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Unintended Consequences **Sea otter program was doomed from the start**

By John Krist,

The scene next Tuesday evening at Santa Barbara's Museum of Natural History probably will be a familiar one: a testy face-off between federal biologists and wildlife advocates on one side, and commercial fishers on the other. Over the past decade, such wrangling between regulators and resource users has become as much a part of the local landscape as the ocean itself.

Previous controversies have revolved around new regulations opposed by the fishing industry: prohibitions against gear or techniques deemed particularly destructive, such as gill or trammel nets and bottom trawling; closure of fisheries for imperiled species such as abalone and rockfish; establishment of protected areas where all harvest is banned so depleted populations can recover.

This time, however, the fishing industry will be arguing in favor of a regulation that biologists and wildlife defenders want abolished. That seeming oddity -- plus the fact that the creature at the heart of the debate is one of the cutest and cuddliest in the sea -- makes next week's hearing unusual.

There's a more important reason, however, for the public to pay attention. The latest conflict, over a proposal to let sea otters recolonize local waters, offers a powerful lesson about the complexity of the marine environment and the shortcomings of government efforts to regulate it.

The hearing next week is one of two planned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding its plan to discontinue a program that was doomed from its inception. (The second hearing will be two days later in Monterey.) Launched by the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987, the program was intended to establish a satellite colony of otters at remote San Nicolas Island as a sort of insurance policy against the possibility that a single catastrophic event -- a huge oil spill, for example -- might wipe out the species.

The southern sea otter once ranged from Oregon to Baja and probably numbered about 16,000 animals, but they and their northern cousins were nearly extinguished by fur hunters in the 18th and 19th centuries. Protected by federal law since the 1970s, the population has increased to about 2,700 animals, concentrated between Half Moon Bay and Point Conception. A single tanker accident in that area might not kill them all outright, but biologists believe it could reduce the population below the level required to sustain itself.

In 1987, the service began moving 140 adult otters to San Nicolas Island. Unimpressed by their new surroundings, the otters promptly swam home. By March 1991, a year after the relocation ceased, only 14 otters remained at the island.

Given time, the main otter population probably would expand its range naturally down the coast, if it were allowed to do so. But the federal law that authorized the relocation program included a political poison pill that undermined its biological intent: To placate angry fishers, mainly abalone divers who viewed shellfish-gobbling otters as unwelcome competition, Congress mandated an exclusion zone along the entire south coast. Otters that strayed into it were to be captured and removed.

Thus protected from otter predation, abalone were quickly rendered virtually extinct in Southern California by commercial divers. Many of them switched to urchin fishing, encouraged to do so by federal subsidy and by a boom in the urchin population. That increase was made possible by the disappearance of competing abalone, which feed on the same kelp that urchins eat, and by a shortage of major urchin

predators such as otters, spiny lobsters (targeted by trappers) and sheephead (harvested for the live-fish market).

Commercial harvesting has kept red urchins in check, but the population of purple urchins -- smaller and less valuable in the Asian seafood market -- has exploded. Purple urchins in turn have devastated kelp beds that provide crucial habitat for many fish.

Next week's hearing will focus on the agency's proposal to eliminate both the relocation program and the exclusion zone, allowing otters to go where they want under the full protection of the Endangered Species Act.

The proposal has drawn opposition from urchin divers -- whose fishery, according to a recent state report, now exhibits "a pattern of serial depletion that characterizes the decline and collapse of the abalone fisheries in the mid-1990s."

If the history of fisheries management in the Santa Barbara Channel has taught us anything, it's that commercial harvesters often are their own worst enemies and efforts to "manage" complex ecological processes frequently produce unintended consequences. Perhaps it's time to let nature take a turn without interference.