

## Letters from our readers

### A bailout plan for ocean ecosystems

To the Editor:

All bailout plans, whether economic or ecological, require a leap of faith. But the risk of inaction is usually higher. Even when the price tag for shoring up our national economy runs to the hundreds of billions of dollars, we must invest in its future.

Our marine ecosystems, like the economy, are strongly influenced by poorly regulated human activities. In the ocean, the result of poor regulation is environmental collapse. We have seen this time and again in the Pacific: extinction of the Steller's sea cow, unprecedented fisheries closures, and the dubious distinction of being home to the first invertebrate ever placed on the endangered species list, white abalone. And the collapse of a single species often results in collateral damage to the rest of the ecosystem, much like when a single sector of the economy fails and we all suffer.

So how can we stop repeating history and restore the steeply declining health of our ocean? Will an ocean bailout plan help? Luckily we have much more scientific evidence upon which to stake our hopes for a positive outcome in California's ocean ecosystem bailout plan than we have for its mortgage crisis equivalent. The Marine Life Protection Act Initiative is a common sense, science-based plan to set up a network of protected areas to return our oceans to health. Although you wouldn't learn this from reading recently published opinions about the proposed network ("An Experiment Worth Watching," Oct. 26 and "Marine Reserves Threaten Subsistence Harvesters" Nov. 18).

This public discussion on the almost completed MLPA process for the north central coast was prompted by complaints of commercial seaweed gatherers from Mendocino County who declined to participate in the MLPA process, but now seek special treatment from the Fish and Game Commission. They want permission to take seaweeds within the newly proposed MPAs (and remain virtually unregulated and take species identified as vulnerable to exploitation), despite the very inclusive and thoughtful public process used to design the proposed MPAs. It is also unfortunate that even those who are supportive of the MLPA inadvertently help to spread the myth that scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness of MPAs somehow does not apply to California's coast.

In fact, a large body of scientific evidence supports the conclusion that a well designed network of MPAs can achieve the goals of the MLPA, namely: protecting marine life, habitats, ecosystems, and natural heritage, improving recreational, educational and research opportunities provided by marine ecosystems that are subject to minimal human disturbance. A diverse group of community members (including fishermen, abalone divers, Native Americans, and conservationists) contributed to the design of an MPA network for the north central coast.

That proposed network, currently under consideration by the Fish & Game Commission, was designed to maximize ecological benefits while minimizing socioeconomic impacts. Local stakeholders worked together for over a year, with guidance from the science advisory team and others.

Their intent was not to prohibit fishermen and others from making a living, but to protect ecosystems proactively, before they get in trouble, and help protect wild populations from overexploitation due to inadequate regulation. One predicted benefit of an appropriately designed network

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of MPAs is that it will replenish populations of some fished species even outside the boundaries of the MPAs themselves.

Just like an economic bailout plan, the Marine Life Protection Act is an investment in the future health of our oceans, and it will, provide an excellent return for fishermen and other ocean users on the natural capital safely invested inside the boundaries of the MPAs.

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