



No-otter zone ends in Southern California

MONTEREY, Calif. —The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially ended California's "no-otter zone" on Tuesday and sea otters are now legally free to float into sunny Southern California waters without the threat of being trapped and deported back to Northern California.

Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, described the no-otter zone as outdated and ineffective.

"Trying to tell a marine mammal to stay on one side of an imaginary line across the water was a dumb idea," Shimek said.



Sea otters once ranged from Baja California to the Pacific Northwest, but intensive hunting drove them to the brink of extinction in the 1910's. A tiny group of just 50 sea otters survived and they lived off a remote section of Big Sur's rugged coast.

Since then, conservation efforts helped the population slowly rebound and there are an estimated 2,800 sea otters today living between Half Moon Bay and Point Conception, according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Sea otters especially love the Monterey Bay and have become an icon of the area.

The no-otter zone was created in 1987 under the Southern Sea Otter Translocation Program. All sea otters were prohibited from living south of Point Conception -- from Santa Barbara County to the U.S.-Mexico border.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service moved 140 southern sea otters to San Nicolas Island, the most remote of California's Channel Islands, in 1987 to establish a reserve population. The mainland population was still small and struggling at the time, and some experts believed the reserve population would prevent the sea otters from becoming extinct during a catastrophic event, such as an oil spill.

Shellfish fishermen, the offshore oil industry, and the U.S. Navy objected to the Channel Islands plan. Their objections spurred the creation of the no-otter zone as a compromise.

The relocation plan failed when all but about 11 of the 140 otters swam away from San Nicolas Island and back to their home waters. In spite of the failure, the no-otter zone stayed in place and wandering otters were trapped and deported for many years. But the no-otter zone remained until Tuesday.

Now, sea otters in Southern California will have the same protections under the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act as the Monterey Bay's numerous sea otters.

"Allowing otters to once again inhabit Southern California waters is considered critical to the recovery of the species," Shimek said.

"Southern sea otters have been largely absent from their historic Southern California habitat for far too long," EDC Attorney Brian Segee said. "This decision is a critical step in efforts to recover southern sea otters, by formally allowing this charismatic and intelligent species to naturally return to waters south of Point Conception."