

Fate Of Rig's Reef Floats To Surface

By Jenny Lee Rice
Gazette Staff Writer

From the shore, it is a barely detectable speck along the horizon. Up close, it is a gigantic configuration of rusting steel beams and pipes, producing 540 barrels of oil and gas per day.

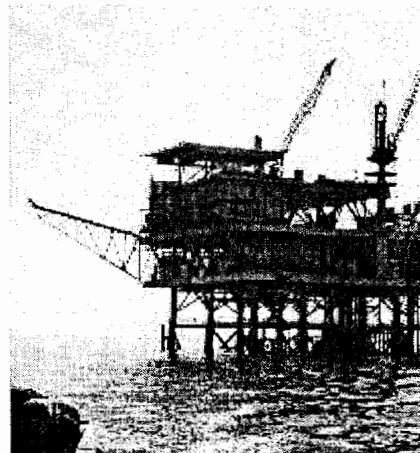
Beneath the surface, it teems with natural life — either an environmental boon or a major setback, depending on whom you ask.

Platform Edith is one of 27 oil-producing platforms along the California coast. Located 8.5 miles out from Long Beach, Edith stands in 161 feet of water. In the 20 years since it has been in place, sea life has attached itself to the underwater portions of the rig. The process has formed a pseudo-reef.

In nature, reefs are ridges of sand, coral or rock that rise to near the surface of the water. The largest example is the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia, which extends for 1,250 miles and is home to many exotic marine animals.

Reefs also can be created artificially. Sunken ships, for instance, often become home to sea life. In 2000, a decommissioned Canadian destroyer, the HMCS Yukon, was sunk intentionally off the coast of San Diego. It has since become a popular diving spot.

California has several natural reefs, including some off the Channel Islands, and a few artificial ones such as the Yukon and those forming at Platform Edith. As Edith and other platforms



ISLAND OF DEBATE. Platform Edith is 1 could be the source of a new underwater ci if left in the water. — Gazette photo by Jen



RESTING PLACE. A sea lion finds a spot more than 11 miles off the coast. —Photo

near the end of their production life spans (George Steinbach, executive director for California Artificial Reef Enhancement, said rigs generally produce for 25 or 30 years), the accidental reefs that have been forming amid their iron legs may become a war ground.

Reef Or Wreck?

The battle lines are clearly drawn, pitting some groups traditionally aligned against one another. Some argue that when the platforms are decommissioned, they ought to be sunk as reefs. This would involve capping off the oil well, Steinbach said, and removing the above-water portions of the rig. The opposition argues that when the oil companies leave, they ought to take everything with them, as was the original agreement.

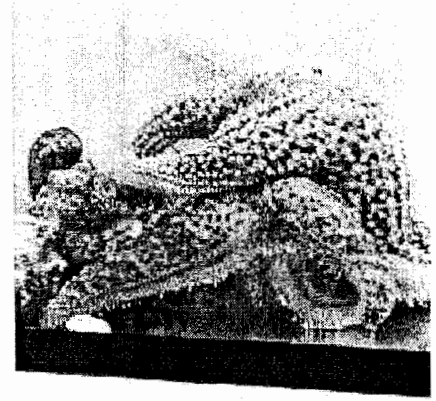
California Artificial Reef Enhancement (CARE) is leading the effort to convert the 27 rigs, including Platform Edith, to reefs. Steinbach, a retired Chevron engineer, is CARE's executive director. He said his awareness of rigs-to-reef programs first started in 1996, when he worked on removing four Chevron platforms off the coast of California.

"Fishermen came to us and said, 'Why can't you leave the underwater portions in place?'" he said.

According to Steinbach, it was too late at that point to consider the option. They had already started working on dismantling the rigs, he said, and "we didn't have the sort of scientific understanding" to preserve the underwater structure.

Steinbach insisted that now "it's just a personal desire to see the right thing done." And although CARE is paid for by the oil industry, he said, "our group doesn't have any interest in the rest of the oil business." He acknowledged the cost benefit to oil companies in leaving part of the platform in place, but said turning the rigs into reefs also would save thousands of sea creatures.

"It's such a win-win proposition," Steinbach said.



AT HOME. These starfish have attached themselves to the old oil rig Edith, but whether that is the debatable question. —Gazette photo

Only Natural

Several environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, National Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Center and Surfrider Foundation, are opposed. Robert Palmer, a member of Surfrider Long Beach's executive committee, said the oil companies are just looking for an opportunity to dump their trash.

"You've got people leaving stuff in the ocean and now saying it's beneficial," he said. "You can't set a precedent in letting them leave their junk there."

Tom Raftican, president of the United Anglers of Southern California and a CARE board member, said the environmental groups were "more interested in building up their membership through hatred of oil companies."

"We have no love lost for the oil companies," he said. "We don't care."

CARE, according to Raftican, is driven purely by concern for the ocean's resources. He said the removal of off-shore platforms would result in the "eviction of all those fish, all that habitat."

"Look at the rigs from the perspective of fish," he said. "If the reef (is) valuable for the resources, leave it in place."

Palmer said Surfrider doesn't want to see sea life destroyed, but argued that it has attached itself to something that didn't belong in the ocean in the first place.

"If we say it is okay to leave that waste there," he said, "what does that say about the ocean?"

Abandoning oil platforms, Palmer said, is different than allowing other ocean debris, such as sunken ships, to remain in the water. He added that the rigs-to-reef proposal is more akin to the debate over whether to preserve the breakwater along coastal Long Beach.

"The issue is that it's industrial waste," he said.

Legal Action

State Senator Dede Alpert (D-San Diego), sponsored a rigs-to-reef bill in 2001. The measure passed, but was vetoed by then-Gov. Gray Davis. She said that although she is used to being on the same side with environmental groups, she thought rigs to reef was worth pursuing.

“I feel that it was so much more an emotional issue than a factual issue,” Alpert said. “(Environmentalists) were upset because the oil companies would get a benefit out of this.”

Dr. Milton Love, a research biologist at the Marine Science Institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been studying sea life around the platforms for six years. Although his research is partly financed by CARE, he said the data he has collected is very cut-and-dried.

“As a biologist, I have to be scrupulously neutral,” Love said.

He said his findings have shown that the rigs “act just like great big reefs” and that some “tend to be better nursery grounds than many natural reefs.”

What policymakers do with his data, he said, is out of his hands.

“It kind of depends on what you want,” he said. “If you want the mud back, you don’t want the platforms. If you like reefs there, you’d (want to keep them).”

Love said that as a citizen, he disagrees with environmental groups on the rigs-to-reefs issue, even though he is a member of some groups leading the opposition.

“When you remove a platform, you kill hundreds of millions of animals,” Love said. “I think that’s immoral.”

Alpert, who said she plans to look into re-introducing a rigs-to-reefs bill under Gov. Schwarzenegger, referred to the project as

making lemonade from lemons. She said she does not think rigs to reefs would give oil companies any advantage in efforts to expand offshore drilling in California.

“We shouldn’t expand,” she said. “We shouldn’t put in new wells. I would never make the argument that it was a good thing to put these in because it was a habitat for fish.”

“Proponents of off-shore drilling could stretch it that far,” the Surfrider’s Palmer said. “It must be removed and it should be put there in the future. That’s the real essence.”

Under The Sea

At a recent visit to Platform Edith sponsored by CARE, scuba divers gave a tour of the reef via live video feed. The legs of the rigs were entirely covered in orange, pink and purple sea creatures. Bob Wohlers, vice-president of instructional design for Diving Service and Technology, led the dive. He said California’s 27 platforms provided 375,000 square feet of reef on which sea life could thrive.

The rig’s vertical structure, paired with the abundance of plankton floating by, make it an ideal reef, he said. The reefs forming at oil platforms, he argued, are in many instances more successful than California’s natural reefs.

“Near the shore, we have sewage outfalls, rain runoffs,” he said. “These have very little environmental pressure on them.”

Wohlers pointed to a rockfish, a species that thrives near the rigs. He then held his ruler up to a nearby starfish, which, when stretched to full size, was about two feet in diameter. Wohlers said the sense of gigantism on the reef is due to the abundance of food.

“What do you think, folks?” Wohlers asked. “Worth keeping?”