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COURTESY OF UCSB

Numerous young bocaccio, or rockfish, swim around Platform Gilda in the Santa Barbara Channel.

Two new studies highlight oil rigs' importance to fish

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Some locals look forward to the day when the oil platforms sitting in the Santa Barbara Channel have pumped their last barrel and are hauled away. Others think they should stay — as artificial reefs that provide habitats for fish and recreation spots for fishermen and divers.

Two studies just published by UCSB biologist Milton Love and colleagues show how valuable they may be as nurseries for species that have suffered from overfishing, the scientists say.

They used a submersible to survey bocaccio populations around eight rigs in the Santa Barbara Channel in 2003 — a bad year for baby bocaccio. They found that the platforms together provided habitat for at least 430,000 young fish. That's about 20 percent of the average number of juveniles that survive every year throughout the fish's entire range, from Oregon to northern Baja California, the researchers say.

"Some years," Mr. Love said, the platforms "would be a much better habitat than natural reefs."

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"In a good year the number of fish is just unbelievable. . . . There's so many of them that in some cases you can't see through them." — Milton Love, UCSB biologist

Environmentalists would rather see rigs removed

■ PLATFORMS

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At issue is the future of several oil platforms in the channel that are expected to reach the end of their productive lives in the next decade. Currently, the rigs must be removed once they're shut down, but oil companies and other groups have been pushing for law changes so they can be left as artificial reefs. They would either be beheaded and left in place, or perhaps towed to deeper waters and dumped there.

Mr. Love and colleagues have been looking at fish populations around oil rigs here for years and have found high densities of fish, but in a study reported this week in the journal *Fisheries Bulletin*, "we actually estimated the numbers, not just the density," he said. "How many little bocaccio were there at the platform?"

It's "one of the first attempts to actually quantify how important platforms are as fish habitat," Mr. Love added. "There were very, very large numbers at seven out of eight of the platforms we looked at."

Those numbers "push us to the point where we can't ignore the importance of that habitat," said George Steinbach, executive director of the California Artificial Reef Enhancement Program, or CARE, which provides information and supports research on artificial reefs.

"From a policy standpoint," he said, "we can take them (the platforms) out and kill all the fish, destroy the habitat and kill all the fish there, or we can leave them there and benefit from having them around."

"I think we're really at a point where hopefully, we'll see a paradigm shift in how people see these structures," Mr. Steinbach added.

Not likely, say environmental groups and

CHECK OUT THE ROCKFISH

Watch video of bocaccio around an oil platform online at www.lovelab.id.ucsb.edu/YOY_Bocaccio.mov.

others who want to rid the ocean of rigs.

Allowing platforms to be turned into artificial reefs, they say, enables oil companies to dodge their responsibilities and to save the considerable cost of pulling up the rigs, towing them to a harbor, and dismantling and disposing of them.

"There is no interest in the oil industry in increasing fish populations," said environmentalist Bob Sollen. "Their whole interest is in not having to spend money to remove this stuff, which they agreed to do in the first place. These things are really just obstructions on the ocean bottom rather than any enhancement of the environment."

While studies show higher fish populations around the rigs, they don't show any evidence that the debris increases fish production, Mr. Sollen said.

But Mr. Love said in some years, platforms are "absolutely critical" for young rockfish. In March, federal officials decided not to designate 13 oil platforms off the coast of Southern California as "essential habitat" for fish. Some rigs-to-reefs opponents are suspicious of the research by Mr. Love and colleagues because it was funded in part by CARE, which gets "the bulk" of its money from oil companies, Mr. Steinbach said. He stressed that CARE also represents other ocean users, including some fishermen who'd like the platforms to stay as fishing spots.

Mr. Love said as a scientist, he's not taking sides on the issue. His work indicates that the platforms are valuable as fish habitat, he

said, but he doesn't discount other reasons for wanting the platforms removed.

"If people want to ignore this data and say we want them out because they're trash, that's OK," Mr. Love said. "That's fine with me."

But "for biological reasons, it's a much harder sell now."

"In a good year," he said, "the number of fish is just unbelievable. . . . There's so many of them that in some cases you can't see through them."

As well as the bocaccio, he added, "we see very, very large numbers of widow rockfish, which are also overfished, very large numbers of squarespot rockfish and blue rockfish and then a smattering of others."

Mr. Love also was part of a team that used high-frequency radar to study currents in the vicinity of Platform Irene offshore from Vandenberg Air Force Base.

It found that on average, around three-quarters of the young bocaccio that settled around the platform would not survive without it.

"If you're produced out at sea and you're coming into shore, you hit platforms first," Mr. Love explained. "There's less chance for you to die."

There may also be fewer big fish around the platforms, so "your chances of being eaten are less at some platforms than at most natural reefs."

While "it certainly doesn't make sense from an ecological perspective" to remove the rigs and everything that lives on them, said Michael McGinnis, director of UCSB's Ocean and Coastal Policy Center, "I kind of think it's an economic and a political issue."

And for some Santa Barbarans, he said, "It's psychological. It's based on our natural history with oil."

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