman for the environmental group.

Under the draft plan released Wednesday, federal officials said the remaining 30 otters at San Nicolas Island would be left alone and others that live along the mainland would be allowed to naturally expand their territory down the coast.

Fishermen said the plan to open the otter-free zone does nothing to address the real threats to otters such as pollution, including cat litter that makes its way into coastal waters from sewers.

"The pollution is the culprit; it is not fishermen," said Peter Halmay, president of the Sea Urchin Harvesters Assn. of California. "But to do something about the pollution will take mobilizing the people of the state of California. It's much easier for them ... to paint fishermen into a corner."

Likewise, Bruce Steele, who has been an urchin diver for 30 years, wasn't surprised.

"The problem with otter politics is that it's either 'heads, I win' or 'tails, you lose,' " Steele said. "It really wasn't our fault that the otters had the problems they've had.

"There's not many of us. It's a lot easier to whack somebody weak than to really take care of your problems," he added.

The public may comment on the new plan until January.