

California completes undersea parks network

December 21 2012, by Kenneth R. Weiss

Surviving budget cuts, mobs of angry fishermen, and death threats, California officials Wednesday completed the largest network of undersea parks in the continental United States - 848 square miles of protected waters that reach from the Oregon line to the Mexican border.

The final segment of [marine reserves](#), along the state's North Coast, becomes official today. Its 137 square miles of protected waters reflect an unusual consensus reached between Native America tribes, conservation groups, and fishermen to preserve tribal traditions while protecting marine life from exploitation.

All told, the dozen-year effort has set aside 16 percent of state waters as marine reserves, including 9 percent that are off limits to fishing or gathering of any kind.

State officials got to work shortly after the Legislature passed the Marine Life Protection Act in 1999. It directed them to consider a statewide network of protected waters, modeled after a familiar strategy on land - setting up parks and refuges to conserve wildlife, said Michael Sutton, a California Fish and Game Commissioner.

"It's not rocket science," Sutton said. "If you protect wildlife habitat and you don't kill too many, wildlife tends to do well. We've done that on land with the waterfowl population. Now, we've done it in the ocean for fish."

Marine reserves have proliferated in the past decade, particularly in

remote areas such as the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, the Phoenix Islands and the Northern Marianas Islands.

Yet California's network of reserves is the only one established near a heavily populated coastline. The state issues 2 million [fishing licenses](#) a year.

The network got its start from the late Jim Donlon, an avid sports fisherman from Oxnard who lamented the loss of the big fish he used to catch around the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara. He set in motion a first round of public meetings that resulted in protecting certain rocky reefs, sandy bottoms and other areas around the islands to allow fish populations to recover.

Initially, these reserves were seen as "an insurance policy" against inadequate fisheries management that had allowed rockfish and other marine life populations to plunge to record lows, said Steve Gaines, dean of the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The idea: Protected waters would allow some fish to reach full size and when they swam out of the reserve they would benefit local fishermen by getting caught.

Now, he said scientists realize that marine reserves, if properly located, can become a source of providing larvae to reseed larger regions and benefit entire fisheries.

"That's what's exciting about California's network," Gaines said. "It's big enough that it's going to benefit the species that occur all along the coast."

The size and scope of the network is exactly what filled auditoriums with

red-shirted, shouting fishermen, angry at impending closures of favored fishing spots. The fight has continued in the courts. So far, none of the lawsuits has prevailed.

The American Sportfishing Association, the Virginia-based trade association of the tackle and sport fishing industry, hired Sacramento lobbyists, public-relations companies and organized anglers by the busload to derail the process.

The organization was delighted when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced in 2004 that budget shortfalls required an indefinite postponement, said the association's vice president, Gordon Robertson. What happened next, he said, outflanked the sports fishing industry.

Michael Mantell, a Sacramento lawyer who coordinates philanthropy and conservation, organized the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Marisla Foundation and two others to pick up the state's costs, including paying for panels of local leaders to take testimony and make recommendations. So far, the foundations have spent more than \$23 million.

"The environmental community poured far more resources than the recreational fishing did," Robertson said. He vowed to not let this happen in other states.

Richard B. Rogers, a lifelong recreational fisherman and scuba diver, said the science won him over on the issue. After Schwarzenegger appointed him to the Fish and Game Commission, his work to help establish the reserves was, as he put it, "the single most important thing I've done in life, other than marrying my wife and raising my five kids."

Yet it also put him in an awkward position: vilified as an enemy of his fellow fishermen.

"We got death threats," Rogers said. "There were threats of physical violence."

He remains bruised that some question his allegiance to the sport, ignoring that he owns a boat, and many rods and reels. He supported the reserves for one reason, he said. "I want to make sure my grandchildren have some fish to catch."

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Citation: California completes undersea parks network (2012, December 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-california-undersea-network.html>

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