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Protected areas are a puzzle for fishermen, state

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Ocean ecologist Ed Parnell wasn't surprised when two scuba divers anchored their boat inside the San Diego-La Jolla Ecological Reserve in April and began spearfishing.

What was unusual, he said, is that the poaching suspects and their boat operator were arrested and charged with killing a protected giant sea bass. The three San Diego men are scheduled to appear in Superior Court today for arraignment.

Parnell, a research diver at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, has been monitoring marine life at the reserve since 2001. He frequently finds lost fishing lures, illegal lobster traps and other evidence of poaching within the 512-acre preserve.

If poachers are so numerous and brazen even at the carefully watched La Jolla underwater park, what does that portend for the state's 80 marine reserves, refuges and preserves as they undergo a major and highly contentious reorganization?

The problem is deeper than poaching.

Many reserves were created without a clear mission or scientific design. Researchers also say dozens of the sites, including the La Jolla reserve, are so small that their benefit to the ecosystem is negligible.

Currently, about 3.5 percent of the California coast is within marine reserves where fishing is severely restricted, state figures show. San Diego County has the reserve in La Jolla and tidepool refuges in Encinitas and Point Loma.

Statewide, many of the sites are poorly marked, and widely differing restrictions at each location are confusing to the public.

The net result: Marine reserves, refuges and preserves have existed in California for nearly 70 years, yet most of the public has little idea where they are or why they were created.

Reacting to a groundswell of complaints from fishermen and marine conservationists, the Legislature in 1999



DAVID HINKEL

Diver Frieda Hinkel took a photograph of a giant sea bass off Catalina Island last month. The fish is a protected species.

adopted the Marine Life Protection Act. The law requires the state Department of Fish and Game to re-evaluate and better organize the mishmash of coastal reserves, refuges and preserves, which are collectively called marine protected areas.

"We have an existing array of marine protected areas that don't function as a network," said Melissa Miller-Henson, a consultant assisting with the project.

The state's goal: to create a system that simplifies fishing restrictions and safeguards key habitats.

During the next two years, fish and game officials plan to work with fishermen, divers and environmental groups to establish a comprehensive marine reserve system for the central coast between Point Conception and Pigeon Point.

Reserves for Northern and Southern California will be addressed in 2007, and the entire network is scheduled to be finalized by 2011.

Current protected areas might be expanded, moved or eliminated, Miller-Henson said.

Commercial and sportfishing groups fear the result will be a vastly expanded network of no-take reserves.

The state should continue to fine-tune traditional fisheries management techniques, such as adjusting fishing regulations to protect heavily exploited fish species, said Bob Osborn, a spokesman for United Anglers of Southern California.

"We think it's a bit premature to put in extensive preserves when it hasn't been demonstrated that they are effective," Osborn said.

Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations in San Francisco, said marine protected areas won't do much to increase stocks of migratory fish such as salmon, tuna and yellowtail.

"Marine preserves are not a one-size-fits-all solution for what's ailing the ocean," Grader said. "We need to look at the whole range of factors affecting the ocean's health, most notably pollution."

Two years ago, objections by sportfishing groups forced the state to scuttle its reorganization effort and start over.

Most of California's marine reserves are not managed closely.

In addition, few of them are monitored by scientists. While the lack of data on the reserves, refuges and preserves makes it difficult to assess their effectiveness, more than 80 scientific studies conducted worldwide have shown that no-take reserves increase the ocean's overall biomass – the total number of living organisms, from plankton to porpoise.

"They are the best tool we have for ecosystem protection and preserving biodiversity," said Robert Warner, a marine biology professor at UC Santa Barbara. "Properly designed reserves are a simpler way to manage and protect multiple species of concern."

Marine experts say the problem with many reserves is that they are too small. "Benefits increase directly with

reserve size," Warner said.

The La Jolla reserve, established in 1971, has been successful in safeguarding a few non-migratory fish species – such as vermilion rockfish – and invertebrates such as green abalone. It's also shielded reef habitat and the rim of the La Jolla offshore canyon from trawlers' nets.

But researchers have concluded that the reserve is too small to increase the overall population of fish inside or outside its boundaries.

A study co-authored by Parnell and four other scientists offered this appraisal: "Despite (decades) of protection . . . most fished species have decreased in abundance inside the reserve.

"Without further intervention in the form of increased fishing restrictions or additional local closures, (its) value as a conservation reserve is questionable."

The scientists have proposed creating a reserve that encompasses more of La Jolla's kelp forest, a productive nursery habitat for marine life.

This area southwest of Point La Jolla is one of the county's most popular sportfishing zones.

"We are all going to suffer some consequences and limits on our take and where we can go fishing," said Stephen Benavides, an expert scuba diver from Irvine who served on an advisory board guiding the state's 2003 efforts to revamp marine protected areas. "If we make reserves with boundaries that the public can easily recognize and educate people on where they are, I think people will respect them."

Public awareness and cooperation are key components to making marine reserves work, state officials said.


About 30 game wardens and seven patrol boats monitor the state's 1,100-mile coastline. Internal studies show that game wardens write 10 to 12 citations for every 100 hunters and anglers they contact.

"The vast majority of folks enjoying the outdoors are cognizant of the regulations and are honest," said Steve Martarano, spokesman for the state Department of Fish and Game. "Every major poaching operation we've done in the last few years began with a tip from the public."

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