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Bring Sea Otters Back Home to South Coast

by Steve Shimek

On Tuesday at 6 p.m. at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will hold a public hearing to determine if sea otters should be allowed to return to the waters of Santa Barbara and southern California.

In 1986 conservationists, fishermen, and the FWS struck a deal to reintroduce sea otters to San Nicholas Island, the most distant Channel Island. Unfortunately, the deal also created a "no-otter zone" from Point Conception to the Mexican Border - a huge expanse of coast and perhaps the most critical portion of the otter's original range. Sea otters are not allowed in this zone 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 20 otters remained at the Island. Beginning in August 1987, 140 otters were moved to San Nicolas. Three years later, 14 remained. The program was a failure but no action was taken and the no-otter zone remains.

Tuesday's meeting was precipitated by the FWS's release of their long-awaited Southern Sea Otter draft Supplemental Environment Impact Statement (SEIS). The draft SEIS documents the failure of the reintroduction of sea otters to San Nicolas Island and the failure of the no-otter zone. 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 our decision on the heartfelt and strong opinions of "otter-huggers" or a small but vocal group of fishermen. We should base our decision on what's best for all of California.

In the 1700s, sea otters thrived throughout coastal California and especially in the Channel Islands. Scientific research, substantiated by anecdotal and historical mariner's records, shows us that about 16,000 sea otters once lived along the coast of California. About 3,300 lived in the waters of the Channel Islands alone: The Islands are essential sea otter habitat.

Today, by last official count, only about 2735 otters live in coastal California waters and another 32 at San Nicolas Island - about 17-percent of the historic population. As a comparison, there are slightly more California sea otters (2767) than kids at Santa Barbara High School (2416). Sea otters returned to the Santa Barbara Channel in 1998 and at last count there were about 100 sea otters between Point Conception and Santa Barbara.

Sea otters are popular and attract tourists. A study by students at UCSB'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.

After sea otters were nearly exterminated by 1850 by fur hunters, shellfisheries - especially for abalone and sea urchins -- developed around an otter-less nearshore marine ecosystem. Abalone landings

peaked in 1957 at nearly 5.5 million pounds and then declined to less than 200,000 pounds when the fishery was closed in 1997 primarily due to over-fishing and disease.

The sea urchin harvest has followed a similar path. California sea urchin harvest peaked in 1991 at a value of nearly \$25 million. The 2004 harvest was valued at just under \$3.8 million (both figures CPI adjusted to 1984 \$). According to California's Department of Fish and Game (DFG), "[Sea urchin] catches in southern California have exhibited a pattern resembling the serial depletion that characterized the decline and collapse of the abalone fisheries in the mid-1990s." According to DFG records, in 2004, of the 208 sea urchin fishermen that primarily landed their urchin catch in southern California, only 26 grossed more than \$60,000. Sea urchin roe is exported to Japan for luxury sushi topping.

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 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.

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 and could solve the problem.

Sea urchin fishermen, supported by other fishing groups, want the no-otter zone enforced, especially if the otters begin to recolonize the Channel Islands. From 1987 through 1991, the 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 of the 24 otters captured.

On the one hand, we can spend millions of dollars chasing otters and fruitlessly attempting to restore kelp beds. The 26 sea urchin harvesters can continue to export luxury sushi topping to Japan. And we can have a less diverse and less productive marine ecosystem.

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

Whatever happens will likely happen slowly. While otters are a more common sight in the waters just south of Point Conception these days, if the no-otter zone is abandoned hoards of sea otters will not overrun sea urchin fisheries any time soon. There's going to be decades for adjustment, time for adaptation.

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