



Santa Barbara Independent Op Ed - December 12, 2010

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Help Celebrate the Otter's Return

It's always great entertainment to read and reply to one of Steve Rebeck's anti sea otter rants. Mr. Rebeck believes that an urchin and abalone dominated seascape – also known as an urchin barrens – is a beautiful thing. He's the kind of guy who says the trees (in this case the kelp) get in the way of the view. Now make no mistake, I'm an advocate too, but for sea otters. Honest disclosure is always helpful to the reader.

Let's get some facts straight. The sea otter was here first and once thrived in the coastal ocean from Baja, up the Pacific Coast, across the Aleutians, and all the way round to Hokkaido, Japan. The sea otter was hunted to the brink of extinction in the 17 and 1800s.

136 otters were moved from the Central Coast to San Nicolas Island from 1987 to 1989 when the mainland range of the California sea otter was roughly Santa Cruz to Santa Maria. In total, 140 otters have been moved to San Nic. Very specific numeric targets were created by the US Fish and Wildlife Service – at the insistence of the fishermen – to define success or failure of the reintroduction plan. The benchmark was to have at least 25 otters at the Island within 3 years of the start of the program in 1987. After moving 140 otters only 14 remained in 1990, most died or swam home. The program failed. As an additional quid pro quo, the huge no otter zone was created covering the entire California Bight except for the donut around San Nicolas. If the reintroduction project failed the no otter zone was supposed to go away, but the US Fish and Wildlife Service never made a failure declaration. Today, mainland sea otters have re-colonized parts of their native range in the no otter zone and in 1999 the fishermen actually sued the government to have the otters trapped and removed. The fishermen want the otters booted out but don't want to abide by the failure criteria they helped create.

Sea otters play a critical ecological role: Without sea otters, urchins and abalone un-naturally dominate the subsurface rocks and eat much of the kelp. With sea otters, kelp and the myriad of fish, crabs, and other species that depend upon kelp, flourish. Kelp is extremely efficient at converting sunlight to life and that's why kelp forests seem to be pulsing with life-force; by some estimates kelp forests are the most productive ecosystems on earth. Even the urchins and abalone thrive – just in lower numbers and deep in crevices out of reach of the otters' stubby arms. Kelp forests are nurseries for valuable fish, dampen wave erosion, and we've even learned that kelp sequesters vast amounts of carbon.

Abalone and urchins don't run or swim away and are easy pickings; fisheries for these species developed along the California coast in the otter-less coastal system. There is no question that sea otters change fisheries and the urchin fishery will be displaced as sea otters return to Southern California waters over the next 50-100 years. Commercial fishing does not dry up as Mr. Rebeck claims, it changes.

Mr. Rebeck's basic premise is that the reintroduction of otters to San Nicolas Island should have never happened. Although we find it incredibly odd to agree with Mr. Rebeck, we actually share common



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ground. But Mr. Rebeck fails to point out that the no otter zone is inextricably linked to the reintroduction. No reintroduction, no no-otter zone – that’s exactly the outcome we want too.

The settlement of our lawsuit against the Fish and Wildlife Service creates a timeline for a public process to decide the fate of otters in southern California. Mr. Rebeck will have his opportunity to pound the podium and rant. We’ll advocate for a celebration of the otter’s return. We hope the Santa Barbara community will join us!

Steve Shimek is chief executive of The Otter Project (www.otterproject.org), a sea otter advocacy group based in Monterey. In November The Otter Project and Environmental Defense Center settled their lawsuit with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to resolve the no otter zone.