

Sea otter relocation program may end Area fishermen fear effect on livelihoods

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After nearly 20 years and millions of dollars, a program aimed at restoring the endangered sea otter off California's coast has been deemed a failure and may be scrapped.

If approved, a plan released Wednesday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would permanently end relocating sea otters to San Nicolas Island and eliminate a massive otter-free zone from Point Conception to the Mexican border. The service hopes to act on the plan within the next year.

While animal rights supporters are heralding the move as a step toward returning sea otters to their historic range all along the Pacific Ocean, fishermen are wary of any new regulations and say more otters, which consume 25 percent of their body weight in crustaceans daily, could eat them out of business. Though the programs failed, scientists are hopeful that otter populations will continue to expand on their own.

"From a scientific perception, it was deemed an experiment," said Greg Sanders, southern sea otter recovery coordinator for the service. "In an experiment, by definition, you don't know the outcome."

In 1987, the service began moving sea otters to San Nicolas Island to establish a population there in case a catastrophe wiped out the population elsewhere along the Central Coast. As a nod to the fishermen, the otter-free zone was established at the same time, where the service would trap and remove any otter south of Point Conception.

Over three years, 140 otters were moved to San Nicolas Island, but few remained. Most returned to the region where they were born, a factor scientists underestimated, Sanders said. About 30 otters remain on the island today.

Efforts to remove otters from the prohibited zone also proved challenging. As of 1993, 24 animals had been removed from the area, four of which died after transit. The project was halted in 1993 because there were few otters left in the otter-free zone, but in 1999 fishermen sued the service for not removing the otters. The suit was dropped in 2000, pending the environmental impact statement released Wednesday.

From 1987 to 1995, about \$3.8 million was spent on the project. About 2,700 otters now live off California's shores.

If the service's plan is approved after a public comment period, otters would be left to their own devices to roam up and down the coast and eat at will. It's a move that fishermen fear could hurt their bottom line.

"It could be the end of several fisheries in Central California," said Chris Hoeflinger, a member of the Ventura County Commercial Fishermen's Association who fears not only that otters will eat too much valuable catch, but also that fishermen will be so highly regulated they will be forced out of business. He said his group will fight the proposal to eliminate the otter-free zone.

Dwindling sea otter populations were in part responsible for moving gill nets farther offshore in the 1970s, reducing that fishery.

Harry Liquornik, who harvests sea urchins off the Channel Islands, said once otters take hold and start hunting around there, his livelihood will be hurt. He said too much money was spent trying to relocate otters instead of dealing with more serious pollution issues along the coast.

Among the leading causes of sea otter mortality is disease from bacteria and toxins, some from the mainland runoff.

Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, said the proposal is a great step toward re-establishing sea otters in their historic range. If the otter-free zone were upheld, it would be a huge setback, he said. Besides, sea urchins, one of the otter's favorite foods, is merely a delectable export.

"It's a clear choice," Shimek said. "Are we going to value kelp beds, fin fish and sea otters or are we going to place a higher priority on sushi topping exported to Japan?"