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Allison Ford: Otters or abalones? It's a false choice

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Allison Ford

In a recent opinion piece, Peter Halmay, former president of the Sea Urchin Harvesters Association, argues that allowing sea otters to recover into their historic range will create a situation of pitting one threatened species against two endangered species. This is factually inaccurate and misleading.

Sea otters, although currently in exile, are native to the entire California coast. The south coast is off-limits to them due to the continued existence of the no-otter zone. In the place of healthy, productive kelp forests, populations of otter prey species such as sea urchin have exploded, leading to substantially less productive ecosystems.

The white and black abalones, whose existence Mr. Halmay fears for, are also natives of the entire California coastline. The species evolved as components of the same complex ecosystem, and coexisted with otters for thousands of years. To suggest that the presence of otters in the abalones' range would lead to their extinction is unsubstantiated -- the science just doesn't support this. In fact, the evidence we DO have tells us otters and abalone can get along just fine; only not at a sufficient level to support an abalone fishery.

Do sea otters eat abalone? Absolutely. But there is a difference between allowing for normal prey/predator interactions which generally requires that someone get eaten and the complete

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decimation of a species.

There are documented instances of sea otters and

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different story. But the idea behind listing endangered species is to prevent extinction -- it's as plain as that. So if a shellfish industry rep tries to make you choose between saving the poor endangered abalone or the big bad otter, it's a false choice.

The Sea Otter Research and Recovery Act will benefit the whole coastal environment -- Mr. Halmay got that right. Water quality and disease are factors that need to be addressed, but allowing for natural range expansion remains a priority. Any amendment to the bill that says otherwise is unacceptable.

The real choice is not between two endangered species and one threatened one, or between water quality and range expansion, but between a healthy, productive ecosystem and an artificial system that is managed by prohibiting the top predator solely for the benefit of a minor fishery -- at great expense to the public. Maintaining a policy that prohibits the return of a natural predator to benefit an industry is nothing less than a subsidy in a fish suit.

Allison Ford is the executive director of The Otter Project, which promotes the rapid recovery of the California sea otter.

abalones coexisting --San Nicolas Island boasts a population of both otters and black abs, and red abs are found in pockets of the sea otter range such as Point Lobos and the rocky Monterey coast. Abalone in otter range just have to work a little harder to hide out--they live in rocky crevices and cracks that are inaccessible to otters and people. As for white abalone, they live at depths beyond the range sea otters tend to comfortably forage. While there is overlap, there is plenty of otter-free habitat too.

The more you look at the facts, the less water Mr. Halmay's argument holds.

Unless of course he meant to say that sea otters and an abalone INDUSTRY can't coexist. Because that's a whole

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