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Underwater ecosystem revealed below oil platforms

by James Figueroa

Ten miles out to sea from Seal Beach, on a sterile white oil platform manned by a desolate few at a time, an underwater kingdom flourishes.

There are giant scallops, brittle sea stars, strawberry anemones, Garibaldi fish, and California sheephead.

It is one of the most diverse and largest artificial reefs in the California coast, according advocates who say that oil platforms provide more abundant sea life than natural ones.

"There is a sense of gigantism on the reef," said Bob Wohlers, a member of the California Artificial Reef Program. "It's not genetic, it's just due to the food source."

Earlier this month, Wohlers led a team of divers on an expedition to explore the underwater side of Platform Edith, an oil rig off of Seal Beach owned by the Nuevo Energy Company.

The platform is one of 27 currently along the coast of California. CARE and other groups are hoping to protect them all from being removed after they are capped off and decommissioned.

"There are 378,000 square meters of reef here," Wohlers told boat passengers while he and a cameraman dived up to 100 feet below Platform Edith. "Personally I cannot imagine eliminating that amount of reef."

Rigs-to-reefs platforms say that the rigs function better than the artificial reefs specifically built for that purpose.

Despite the abundant sea life, many environmental groups have argued that decommissioned oil platforms should be removed from the sea floor, holding to requirements that oil companies signed when the rigs were installed.

Opponents of keeping the artificial reefs — which include

groups like the Sierra Club and Surf Rider Foundation — say that they simply draw existing ocean life from other areas.

"A landfill can be considered essential habitat for seagulls and a sewer can be considered essential habitat for rats," Eric Cardenas, a representative of the Environmental Defense Council, told Environmental News Network. "We have to ask, 'Is this beneficial or does it draw fish away from their naturally-occurring habitat?'"

CARE has countered with new studies by UC Santa Barbara professor Dr. Milton Love that show marine life does reproduce on artificial reefs.

It has also pointed to rigs-to-reefs programs that have been

successfully implemented in other states such as Texas and Louisiana. Environmentalists believe that those programs have been successful because the oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico occupy much shallower water.

One attempt to implement a rigs-to-reefs program in California already has failed.

In 2000, state Senator Dede Alpert sponsored a bill that would have allowed oil companies to leave behind the underwater jackets that support the rigs, shearing them off at a depth to allow ships to pass over.

The bill was passed by both houses in Sacramento, but was ultimately vetoed by Governor Gray Davis.

"There hasn't been any other new legislation, but with the new governor, it presents new possibilities," said George Steinbach, executive director for CARE. "The federal government is also taking a look at it."

Until something happens at the government level, CARE is doing everything it can to advocate keeping the artificial reefs, sponsoring numerous dives and expeditions at Platform Edith and other California platforms.

"We bring the visual story at every opportunity we can," said Steinbach, who added that CARE recently sponsored large presentations on the value of artificial reefs in Miami Beach and Washington, D.C.



Sea life sees oil habitat

Some organizations are trying to preserve ocean oil platforms as important artificial reefs, saying the rigs provide more abundant life than natural reefs. Please see story, page 9.

—photo by James Figueroa



Marine biologist Mike Curtis examines a starfish brought up from the artificial reef below Platform Edith.

— photo by James Figueroa