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**Op-Ed: Conserving Ocean Gems for Future Generations**

By Steve Shimek

On August 15th the California Fish and Game Commission made history, voting unanimously to create a network of 29 marine protected areas that comprise more than 200 square miles (about 18%) of Central Coast state waters between Pigeon Point (south of Half Moon Bay) and Point Conception (northwest of Santa Barbara). The Central Coast is an important initial step in a process to create the nation's first scientifically based, statewide network of marine protected areas.

The area is vast. State jurisdiction of the ocean extends from shore to 3 miles offshore, and even more in places like Monterey Bay where the 'state line' extends straight across the bay from Santa Cruz to Monterey. In total, Central Coast waters encompass 1150 square miles of Grand Canyon-like submarine canyons, expansive rocky plateaus, and the most productive kelp forests on earth. Our Central Coast ocean is a magical place.

Vast and well used! Elephant seals compete for the same squid fishermen net. Whale watching has blossomed into a year-round industry. Sea otters just love to munch the Dungeness crabs we enjoy as local bounty. Scuba divers inject millions into local economies to see and photograph live fish while party boats ferry fishermen to nearby reefs to catch them.

But what looks crystal blue and pristine on the surface is not as healthy as we would like. The state's fishing fleet is half the size it was 25 years ago. Many species of rockfish have populations less than 10% their historic numbers and are so depleted the federal government declared the entire west coast fishery a disaster in 2000. Over-fishing, pollution, and habitat destruction are the culprits.

Central Coast resident, and then-Assemblymember Fred Keeley, foresaw the problems and guided the Marine Life Protection Act to passage in 1999. The premise was simple: we all – otters, seals, divers, fishermen, and the People of California – will benefit from a healthy ocean. The Act called for the creation of a science-based network of no-take marine reserves, conservation areas (where some commercial and recreational fishing is permitted) and parks (where only recreational fishing is permitted).

Worldwide, hundreds of marine scientists endorse marine reserves as fundamental to restoring and protecting ocean productivity and diversity. Two national ocean commissions have urged marine protected areas and ecosystem-based management as essential supplements to traditional fisheries species-by-species management.

The MLPA languished for several years due to budget and staff shortages until Governor Schwarzenegger, in late 2004, made ocean protection and implementation of the Marine Life Protection Act a high priority. What followed was over a year of intense stakeholder, marine scientist, and policymaker debate.

The Commission's plan is a well thought-out compromise between competing interests. Eleven square miles of ocean waters around Año Nuevo Island will be placed in a 'no-take' marine reserve. Immediately south of Año Nuevo, shore, salmon, and squid fishing will be allowed, but other fishing will be limited. From just south of Greyhound Rock, all the way to the middle of Monterey Bay, waters remain open to fishing, allowing small boat and skiff fishermen the safety of fishing close to port. The Natural Bridges tide pools and four miles of rocky intertidal will receive permanent protection, a move supported by Santa Cruz Mayor Mathews. The area in the middle of Monterey Bay, known as Soquel Hole, remains open to salmon and albacore fishing.

Along the Central Coast some ecologically important areas are closed to fishing; but the vast majority of our coast is open.

An economic analysis by the Department of Fish and Game found the maximum potential negative economic impact to commercial fishermen will be very modest; sites were selected after careful planning and stakeholders working together to address concerns. Still, not everyone is happy.

After decades of making a living and harvesting from 'the commons' fishermen feel they were given short shrift. Monterey scuba divers feel the Commission missed an opportunity to resolve user conflicts. Environmentalists would have preferred larger areas given higher levels of protection. The Commission chose a crafted compromise.

Fred Keeley, the Fish and Game Commission, and Governor Schwarzenegger should be congratulated for their vision. Although there are still regulatory hurdles, as soon as next year we may see 18% of our ocean with some protection, with 8% placed in no-take marine reserves.

Big Basin was California's first State Park, created in 1902 to protect a remnant grove of old growth redwoods. It's long overdue that we protect our ocean. With our help, representative pieces – gems – of our marine ecosystem can remain intact, productive, diverse, and preserved for our grandchildren.