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Venture

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Sports 21

Rigs-to-reefs push under way along coast

LONG BEACH • The reef is alive with starfish, scallops, rockfish, garibaldi, sheepshead, mussels, barnacles, invertebrates, sea slugs, sea cucumbers, sea urchins and even feather duster worms.



DAVE STREGE
OUTDOORS

This aquatic community is vivid in color, diverse in sizes and shapes, and as dense as a rain forest.

Marine life abounds, unaware of its

impending death sentence.

By law, this reef, along with 26 others along the California coast, will be destroyed. Everything down to the sea bottom must be removed.

Unless the federal government can be persuaded to give them a stay of execution.

Oil Platform Edith, sitting off Huntington Beach, is one of the 27 offshore platforms that has become an artificial reef.

These marine neighborhoods cover 378,000 square meters, or the equivalent of 75 football fields, which is why the fishing and diving communities and some conservation organizations are pushing for a rigs-to-reefs program.

With this in mind, the California Artificial Reef Enhancement program was established in 1999. CARE is urging the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries to turn decommissioned oil rigs into artificial reefs.

The oil platforms would be cut off near the top to ensure navigable waters. The remain-

ing portions would stay as marine communities. Similar programs are thriving in the Gulf of Mexico and off Florida.

"It's not like we have to reinvent the wheel," said Bill Shedd, a CARE board member.

In an attempt to publicize the rigs-to-reefs effort, CARE took the media to Platform Edith last week aboard the Encore from Long Beach. Divers went down 100 feet with a TV camera to bring back live images of the reef.

Every inch of the metal legs, jackets and crossbeams is covered in colorful life: green, yellow, purple, orange, brown.

"So what do you think, folks? Worth keeping?" diver Bob Wohlens said as he narrated the dive at 100 feet.

"Unbelievable. Look at all the color, all the marine life. ... I can't imagine eliminating that much habitat off our coast.

"You could not begin to count how many animals are on this reef."

Boccaccio, a species at the heart of rockfish closures, are said to inhabit the reefs, using them as nurseries, as other rockfish do in the shell mounds at the sea bottom.

Dan Frumkes of United Anglers of Southern California first initiated the push toward rigs to reefs in 1994.

The long, arduous effort finally resulted in the creation of Assembly Bill 1 — rigs-to-reefs legislation.

The bill would have allowed oil companies to save an estimated \$1 billion by not having to remove the entire platform. They would keep half the money, and the other half

would go into an endowment fund to pay for marine conservation and habitat projects.

Despite the state Assembly and Senate's passing the bill, Gov. Gray Davis vetoed it.

Shedd said it was hatred of the oil companies by extreme environmentalists that led to the action by Davis.

"Since then, we've had a stronger commitment to save this habitat," said George Steinbach, the executive director of CARE.

Steinbach is retired from his job with Chevron in the planning for decommissioning of the platforms.

"We want to educate and make people aware that there's another component; it's not just an oil platform you want removed," Steinbach said.

"It's a main habitat that has value to the fishery and environment. We want people to appreciate the value and want that value to be taken into account when making the decisions to decommission (the rigs)."

Having failed to create the program on the state level, CARE is targeting the federal government since 23 of the platforms are in federal waters.

NOAA Fisheries is currently studying the science, socioeconomic, and legal and regulatory aspects of the rigs-to-reefs program.

"This should happen," Steinbach said. "It makes sense. I want to do my part to make sure it does happen."

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