

Federal experiment to relocate sea otters to remote island fails

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An experimental program to restore California's ravaged sea otter population by establishing a colony on a remote island off Santa Barbara has failed, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which proposed Wednesday to abandon the effort.

The plan, which has long been considered a mistake by otter lovers, created a "no otter zone" over much of Southern California and called for the relocation of the furry creatures to San Nicolas Island. Between 1987 and 1991, 140 otters were captured and placed on San Nicolas, the southernmost of the Channel Islands, but most of them immediately vanished. Only 32 otters remain there today.

"This invisible line we drew in the water isn't recognized by sea otters," said Greg Sanders, the Southern Sea Otter recovery coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "We can't expect to move otters and have them stay where we put them."

The proposal to end the program, outlined in a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement released Wednesday, is likely to face stiff opposition from sea urchin harvesters, who fear competition from the ravenous otters if the "no otter zone" is eliminated.

The Sea Urchin Harvesters Association of California and other fishing industry representatives are already lobbying for an alternative management plan to protect their catch, much of which is sold for sushi in Japan. Sea urchins there can fetch \$60 a pound.

The southern sea otter, or *Enhydra lutris nereis*, has a voracious appetite and particularly likes sea urchins. The otters are the smallest marine mammals in U.S. waters, and their use of tools to break open their food makes them unique.

Thousands of otters once roamed the waters from Alaska's Prince William Sound to Baja California. Unfortunately for them, their soft, thick fur was considered a luxury starting in the late 1700s, and fur hunters killed them by the thousands. By the beginning of the Gold Rush, sea otters were nearly extinct and their pelts were worth more than gold.

They were believed extinct until the 1930s when a small population of about 50 was discovered near Big Sur. The animals have been listed since 1977 as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The San Nicolas plan was proposed in a 1982 Fish and Wildlife Service report called the Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan. It said a large oil spill could kill all the remaining sea otters and proposed creating a reserve population that could ensure survival of the species in the event a catastrophe.

Lobbying by sea urchin harvesters and offshore oil interests, however, resulted in a compromise establishing a "no otter zone" from Point Conception, 40 miles north of Santa Barbara, to the Mexican border, including all of the Channel Islands except San Nicolas.

Most of the otters that were moved died or swam back to the places they were taken from, sometimes hundreds of miles away. Fish and Wildlife patrols captured some of the strays but largely gave up the practice after it became clear it was not going to work.

"It was just crazy," said Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, a nonprofit organization that supports sea otter conservation. "Any animal that swam 100 yards or even one foot across that line changed from an endangered species to a nonessential animal."

There are now 2,700 sea otters ranging from Half Moon Bay to Point Conception, but their numbers have only increased slightly in the past few years.

The public will have 90 days to comment on the proposed changes, including public hearings in Santa Barbara and Monterey. The Fish and Wildlife Service will then issue a final report implementing its proposal or offering a new one.