

## **New waters for sea otters**

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U.S. report urges ending no-go zone for creatures  
Fishermen concerned about plan

Sea otters should be free to bob around in Santa Barbara County waters, the federal government recommends.

Currently, the area south of Point Conception is a no-go zone for the threatened animals, but a long-awaited report released Wednesday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concludes the geographic restriction is part of a recovery program that's not helping and should be abandoned.

While the proposal is welcome news for otter advocates, it angers urchin and abalone fishermen, who struck a deal with federal officials in the 1980s. In return for moving some otters to San Nicholas Island -- to create a backup population to guard against a catastrophe in another area -- officials agreed in 1987 to make the coast south of Point Conception an otter-free zone.

That way, human harvesters wouldn't have to compete with otters for their catch.

For several years, any otters that paddled into the no-go zone were scooped up and moved north, but translocations were halted in 1993 after officials deemed them too risky.

Meanwhile, efforts to establish an otter population on San Nicolas Island fared poorly. Of the 140 animals moved there, 13 died, several strayed into the no-otter zone and several dozen disappeared. Currently, about 30 animals remain on the island, and the study released Wednesday recommends they be allowed to stay.

Greg Sanders, who coordinates the sea otter recovery plan for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said stopping the program is the "best and the only reasonable choice."

A couple of years ago, the agency recommended in a new recovery plan that the no-otter zone be abolished; since then, staff has completed a study of the alternatives.

"The otter translocation program not only hasn't worked," Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, said in a statement Wednesday, "but it has jeopardized this threatened species."

Urchin and abalone harvesters, though, are concerned and disappointed by the recommendation.

Federal officials are "walking away from an agreement," said Bruce Steele, who's harvested urchins in Santa Barbara waters for more than 30 years and helped negotiate with the Fish and Wildlife Service over the otter translocation program. He would like to see some kind of compromise reached -- perhaps that otters be allowed to expand beyond their current range but still be excluded from some of the most important shellfish fisheries.

"To lose the islands would be basically to lose the whole game," Mr. Steele said. "We try to take care of our own resource, but when the otters come in, they take over."

Although biologists and otter advocates acknowledged fishermen's concerns, they said the animals won't be massing in Santa Barbara waters anytime soon.

While otters are a common sight in the waters just south of Point Conception, Mr. Sanders said, "We're not expecting to see these huge groups of animals showing up off of Leadbetter Beach."

"Sea otter recovery is slow," added Steve Shimek, executive director of The Otter Project, a nonprofit group based in Marina. "There's going to be adjustment, time for adaptation. No one's going to go out of business overnight. . . . The sea urchin fishermen feel that the otters will outcompete them. That's going to take 50 to 100 years."

At the end of the day, Mr. Sanders said, "It's a recovery program, not a fisherman's protection program." Centuries ago, there were between 12,000 and 20,000 of the animals all along the California coast, but they were hunted nearly to extinction for their plush fur in the 1700s and 1800s. Southern sea otters now number about 2,700, Mr. Sanders said.

Although the population has crept up in recent years, he said "we're still concerned" -- particularly because many of the otters found dead on San Nicolas Island were animals in their prime reproductive years. Biologists haven't found a single cause for the deaths, but they're concerned about disease, pollution and possibly a limited food supply.

Even though abolishing the no-otter zone "doesn't make otters breed faster, it doesn't solve the issue of pollution, it does allow sea otters to recover" by letting them expand their range, Mr. Shimek said.

Kim Delfino, California program director for the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife, said a more widely distributed population would also help protect the animals against the devastation of an oil spill or some other catastrophe -- the goal of the translocation program.

Mr. Shimek said the return of otters may also benefit other commercially fished species that depend on healthy kelp forests.

Without otters to control them, "sea urchins are overrunning these kelp forests and eating all the kelp" -- which provides shelter for rockfish and other species.

"If you bring sea otters back, you end up with healthy productive kelp forests that would support more fish," Mr. Shimek said. "We're not talking about the elimination of commercial fishery. We're talking about change."

Otter proponents said the animals may also be a boon for tourism.

A study released last week by Defenders of Wildlife concluded that if sea otters were allowed to range south of Point Conception, they would generate millions in economic benefits for Santa Barbara and Ventura counties from tourism, recreation and jobs.

In Monterey, where otters are something of an icon, gift shops are stuffed with calendars, cuddly toys and other otter memorabilia, and gaggles of admirers coo at the animals from beachside trails. Ms. Delfino likens otters to "floating teddy bears," and said they'd be just as popular here.

Contemplating the pros and cons, Mr. Shimek said: "We're at a point where we have to make choices. . . . Are we valuing sea otters, healthy kelp forests and finfish, or are we going to value exporting sushi to Japan?"