

## *Oil platforms nurture fish*

*Researcher: Platforms benefit fish numbers*

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The underwater pilings and crossbeams of oil platforms in the Santa Barbara Channel not only harbor bigger and more abundant rockfish than natural reefs -- they also appear to be better nurseries, according to a six-year study by UCSB marine biologists.

"There are so many big fish at the bottom of these platforms that they scare off the small species," said Milton Love, a UCSB researcher who has made annual dives at nine oil platforms since 1995. "In an ironic kind of way, platforms may be more representative of the natural community than our natural fisheries."

Barely off the presses, the study is already being used as ammunition by some fishermen's advocacy groups who support saving the underwater towers of platforms after oil production shuts down. The structures above the water could be lopped off, they say, and de facto marine reserve could be preserved for years to come.

"There's just a goodly number of rockfish around these structures," said George Steinbach, a spokesman for the California Artificial Reef Enhancement Program and a former Chevron platform decommissioning manager. "These are the fish that are in such tough shape. If those platforms are removed, the majority of them will be destroyed."

Many of the 26 oil platforms off Southern California are expected to stop producing within 10 to 15 years. But the idea of leaving part of them standing on the ocean floor is anathema to environmental groups who opposed offshore oil development in the first place. Currently, federal regulations require the oil companies to dismantle and haul away the platforms when they abandon them.

For "rigs-to-reefs" opponents, including trawlers and other commercial fishermen, the underwater scaffolding is so much industrial junk. In 2001, a coalition of 25 environmental groups convinced Gov. Gray Davis to veto a bill that would have given the program a green light.

"Of course fish are going to go around these rigs, because the fishing boats can't," said Susan Jordan, director of the California Coastal Protection Network. "They're not stupid."

Rather than use oil platforms to harbor fish, the state should work to restore the natural marine environment to its former health, Ms. Jordan said.

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"Did Mr. Love test any of the fish for pollutants?" she asked. "Typically, oil platform areas carry with them a high degree of contamination."

Under water at Platform Hidalgo, just south of Point Arguello, Mr. Love looked through the window of a minisubmarine and counted more than 14,000 baby rockfish within six feet of the sub on six visits. They were swimming around in enormous schools in the middle of the underwater "tower," possibly attracted there because it was so large.

The scaffolding also offers protection from predators, Mr. Love said.

By contrast, he said, he counted fewer than 6,000 baby rockfish within six feet of the sub at North Reef, about half a mile away from Hidalgo.

When all ages of rockfish were counted, the total for Hidalgo was more than three times greater than for North Reef.

Rockfish are slow-growing species: they take between four and six years to reproduce. Bocaccio, a popular commercial and sport rockfish, have been fished to about 5 percent of their historical levels. The rockfish catch is severely restricted off the entire West Coast.

At Platform Gail off Anacapa Island, Mr. Love found 400 times as many bocaccio as in the Santa Monica Bay, where recreational fishing is allowed.

In addition to abundant rockfish, he observed layers of mussels several feet thick growing along the pilings and crossbeams of all nine platforms. Under the platforms on the ocean bottom, he saw mounds of mussel shells 20 high, bursting with crabs, shrimp, sea anemones and seastars and inhabited by sizable numbers of lingcod, another overfished species.

"Some of these platforms may be regionally important as rockfish habitat," Mr. Love said. "It's clear that virtually all of the 200 reefs we've looked at in Central and Southern California have been heavily overfished."

Jenna Garmon, a spokeswoman for the Environmental Defense Center, said that some studies have found that the platforms are attracting fish away from the natural reefs.

"Just because there are fish at the platforms doesn't mean that they're providing a benefit to the marine environment," Ms. Garmon said.

The center wants Chevron to remove the shell mounds under four platforms that it dismantled off Carpinteria and Summerland in 1996. Studies show that the mounds are contaminated with heavy metals and hydrocarbons.

Mr. Love said it was possible to restore natural reefs by shutting down fishing and waiting for the fish to grow and reproduce.

"But that would take 30, 50 or 100 years," he said. "And that's not the direction things are going."

**READ ALL ABOUT IT**

Milton Love's report, "The Ecological Role of Oil and Gas Production Platforms and Natural Outcrops on Fishes in Southern and Central California: A Synthesis of Information," is available at [www.id.ucsb.edu/lovelab](http://www.id.ucsb.edu/lovelab).