

Otters may win 'right' to roam Translocation has failed because the animals swim wherever they want

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Try telling a sea otter where it can and can't swim. It probably won't listen.

That's one reason the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to end the California sea otter relocation program, which starting in 1987 moved 140 Southern sea otters to a separate colony on San Nicolas Island in the Channel Islands and established a no-otter zone extending from Point Conception to Mexico.

The purpose of the program was to develop a reserve of otters in case something happened to their counterparts farther up the coast, while designating an area where fishermen could hunt for sea urchins without worrying about competition from the otters.

The problem is that the sea otters didn't follow the plan: Over the past 18 years, many of the San Nicolas otters left the island and ventured into the no-otter zone.

On Wednesday, the Fish and Wildlife Service released a draft supplement to its environmental impact statement outlining three general options for the program: maintain it as it is, reduce the size of the no-otter zone, or drop the plan entirely.

The agency is backing the third option.

"We believe that continuing the translocation program will not promote recovery of the species," said Steve Thompson, manager of the Fish and Wildlife Service's California office.

The growth rate of the California sea otter population declined by 3.2 percent last year, said Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, a group campaigning to terminate the no-otter zone.

"To ensure a sustainable sea otter population in the future, we need to allow sea otters to expand their range without forcing them to live in one spot or another," said Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel.

Only 30 members of the original colony remain on San Nicolas. One hundred otters are living in the no-otter zone. Many of the original "reserve" colony simply swam back north to join the 2,700 otters that trawl the coastal waters between Half Moon Bay and Point Conception. Meanwhile, animals not in the experimental population are venturing south into the no-otter area.

Some of those have pups, said Shimek.

"It's time for the zone to go away," he added. "What we've got is sea otters struggling to recover. It's crazy not to let them do that."

He added that if the measure does not pass, any otters found in the zone would be transported north, where they could disrupt local populations in places like Monterey.

"The solution is range expansion," Shimek said.

If the agency terminates the program, otters will have free range all the way to Baja, and all of them will be considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Right now, the otters at San Nicolas and in the waters south of Point Conception are not covered by the Endangered Species Act, said Shimek.

One potential concern associated with abolishing the no-otter zone is how the measure will affect sea urchin fishermen.

The problem? Sea otters love to eat sea urchins, so they compete with fishermen for supplies. "I'm opposed to opening it up," said Robert Juntz, president of the Sea Urchin Processors' Association of California, of the no-otter zone. "It's a raw deal for the commercial fishing industry."

But Juntz said getting rid of the zone would make little difference to sea urchin fishermen because otters who decided to move south of Point Conception in the past were usually not relocated. The situation has gotten out of control, he said, and that's why the agency wants to terminate the program.

"It's too late now," Juntz said. "They realize it's an impossible task."

Lois Grunwald, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Agency, said the agency wants to hear what the public thinks of the recommendation.

"We're looking forward to receiving public comments," she said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service will listen to discussion on the matter until January, then make a final decision sometime next year, said Grunwald.

A public hearing will be held Nov. 3 at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.