

What's good for the otter is good for us.

San Jose Mercury News Commentary.

April 2007

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If you ask a school kid in Oregon if they've ever seen a sea otter, chances are they'll say, "yes—in an aquarium." Except for the occasional long-distance straggler from other populations, Oregon sea otters have been extinct since the early 1900's. Here in California, we've seen similar threats. But we also have the chance to hold onto what many coastal areas have lost – complete functioning ecosystems. California is moving forward on implementation of the Marine Life Protection Act, a 1999 law meant to protect marine life and their habitats through the creation of a network of marine protected areas (MPAs) on the Central Coast between Half Moon Bay and Point Conception. Like our national parks -- Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon -- marine protected areas are places where fish and wildlife can be given relief from human impacts.

While MPAs won't cure every ill, they are a critical tool to help ensure that otter populations are healthy once more. On April 13 in Bodega Bay, the California Fish & Game Commission will make a final decision on launching a plan for MPAs for the Central Coast. Fishermen don't want ocean parks and reserves; they are pressuring the Commission to pass weak protections. Californians want strong protection; the Commission should pass an effective Preferred Alternative without additional sacrifices to conservation and science.

Increasingly, dead otters have been washing up on California beaches, alarming scientists who say otters reflect the health of our oceans and fisheries. The California sea otter, one of the most well-known canaries in the oceanic "coal mine," are feeling the brunt of increased pressure on the oceans from our burgeoning population. They get snared in nets, caught in traps, poisoned by oil spills, and die of diseases washed from land.

The challenges facing our ocean and the resultant threats to our marine mammal population spurred me to agree to spend a year helping design a network of marine protected areas for the Central California Coast. The state brought together an enormous, diverse group of people—divers, fishermen, locals, businessmen, and scientists with decades of local experience. I have been involved in advisory groups before and I can honestly say I have never seen the range of expertise I saw here.

I worked with a group of sportfishermen, divers, and other conservationists to design a proposal, and while some of our favorite spots appear in the plan before the Fish & Game Commission, others did not. Our proposals had to meet scientific review and the requirements of the law, as well as the scrutiny of our fellow panelists. None of us got everything we wanted, but in the end we all shared the same goal for the central coast: healthy marine habitat and abundant fish.

MPAs, especially no-take marine reserves, could benefit sea otters in at least three ways—less disturbance in areas where there will be fewer boats, a food web that will remain intact, making forage more abundant, and fewer negative interactions with fishing nets and traps.

But I am hopeful there will be a fourth, possibly more catalyzing benefit: California's science based "network" proposal is designed to 'spill-over' to areas outside the protected areas to replenish the in-between areas too. Our declining fisheries can reap the benefits of the increased fish populations and our sea otters will thrive in a richer invertebrate environment too.

Under the proposed MPA plan supported by diverse stakeholders, the Commission will place over 200 square miles of Central Coast ocean from Half Moon Bay to Point Conception, roughly 18-percent, under

some level of protection; 97 square miles would be in no-take marine reserves. The vast majority will remain open to fishing. Marine protected areas were placed specifically to avoid impact on fishing fleets and popular recreational fishing spots.

Some say that this first-step network of marine reserves is too moderate to help the California sea otter recover. But I am more optimistic. It seems to me this is the hopeful opportunity to create a win-win situation and ultimately the stakeholder buy-in that we may be partially lacking now. If California's network design can help replenish the 'whole,' this generation of fishermen and conservationists will have left a lasting legacy for future generations of people – and otters.

The California Fish and Game Commission is expected to make its final decision April 13.