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## **Eliminate Failed No-Otter Zone**

by Steve Shimek

Imagine Monterey and California without sea otters. In the 1700s, sea otters thrived throughout coastal California. Scientific research, substantiated by anecdotal and historical mariner's records, tells us that about 16,000 sea otters once lived along the coast of California.

Today, by last official count, only about 2735 otters live in California waters and another 32 at San Nicolas Island - about 17-percent of the historic population. As a comparison, there are far more CSUMB "Otters" (3475) than real ones (2767).

Our sea otter population has been coughing, spitting, sputtering and failing to grow. One reason is we won't let it grow. Strange but true: since 1987 sea otters have been banned from expanding their range to southern California.

In 1986 conservationists, fishermen, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) struck a deal to reintroduce sea otters to San Nicholas Island, the most distant of Southern California's Channel Islands. Unfortunately, the deal also created a "no-otter zone" from Point Conception to the Mexican Border - a huge expanse of coast and perhaps one of the most critical portions of the otter's original range. Sea otters are not allowed in this zone to "protect" the sea urchin fishery, and the deal requires "non lethal" removal of any straying otters.

The deal also required that the program be declared a failure if after 3 years from the beginning of the program, fewer than 25 otters remained at the Island. Beginning in August 1987, 140 otters were moved to San Nicolas. Three years later, 14 remained. The program failed but no action was taken and the no-otter zone remains today.

Until 1993, sea otters were actually hunted down, trapped, and relocated north to the Monterey Bay area, sometimes to die. In late 1998, over 150 sea otters 'stormed' the no-otter zone, southern California fishermen sued, and we have been in stalemate ever since. Nearly 100 sea otters were found in the no-otter zone in 2005; all otters found in the zone would be removed and moved north if the no-otter zone is enforced.

On Thursday, November 3, the FWS will hold a public hearing in Monterey to determine if sea otters should be allowed to return to the waters of Santa Barbara and southern California, or, if otters found in the zone should be trapped and moved north.

The recommended action, which The Otter Project supports, is a declaration of failure for the San Nicolas translocation, abandonment of the no-otter zone, and leaving the 32 remaining otters at San Nicolas.

There are strong feelings on all sides of the otter issue.

The Otter Project believes we should not base this decision on the heartfelt and strong opinions of "otter-huggers" or a small but vocal group of southern California sea urchin fishermen. We should base our decision on what's best for all of California.

Sea otters are popular and attract tourists. A study by students at UC Santa Barbara's Bren School concluded that each and every wild sea otter provides an economic boost of around half a million dollars in tourism spending.

When sea otters are absent, abalone and sea urchins can be abundant, kelp beds smaller, and ecologically less diverse and less productive. When sea otters are present, kelp beds are often bigger and more productive, supporting healthy and diverse populations of fish.

Sea otters play an important role in maintaining kelp forests by preying on sea urchins that, if not controlled, can overgraze the kelp resulting in denuded areas, called "barrens" by sea urchin fishermen. Today, in otter-less urchin barrens it's as if the sun's energy is falling on a desert, instead of falling on a rainforest and being converted to food for the ecosystem. Before sea otters returned to the Monterey Peninsula in the 1960s, kelp was rare, abalone and sea urchins common.

California and the federal government are spending millions of dollars to restore southern California kelp beds only to have the young kelp plants overwhelmed and devoured by sea urchins. So, while taxpayers spend millions to restore kelp, some single interest fishermen want to keep out the top-carnivore that eats urchins that could solve the problem.

Southern California sea urchin fishermen, supported by other fishing groups, want the no-otter zone enforced and they want the stressed-out otters released on Santa Cruz and Monterey's doorstep.

From 1987 through 1993, the no-otter zone was enforced. According to the FWS, the cost to taxpayers was \$6,600 in fuel and boat-time, plus 273 man hours, for each otter captured. Twenty-four sea otters were trapped, removed from the zone, and released in Santa Cruz County. Four died within two weeks of being released and two swam back to the no-otter zone only to be recaptured.

Pending the results of the upcoming meeting and process, the FWS has suspended no-otter zone enforcement efforts. The FWS believes "actions may result in the direct deaths of individuals and disrupt the social behavior in the parent population... These effects will exacerbate the recent decline of the southern sea otter population."

On the one hand, we can spend millions of dollars chasing otters and fruitlessly attempting to restore kelp beds. Urchin fishermen can continue to export luxury sushi topping to Japan. We can have a less diverse and less productive marine ecosystem. We can have dead otters on our doorsteps.

Or, we can have sea otters, bigger healthier kelp beds, more fish, and a more diverse and productive marine ecosystem.

The meeting on Thursday will be Monterey's opportunity to support healthy, productive, and complete marine ecosystems. We hope Monterey will speak up in favor of sea otter recovery.

The meeting will be Thursday, November 3, 6-9 pm, in the Auditorium at Monterey Bay Aquarium.