

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



OUR OPINION



Ripping out the rigs?

The oil platforms that mar the views of the waters off Santa Barbara and put the environment at risk of a spill provoke such strong emotions in people that it can cloud the debate over what to do after their operators decommission the rigs.

When that great day comes should underwater pilings and crossbeams remain to become permanent artificial reefs?

The Santa Barbara City Council in April 2001 went on record against that idea. A staff report noted, "Leaving oil rigs in place will result in area contamination as the rigs continue to deteriorate. If the platforms are not removed, the oil companies would be exonerated from cleaning up these materials."

Perhaps. But we think the public discussion also should include the cost — to nature — of ripping out the giant legs of the platforms. Will this wreak havoc with the seafloor and the marine life that has come to rely on these structures?

Maybe they should be left alone.

The latest evidence to do just that comes from a six-year study by marine biologists at UCSB. They found that the underwater towers in the Santa Barbara Channel are home to more and bigger rockfish than natural reefs.

"Some of these platforms may be regionally important

as rockfish habitat," UCSB researcher Milton Love told the News-Press. "It's clear that virtually all of the 200 reefs we've looked at in Central and Southern California have been heavily over-fished."

Humans have decimated rockfish populations enough without taking further

actions that put these species even more at risk. The UCSB team also saw an abundance of other sea life.

And the debate about what to do with the rigs isn't just academic.

Observers believe that some of the 26 oil platforms off Southern California will stop producing in 10 to 15 years.

Federal regulations require the oil companies to remove

retired platforms. And Gov. Gray Davis last year vetoed a "rigs-to-reef" proposal because of environmental concerns.

Opponents, for example, worry about any contamination from metals and other substances.

No one wants to brush off concerns about the potential impact of leaving the rigs in place. But discussion about harm to nature by removing them needs equal time in the debate.

We think the public discussion also should include the cost — to nature — of ripping out the giant legs of the platforms. Will this wreak havoc with the seafloor and the marine life that has come to rely on these structures? Maybe they should be left alone.

LOOK IT UP

To read the UCSB report, "The Ecological Role of Oil and Gas Production Platforms and Natural Outcrops on Fishes in Southern and Central California: A Synthesis of Information," go to the Web site: www.id.ucsb.edu/lovelab.