Kelp make a comeback off PVP

Off Palos Verdes Estates Long Point, efforts to save the forests are gaining headway

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The small boat stocked with mesh bags, cameras and diving gear took off on an overcast morning from Marina del Rey.

It glided along the main channel and into Santa Monica Bay, slicing through the water until finally slowing off the coast of the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

At Long Point, just below a resort rising at the edge of a rocky cliff, the five divers found what they were looking for.

They dropped anchor, zipped up their wet suits and admired a thick blanket of kelp poking through the surface, its brownish-green fronds covering a stretch of water the size of three football fields.

"This thing looks awesome," said Tom Ford, executive director of the nonprofit Santa Monica Baykeeper, as he watched the fronds rippling across the water.

A lush kelp forest has taken root on the rocky floor below, where leafy strands grow vertically until making a 90-degree turn at the water surface. A seal popped his head up at one point, and a fleet of pelicans flew by not long afterward.

Long Point didn't look like this a few years ago.

When Santa Monica Baykeeper started a kelp restoration program here in 2005, the forest was far smaller - there were two patches of kelp roughly 30 or 40 feet in diameter, Ford said - and it wasn't exactly a diverse ecosystem; the kelp bed was home to spiky sea urchins, diatoms and, in one diver's words, "bacterial slime."

But as the forest has rebounded, so has the diversity of species that depend on the kelp. Just last week, three Baykeeper employees and two volunteer divers came across calico bass, sheephead, Garibaldi and copper rockfish during two 20-foot dives not far from the base of the cliff.

"This was a moonscape covered with urchins," Ford said of the site three years ago. "And now, there's so many more species of fish and a greater abundance of those species as well."

It didn't happen overnight and without a commitment from Baykeeper, which established its first kelp restoration and monitoring project in 1996 with a pilot program off Rocky Point. Later, it expanded to three areas off Malibu's Escondido Beach.

The group estimates that Southern California's kelp canopies have been reduced by 90 percent over the past 100 years - a phenomenon blamed in large part on over-fishing and over-harvesting. Other possible factors are polluted runoff and climate change.

When sheephead fish, lobsters and others that feed on the urchins are plucked out of the ecosystem, the spiny creatures can overpopulate the kelp forests and mow down the base of the stalks. Long said it seems like the urchins are vilified for their presence, but really, "it's not their fault" that their predators have been removed.

Another one missing is the sea otter, which is not permitted to stay in Southern California waters under current wildlife management agreements.

When the kelp restoration program began at Long Point in 2005, bags filled with spores from mature kelp were anchored on the rocky bottom with weights. The linear strands can grow fairly quickly when new spores are released.

But before that could happen, the group focused on removing the exploding population of sea urchins nibbling at the kelp bases, which in dense spots measured 30 to 40 per square meter.

Today, even with the average count down to about 10 to 15 urchins per square meter, the job seems to be never-ending.

Last week, even as divers loaded thousands of golf ball-size purple urchins into mesh sacks and prepared to relocate them, the divers lamented there is still more work to do.

"It's hard to swim away when you see so many urchins left," said Heather Wilson of Alhambra, a volunteer with Santa Monica Baykeeper for several years.

But the avid diver also said she's been pleased with the results.

"I've been doing this work long enough that you can really see a difference," Wilson said. "I need to dive every week, so I might as well get my scuba fix and do something that's good for the ocean."

The Baykeeper boat sailed away from Long Point last week weighted down with 15 bags of urchins. After a short sail just north of the Peninsula, the crew pulled on gloves and began the count.

Stacie Fejtek, a Baykeeper marine ecologist, weighed the bags, while volunteer Karim Hamza recorded the numbers. Ford, Wilson and Brian Meux, Baykeeper's kelp project coordinator, shouted out "Red!" and "Purple!" after counting groups of 10. Then they released the spiky creatures into the surf.

"They've got a perfectly good habitat right here," Fejtek said. "We're just trying to give (the kelp) a fighting chance."

All told, the group relocated 5,203 purple urchins and 105 red ones. The heaviest of the bags weighed about 50 pounds.

"This is a big haul," Fejtek said.

Baykeeper staffers say they're proud of their work at Long Point and at the sites near Malibu, which they now monitor only periodically.

But they're not anywhere near being finished. And with a three-year grant drying up in March - the group had secured about $700,000 for the program - the organization is now looking for more funding so it can continue sending staffers out to sea on a regular basis.

Today, Baykeeper employees, with roughly 40 active volunteers, take turns diving twice a week, mostly off Long Point. Another restoration site is in development at Point Vicente.

The 25-foot Baykeeper boat eased into its slip in Marina del Rey about 3 p.m., its deck filled with empty mesh bags and five tired divers. A long day's work, they said, but well worth it for the kelp.

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