

## **Let's learn to live with our sea otters**

By Steve Shimek  
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I am an unabashed otter advocate - by interest and avocation. Apparently, Mr. Rebeck ("Time to evaluate sea otter status," April 19) does not share my concern for transparency.

Mr. Rebeck used the tagline, Technical consultant to the Sea Otter Recovery Team; implying an interest in sea otter recovery when he in fact represented the California Abalone Association on the stakeholder consulting group. With sea otters, a lot depends upon your point of view.

Scientists estimate there were once around 16,000 sea otters in California. When the sea otter was listed in 1977 as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), there were around 1789 otters. By 1984, there were 1372 otters.

Some say there was no need to ESA "list" the small otter population that occupied 182 miles of coast. According to the 1982 Recovery Plan, an oil spill was the primary threat to the otter population and we learned that threat was very real when the Exxon Valdez disaster killed more than 3,000 Alaskan otters and oiled 1,100 miles of coast in 1989. Scores of tankers transit California's 840 mile coast weekly.

Research alone cannot help the sea otter recover. In addition to a vigorous research program we should oppose planned offshore oil drilling. We can encourage Morro Bay and Cayucos to quickly upgrade their sub-standard sewage treatment plant. And, we can implement a statewide network of marine parks and reserves to protect sea otters, valuable ocean resources and at the same time, restore depleted fisheries.

The sea otter brings dramatic change to the nearshore environment. Without sea otters, the sea floor is often dominated by abalones and sea urchins - a condition abalone and sea urchin fishermen understandably prefer. Sea otters eat abalones and urchins and as a result, kelp beds increase in size and productivity, many valuable fishes increase and biological diversity is enhanced. As far as the local economy, a study by the UC Santa Barbara Bren School found that the tourism value of sea otters far exceeds the value of the fisheries they displace.

The earlier Viewpoint writer suggested that delisting the sea otter would "allow more flexibility and increased options for resource managers." What he means is heavy-handed control of otters to keep them from eating the urchins and abalone.

Today, there are about 2,700 sea otters in California, about 17 percent of their pre-fur trade numbers. Under the current Sea Otter Recovery Plan, "Delisting may be considered when the population reaches the delisting criterion of 3,090 individuals." As an unabashed sea otter advocate, even then, I could not sacrifice a healthy nearshore marine ecosystem in an effort to control sea otter numbers for the benefit of fishermen unwilling to adapt their practices to live with our wildlife, instead of in opposition to it.