

Protecting Our Marine Life

Coastkeeper Commits to MLPA Process

By Ray Hiemstra

Spanning a vast coastline, the diverse and often spectacular mass of California's land meets the Pacific Ocean. In places, mountains plunge into the ocean. In others, ancient shorelines form terraces above the surf, exposing once-hidden stories of millennia. Streams and rivers cut through the coastal mountains and lowlands and, in some places, flow into bays and lagoons rimmed with wetlands. Offshore, islands and rocks break the surface. In all, nearly 4,000 miles of California's land is touched by the Pacific tides...



Orange County Coastkeeper is playing a major role in the creation of the MPAs in Orange County.

These grand features of the California coastline are the things we can easily see. But beneath the surface of the offshore waters, California's dramatic geological formations continue. Compared to the Atlantic or Gulf coasts, California's shallow continental shelf is relatively narrow, generally no wider than five miles. Nevertheless, a rich diversity of marine habitats exists in this narrow zone, which includes kelp forests, rocky reefs, deep canyons and towering pinnacles. The shoreline is dotted with tidepools, and muddy plains that can be thousands of feet deep.

The waters off California are host to hundreds of species of fish, marine plants, and algae. Thousands of species of marine invertebrates inhabit the sea floor. Many species of coastal and offshore birds spend some part of the year in California's waters, as do 35 species of marine mammals.

For both economic and environmental reasons, we must ensure that our beautiful and productive marine resources are protected and restored. California's rich marine heritage supports diverse commercial and recreational fisheries, and people have increasingly sought enjoyment in observing California's marine wildlife. The near-shore waters are among the world's top recreational destinations for scuba divers, and for observing the flight of birds or the graceful forms of dolphins and whales. Several California institutions are renowned as leaders in marine science.

As in other coastal states, the growth of California's population and economy, especially since World War II, has introduced additional stresses to coastal ecosystems. Coastal development has transformed watersheds, wetlands, and estuaries, and placed greater demands on coastal ecosystems. These stresses include chemical pol-

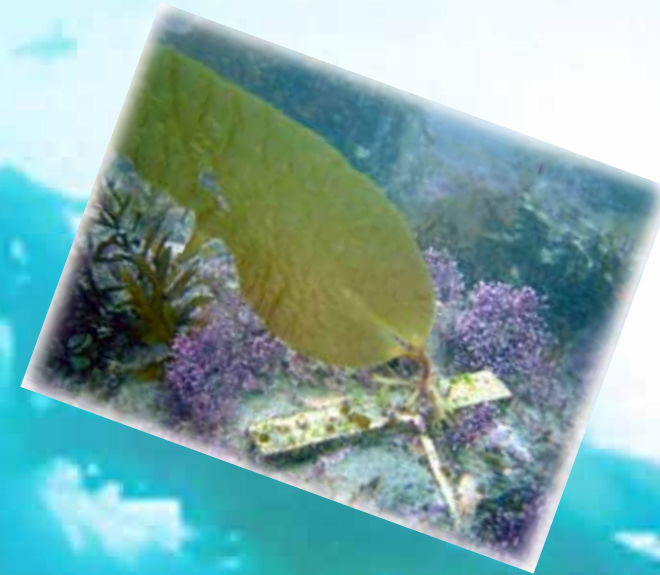
lution, alteration of physical habitat, and invasion of exotic species.

Intake structures for "once-through" cooling systems at electrical power plants kill marine life, and the thermal discharges from these facilities contribute the largest volume of effluent into California's coastal ocean environment. Chemical pollution can alter the abundance and biodiversity of wildlife in coastal environments, especially in bays and estuaries. Pollution ranges from toxic chemicals to partially treated sewage, with sources of potential pollution ranging from sewage treatment plants, to runoff from agricultural and urban areas. Like these other factors, fishing can have impacts on marine fish populations and other wildlife, and has likely been having these effects since humans began to harvest marine species. Improvements in technology and the expansion of fishing fleets have led to overfishing, increased bycatch and habitat damage. Declines in some fish populations have altered species interactions, resulting in adverse ecological impacts.

A history of marine protection

From its first days as a state in the mid 1800s, California has adopted statutes and regulations dealing with the ocean, fisheries, and protection of resources. In 1852, the California State Legislature passed its first fishing statute to regulate the Sacramento River salmon fishery. In 1870, the Legislature responded to the concerns of sport fishermen by establishing a State Board of Fish Commissioners, which later became the Fish and Game Commission. In these and other ways, California led the nation in marine protection efforts. By the end of the 19th century, the California State Legislature had adopted a body of fisheries management law that was a model for its time.

Traditional views of marine fish populations as commodities began shifting more rapidly throughout the 1970s. Marine wildlife and ecosystems were increasingly valued for uses such as tourism, education and scientific research. Recognition grew of the need to balance the capacity of fish-



Orange County Coastkeeper Associate Director Ray Hiemstra is one of the eight Orange County residents who serves on the Regional Stakeholder Group, and he is working to ensure that our fragile Orange County coastal habitats and fisheries get the protection they need and deserve to provide for the future.

Photo by Lee Reeder



ing fleets with the often limited and uncertain productive capacity of marine species. Rather than seeking to extract the maximum yield from marine species, fisheries managers began seeking levels that would be sustainable into the distant future.

To deal with the water quality aspect of marine resource protection, California implemented the Coastal Non-point Source Pollution Control Program in 2000. Since then the state has undertaken a huge effort to improve coastal water quality and habitat. Storm water runoff from large, and medium-sized urban areas is now regulated and improving water quality has become a major focus of state regulators.

In 1998, the Legislature responded to shifts in scientific knowledge and public values, as well as declines in some fisheries and nearshore ecosystems, by adopting the Marine Life Management Act. Before the MLMA, the Legislature was responsible for managing most of California's marine resources harvested by commercial fish-

eries within state waters. Management of commercial fisheries under this division of responsibility was complicated, piecemeal, and often untimely, with both the California State Assembly and California State Senate approving necessary regulatory changes only after much political deliberation. The MLMA transferred permanent management authority to the Fish and Game Commission. The MLMA also broadened the focus of fisheries management to include consideration of the ecosystem—the entire community of organisms (both fished and unfished) and the environment and habitats those species depend on.

A new statewide effort

In 1999, the governor signed the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA). Ten years later, this law is being implemented in Southern California. This act continues a long tradition of legislation that addresses conservation of California's diverse coastal and marine wildlife and habitats. The

MLPA reflects prevailing scientific views regarding the role of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in conserving biological diversity; protecting habitats; aiding in the recovery of depleted fisheries; and promoting recreation, study, and education.

Recognizing the value of MPAs

Recent literature supports the potential value of MPAs for protecting habitat and biodiversity within reserve boundaries. The potential benefits of MPAs to fisheries management include buffering against uncertainty, reducing collateral ecological impacts (e.g., bycatch and habitat damage), managing multi-species fisheries, and improving knowledge. There are compelling reasons to believe that if designed properly, MPAs can contribute to fisheries management. Without experience gained from establishing additional MPAs, assessing the appropriateness of MPAs for fisheries-enhancement purposes will remain difficult.

In August 2004, the California Re-

sources Agency, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Resources Legacy Fund Foundation formed a public-private partnership to provide the necessary funding for a renewed effort to implement the MLPA, after two earlier unsuccessful attempts. This resulted in the MLPA Initiative, under which the MLPA is being implemented throughout California.

The MLPA Initiative established a Blue Ribbon Task Force made up of seven public leaders selected for their knowledge, vision, public policy experience, and diversity of professional expertise, to oversee the implementation process. A Science Advisory Team made up of technical experts in a range of fields including marine ecology, fisheries, the design of marine protected areas, economics, and social sciences to assure the scientific requirements of the law are met. And a Regional Stakeholder Group—made up of members representing commercial and recreational fishing, environmental organizations and local agencies



Photo by Lee Reeder

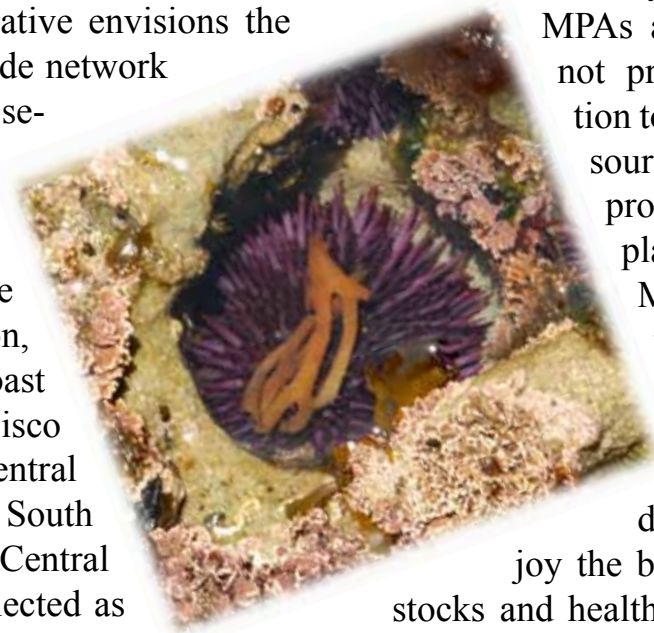
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and cities—is tasked with developing the MPA boundaries. At the end of the work by all these groups, the California Fish and Game Commission has the final say on the implementation of MPAs. The commission has the sole discretion to accept the recommendations developed through the process or to modify the proposals as necessary before adoption.

Rather than attempting to design a single network for the entire state at one time, the MLPA Initiative envisions the assembly of a statewide network by 2011 through a series of regional processes. The MLPA Initiative identified five study regions: the North Coast Region, the North Central Coast Region, the San Francisco Bay Region, the Central Coast Region, and the South Coast Region. The Central Coast Region was selected as the initial study region from which to launch the MLPA, and the process there was completed in 2008. The North Central Coast was next and that process was completed in 2009. The South Coast Region process is currently under way and is scheduled to be completed in mid 2010. The North Coast Region process will begin in late 2009, and the process will be completed with the San Francisco Bay region in 2011.

MLPA in our backyard

The South Coast Region is the largest in the state and stretches from Point Conception north of Santa Barbara to the Mexico border. The 17 million people living in the coastal area heavily use this area both recreationally and commercially. Orange County is a critical location in the South Coast Region and is a perfect example of an area that can benefit from this process.



Currently there are seven small MPAs along our coast that do not provide adequate protection to preserve our marine resources. Through the MLPA process, these will be replaced with a new set of MPAs that will help better protect our marine ecosystems. This process will ensure that Orange County residents will be able to enjoy the benefits of increased fish stocks and healthier ecosystems for generations to come.

Orange County Coastkeeper is playing a major role in the creation of the MPAs in Orange County and the South Coast Region. Associate Director Ray Hiemstra is one of the eight Orange County residents serving on the Regional Stakeholder Group (RSG), and he is working to ensure that our fragile Orange County coastal habitats and fisheries get the protection they need and deserve to provide for the future.

Where does the MLPA process go from here?

After almost one year of work, consisting of three rounds of negotiations, the Regional Stakeholder Group and Blue Ribbon Task Force have completed their work, and submitted four MPA proposals for the South Coast to the California Fish and Game Commission for their consideration. The proposals submitted are: the Group 1, 2, and 3 proposals, developed by the Regional Stakeholders; and the “preferred” proposal that was developed by the Blue Ribbon Task Force, called the Integrated Preferred Proposal (IPA). The proposals will now go through an environmental and legal review before a final set of Fish and Game Commission hearings in 2010. At these hearings, changes can be made before the final MPAs for the South Coast Region are adopted for implementation.

One of the hallmarks of the MLPA process is the fact that the public plays the major role in developing the new MPAs. Since the South Coast Region process began in June 2008, there have been more than 40 public meetings and workshops of the various MLPA subgroups. Taking advantage of this important opportunity, members of the public have submitted hundreds of letters and e-mails, and turned out in force at meetings to make their views known.

It is important to note that the South Coast Region process is not complete. There is still plenty of time and many important reasons for citizens to participate by sending in letters or attending meetings, and we encourage you to do so. All the information you need to participate is available at the Coastkeeper Web site or at the Department of Fish and Game Web site at www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa.

VOICES

Letting the Ocean Lie Fallow A Blue Belt for Laguna Beach

An Interview With Toni Iseman

Interview and photos by Lee Reeder

Efforts to protect marine life on the Orange County coastline extend beyond the formal Marine Life Protection Act process, and sometimes these outside efforts are complementary to its vision. One example is the push to create what has alternately been called a “blue belt” or “no-take” zone for the coastline along the entire city of Laguna Beach for five years. The recommendation, endorsed 4-to-1 by the city council, has been one of the most volatile issues in the community in recent memory. For our “Voices” feature, we interviewed one of the champions of the proposal, Laguna Beach City Council member and former Coastal Commissioner Toni Iseman.

Coastkeeper: When did you first become involved in the MLPA process or in protecting marine areas in general?

Iseman: I was involved before the MLPA process existed. I remember long ago receiving a letter from a man in North Laguna. I didn’t know him and I’ve never met him, but I remember what he said. He wrote about finding fish that had been speared for sport left to die. He was very upset about what he witnessed, and asked if there was anything I could do.

Coastkeeper: How is the ocean around Laguna Beach evolving, and how do you see it changing in the future?

Iseman: There is a group of women in North Laguna who swim almost daily, and because they’re down there, they’re our eyes. They tell us what is happening, what is changing, and about acts of disregard for the ocean. I’ve lived here since 1970, and I remember what the tide pools used to be like. There were big abalone, and now they’re all gone. The kelp is challenged or missing, the sea urchins are eating the kelp, which is essential to so many species. The sheep-head are too small to eat the urchins, and lobsters, which also feast on urchins, are heavily fished by commercial fishermen. Sea lions are not able to get enough fish. Is that because of El Nino, or is it because the marine life is being depleted by overfishing? We don’t know.



Voices *continued...*

Coastkeeper: How does the protection of marine life areas differ from other environmental efforts you've been involved with?

Iseman: This is as volatile an issue as anything that has come before the council in 10 years. When I went to the MLPA meeting in Santa Ana I observed the testimony and it was very passionate. The fishing interest is a bread-and-butter issue for the commercial fishermen. The hardest part of this whole decision for me has to do with the family aspect. I know people who spearfish for their dinner, who go out every night and find food for their families. To me that is a really positive way of taking advantage of our natural resources. Another thing is the social aspect of family fishing—the father and son or father and daughter. They could now go north or south, but it would not be as convenient. I wish there were a way that we could filter for those uses, but it would be impossible.

Coastkeeper: How did you decide to become involved in efforts to create a blue belt in Laguna Beach?

Iseman: The meetings started a couple of years ago, and they would invite members of the council to attend. I sat in and realized it was an amazing group—very passionate and knowledgeable. They were taking the leadership role, and pushed the community to employ Calla Allison, who is our marine protection officer. It was a new collection of people. We had an existing group of environmental people in the community—the usual suspects—but this was a different mix. So people who had never been involved stepped up to the plate on this.

Coastkeeper: Do you think it's significant that there was a new mix on board for this issue?

Iseman: I do. I was mayor in 2007 when the U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Summit took place in Seattle, and I was amazed at what an incredible experience it was—just an awareness that it's a whole new mix of energy dealing with environmental issues. Bill Clinton was there and one of the things he stressed is the environment is our new economy, which is very effective in bringing along people who don't want to believe in global warming, but who would like to see something happen to shake up our stale economy right now.

A local radio station there snagged me for an interview and asked me how we got some of the community to go along with environmental issues. I replied that it was the other way around—it's the community that leads the council. Not that the council doesn't care about the environment, it's just that we have people in Laguna who are so passionate and well-informed that they'll show us the way. This is just another case of the community being ahead of the city.

Coastkeeper: How did they get the word out at first?

Iseman: Mostly on e-mail. We are all connected here. If I wasn't on their list, I was on someone else's list, and the information got forwarded to me. They would come to the council and let people know, or there would be a little notice in the newspaper. There was a lot of word of mouth.

Coastkeeper: Did Laguna Beach people officially become involved in the MLPA process?

Iseman: Laguna Beach has an environmental committee, and there was some cross-pollination there. Some environmental committee

A Blue Belt for Laguna Beach

members became involved with the group, but it wasn't sanctioned by the council or the environmental committee. It was an independent body and they didn't need our input.

Coastkeeper: What made you decide a city resolution was the way to go?

Iseman: One of the reasons I felt it needed to be the entire coast is for clarity. It's so much easier to say, "nowhere in Laguna will this happen." Come down, go to the beach, snorkel, go surfing and do anything you want to do to enjoy the beach, but just don't take anything away. If there is some invisible line where half of Laguna you can and half you can't, well, I'm an old school teacher and I know those excuses: "I didn't know that," or "I didn't see the sign."

One of the arguments is, "How are we going to be able to enforce this?" It seems that it's a lot easier to enforce if you know that everyone out there who is fishing is doing something he or she shouldn't be doing, rather than having to watch, catch, get on board and see what they have. Instead, it's understood you just don't do it here. From a standpoint of enforcement it doesn't take too many times of someone getting caught and seeing the consequences of getting caught, and then the word will get out that it isn't worth it.

Coastkeeper: What do you expect to be the best result of this process?

Iseman: We let the ground lie fallow. To use a farming term, we let the soil rest. At the end of five years the fertility of those waters will improve. The marine life will be stronger and we will have something to show for the future.

The science says it will not only happen within our boundaries, but the improvement will spill out on both sides. The ocean surrounding us will benefit from the fact that we have a big piece of water that is not going to be stripped of its marine life.

Back in the '80s, 79 percent of the voters

in Laguna Beach voted to tax themselves to save our canyon from an ecological and traffic nightmare, so it's in our DNA in Laguna Beach to take care of what Mother Nature gave us.

When you look to the north of us in Newport with all of the boats and Dana Point to the south, this would be the logical place to have a big piece of water that could be protected. If we can capture the entire coast here, it bodes well for visitors, the hospitality industry and everyone.

I think we will all look back on this time and say, "It wasn't easy, but boy did we ever do the right thing."

