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In coastal battle of wits between man and otter, man concedes

Tim Molloy, Associated Press

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. - Greg Sanders' otter-catching days are over.

It's been years since he last snatched the animals from Southern California waters and shipped them north under an ambitious federal program to preserve an endangered species while protecting shellfish divers from natural competition.

Now, in an admission that the slick-furred creatures refuse to respect boundaries imposed by man, the federal government wants officially to abandon an otter-relocation policy it effectively dumped more than a decade ago.

If the government's battle of wits is at its end, the otters have won.

"This concept of taking animals and putting them in one place and expecting them to stay where we want them ... wasn't really working," said Sanders, 44, a bright-eyed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who exudes the kind of patience it takes to spend days waiting out elusive animals.

The agency is taking public comment through January in hopes of scuttling the program, which cost several million dollars before it tailed off in 1993. Fishermen want the existing policy enforced.

Environmentalists praise the idea of letting otters go where they want, saying it will aid the recovery of a species hunted almost to extinction. By the end of the 19th century, an otter population of 16,000 that had stretched from Mexico to Oregon had dwindled to 50 otters in a secluded cove off Big Sur. Today there about 2,700 southern otters off California's coast, Fish and Wildlife estimates.

One of them, nicknamed Phoky, became Sanders' chief nemesis. The name, pronounced "folky," came from his habit of trying to mate with harbor seals, which are of the genus "phoca."

Sanders stalked Phoky around Southern California's Anacapa Island for 24 days in 1990. Finally, Sanders captured Phoky and sent him north to Monterey.

Within six months, Phoky was back in forbidden waters.

He was one of dozens of otters that surprised government biologists at almost every turn. To appease fishermen, in 1987 the agency banned otters from California waters south of Point Conception near Santa Barbara - with one exception.

Fearful that an oil spill could wipe out otters elsewhere, Fish and Wildlife tried to create a reserve for 150 otters on San Nicholas Island, about 80 miles south of Santa Barbara.

Biologists had thought the otters would stay near San Nicholas, which has plenty of food and is surrounded by deep water that is hard to swim across. Even if the otters wanted to leave, it seemed improbable that they had the navigation skills to do it - especially since they were taken to the island by plane.

"We flew 'em out there," Sanders said, "although we didn't blindfold them."

The otters didn't play along. Some swam up to 200 miles to return to native habitat along the Central Coast.

Fishermen and seafood processors say federal officials never did enough - and complain that lobster and urchin fishing could be devastated if otters continue roaming Southern California waters.

"It comes down to a philosophy of, what do you believe in? Do you believe in animals or do you believe in

human beings?" said Robert S. Juntz Jr., president of the Sea Urchin Processors Association and owner of a processing plant in Mendocino County that employs about 45 people.

"The otters are a very voracious animal," Juntz said, adding they reduce shellfish levels "to where you and I, if we went sport fishing, would have a really hard time finding enough to feed ourselves for a day."

Otters are good at getting their prey - but getting otters was never so easy.

After waiting for an otter to fall asleep, wildlife crews would sneak up beneath it with a propeller-powered craft manned by a diver and snare it in a net. The otter then would be flown in a chartered plane or driven hundreds of miles to a Northern California beach for re-release. Some died from the stress.

Total cost: \$6,000 to \$12,000 per otter.

But before officials can catch an otter, they have to spot it. One recent Tuesday, as part of the agency's fall otter survey, Sanders spent two hours near the University of California, Santa Barbara, peering through a telescope at a kelp bed where something resembling an otter had been seen the day before.

Sanders perked up when a potential otter bobbed near the surface, but it turned out to be a harbor seal. Or a log. Lots of things look like otters.

"You get these harbor seals that fake you out," Sanders said.

Sometimes, though, Sanders catches a break - as in the incident he refers to as "the drive-by sighting."

Years ago, Sanders got a call from a lifeguard who had been cruising along coastal Highway 101 near Ventura when he spotted what he thought was an otter. Sanders was incredulous, but decided to follow up. It turned out to be Phoky.

A few weeks ago, Sanders and other wildlife officials marked the 15th anniversary of Phoky's first capture near Anacapa.

Phoky didn't make it to the celebration. Last Sanders heard, the otter was rumored to be in Mexico.