

Hungry Otters Stray Into Fishermen's Territory

Hungry otters ignore "no-otter zone," compete with S. California fishermen for shellfish

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In this Jan. 15, 2010 photo, a group of sea otters gather in Morro Bay, Calif. The first hint of... [▼](#)
(AP)

The first hint of trouble in trying to save endangered sea otters and protect fishermen competing for the shellfish the creatures eat was when bureaucrats drew a line in the ocean separating the two.

That was followed by an unsuccessful attempt to create a colony for the creatures on a distant island and a more disastrous venture to relocate strays who wandered into what was dubbed the "no-otter zone."

The otters didn't cooperate and their subsequent rebound in Southern California created a classic man vs. nature conflict that could alter a two-decade recovery program and raises the question of what species is more endangered: animals or urchin divers.

At the heart of the matter is a well-intentioned attempt to control nature for commerce that backfired.

"It's a view of the world as if animals are your chess pieces," said Lilian Carswell, who oversees otter recovery at U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

The agency long ago abandoned the costly and ineffective transfer policy, but environmentalists who claim the otters are being targeted filed a lawsuit in federal court last year to extend protections for otters that migrate outside the artificial boundaries.

"They're moving into a hostile environment," said Allison Ford with The Otter Project, which sued the Department of Interior and Fish and Wildlife. "We've heard anecdotal evidence of otters being shot, harassed and run over by boats."

Shellfish divers liken the voracious mammals to locusts of the sea and fear that giving the critters free rein will jeopardize their industry. Fishermen deny harming the otters, but claim the animals have devastated the sea urchin population wherever they've gone.

"Based on historic action we think eventually they'll wipe out the shellfish industry in California," said Vern Goehring, executive director of the California Sea Urchin Commission.

Ironically, it was the near decimation of the otters that allowed segments of the fishing industry to thrive. Urchin and shellfish blossomed when the otter were driven near extinction by fur traders who hunted the marine mammals in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Once numbering as many as 18,000 along the giant kelp beds of the California Coast, the species sank to about 20 otters off Big Sur in 1938.

The population gradually rebounded after being listed as threatened in 1977 and the population now hovers around 2,800, including an estimated 70 in the no-otter zone.

About 25 years ago, however, conservationists worried that a single oil spill could wipe out the state's entire otter population. They came up with a plan that involved a compromise to quell shellfishing industry opposition to growing otter numbers.

An experimental otter colony would be planted 62 miles off Los Angeles on San Nicolas Island in the Channel Islands and they promised to confine other otters to the Central Coast. The safety zone designated in 1987, stretched from just south of San Francisco at Pigeon Point, to just north of Santa Barbara at Point Conception.

Anything outside that area was dubbed the "no-otter zone" and stray otters would be rounded up and returned.

The San Nicolas experiment struggled, with most of the otters either dying or swimming hundreds of miles back toward the Northern California mainland. The relocation effort — at an estimated cost of \$10,000 per otter — also failed.

It often took a couple days to round up a crew of divers who would search in boats for wayward otters. If they were lucky enough to find one, divers had to wait until for the otter to fall asleep and then approach from downwind. Then divers would then sneak up on the animal from below with equipment that didn't release bubbles.

Sometimes the captured and returned otters would swim right back.

"They didn't like it — it wasn't home," said Jim Estes, a biology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who worked on the relocation effort that he now calls "naive."

The agency stopped catching otters in 1993 and five years later the otters had small but growing populations off Ventura and Santa Barbara, outside the protection of the Endangered Species Act.

Fish and Wildlife began re-evaluating the policy, but stalled in 2006 when the Navy expressed concerns that their operations might be limited if otter protections were extended. Under the Endangered Species Act, the military and projects such as oil drilling would need to ensure they wouldn't harm the otter.

Late last year, the Environmental Defense Center on behalf of the Otter Project filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in San Jose to force the agency to finally call the San Nicolas experiment a failure and lift the no-otter zone.

The federal government is fighting the suit, but declined to speak about pending litigation. The fishing industry has asked the court to intervene.

This isn't the first time efforts to save a threatened or endangered species have collided with other interests. From bald eagles to grizzly bears to gray wolves, protecting animals have often produced unintended consequences. Fights are still going on in Wyoming over whether wolves can be shot as predators.

Harry Liquornik, a longtime diver, calls the 4-foot member of the weasel family a formidable threat to his estimated \$10 million-a-year urchin industry, which largely supplies the delicacy to sushi restaurants. Otters consume about 15 pounds a day of urchins, crab, mussels, snails and — if they can find it — abalone.

Pitting sea urchins, which have about as much personality as a rock with spines, against the sea otters is a public relations nightmare.

"They're cute and have a really big following," Liquornik concedes.

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