

Otter Defended

Thursday, April 1, 2010

I figured it was only a matter of time before someone would yell loud enough for the otter conspiracy theory to make it into the mainstream press. Otters secretly transplanted from Alaska, a powerful “otter lobby” cooking the numbers to help ensure the expansion of otters at the expense of helpless fishermen—Mr. Goldblatt’s March 28th op-ed has all the elements of a good conspiracy novel. [[Voices, “Otter Ho!” 3/28/10.](#)]

It was printed in the wrong forum though. Coming from someone who is trying to protect the “unknowing public” from otter deception, Chris Goldblatt’s diatribe against otters is startlingly inaccurate. I’m surprised the *Independent* consented to print such blatant mistruths. Mr. Goldblatt’s doom-infused “They will destroy fisheries” is an opinion piece, true, but opinions that are given voice in a respectable public forum such as the *Independent* should at a minimum be supported by factual information. Mr. Goldblatt’s statements are misleading and do little to further the heated but valid debate on the role of otters in Santa Barbara.

It would be a waste of space to try to correct all of Mr. Goldblatt’s factual errors, but a few key ones should be noted. Otters are voracious gatherers of shellfish, it is true. They do not, however drive the extinction of their prey species; they merely incite the age-old dance between predator and prey that drives prey to outsmart, or at least out-hide, predators. As some of the online commentators to the op-ed pointed out in the otters’ defense, this dance leads to a far richer and more vibrant ecosystem, which supports a myriad of community interests (richer finfisheries, coastal buffers from erosion, divers and wildlife watchers galore, the list goes on) for all coastal residents—not just the narrow interest of a small industry. Science has verified the importance of the otters’ role in an ecosystem again and again. Experience has verified the importance of healthy ecosystems to people.

People, like otters, drive ecosystem change, but ours are often to deleterious effects. The allegation that otters are responsible for wiping out the white abalone in the Channel Islands is simply false; otters rarely dive past 75 feet, whereas white abalone are most abundant in the range of 80 to 100 feet. The National Marine Fisheries Service credits human overfishing for the white abalones’ precipitous decline.

Unlike otters, we have choices to make about our impacts—they don’t have to be negative. We are finally starting to understand that we need functioning systems just as much as any creature, in order to support our economic and social well being. Embracing marine protected areas, letting otters distribute themselves instead of wasting tens of thousands of dollars to do it for them—these are marks of the changing attitudes towards resource management that the public is embracing.

This is a nonpartisan issue supported by the public and policy makers from both sides of the proverbial aisle. We all need ecosystems to

function—they provide us with sustenance, protect us from the elements, process our waste and give us rich and beautiful places to live. And they do this best if we leave them alone.

Change is difficult, and with otters and ecosystem changes will come economic changes. Some industries will suffer, some will prosper, and new ones will no doubt be born. Economies, like ecosystems, are intricate things, and conservationists, fishermen, policy makers, and academics will argue for years over who or what caused changes in both systems. I hope the arguments are less farfetched than otter conspiracies though. All parties involved, and the public, deserve better.—Allison Ford, [Otter Project](#) executive director

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Reading through the "Otter Ho!" article and reader responses reaffirms the sad fact that the environment has become another important issue that has been reduced to a political football (see also health care). As a liberal environmentalist Democrat who kills sea animals for personal food, I can appreciate the emotions on each side of this issue. As a research engineer I am saddened by the lack of rational science that goes into the policy decisions. Both sides are disingenuous in their claims and selective use of data.

Unlike many of my friends, I believe the Marine Protection plan was a decent concept, and fish populations have improved in some places. But it too is now just a political tool: It seems that the UCSB marine science department has convinced the Packard-financed Marine Life Protection Act program that all data indicates the beach right in front of their building is the best candidate for protection on the South Coast. How convenient.

The dream of restoring original natural balance with six billion people on the planet scarfing resources and spewing offal is delusional. We have let Pandora out of the box. What we can do is honestly try to reduce the major threats to the basic health of our resources. In the case of our coastline, I believe that water quality is far and away the most critical issue. As an old guy who spends lots of time underwater, I can affirm that the reduction of phosphates in commercial products was huge. Continued improvements in sewage treatment and creek contamination will do more to enhance the health of our kelp beds and reefs than anything else we have control over. Arguing about otters while contaminating the ocean is a little like debating paint color while the house burns. — *D. Klingensmith, Noleta*