

# The Malibu Times

Thursday, February 23, 2006

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## News

### [Santa Monica Bay is murky water to state regulators](#)

Wednesday, February 22, 2006

#### **An under-funded and inflexible Department of Fish and Game depends on nonprofits for vital research.**

By Max Taves /

Special to the Times

A large-scale effort to collect detailed data of California's marine ecosystems coordinated by the Department of Fish and Game in 2004 left the Santa Monica Bay virtually unexamined.

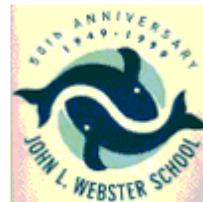
While trained divers from the department and environmental groups gathered comprehensive data on the quantity and vibrancy of marine life from 68 distinct ecosystems along the coast from Monterey to San Diego, only one area within the Santa Monica Bay was studied, and all coastal waters north of Point Dume and south of Santa Barbara County went unstudied.

With the prospect of a liquefied natural gas terminal being built off Malibu's coast, marine biologists at local environmental groups and within the federal department worry that studying its impact on local fish populations will be hampered. Because the department has collected little data from Malibu and the rest of Santa Monica Bay, scientists will not be able to accurately assess the costs of human impact.

The department defended its decision not to study the Santa Monica Bay more thoroughly during the Cooperative Research and Assessment of Nearshore Ecosystems, or CRANE, in 2004.

"CRANE was primarily a rocky reef program, almost exclusively a rocky reef program," said John Ugoretz, the director for all nearshore ecosystem research for fish and game. "And Santa Monica Bay does not have as near as much rocky habitat as other areas along the coast."

Local environmental groups, however, argue that the



department's absence in the region began long before CRANE.

Malibu, Ca



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Tom Ford has dived several times per week off Malibu's coast for the past eight years while monitoring the growth of kelp for the Santa Monica Baykeeper, a local environmental group. He respects scientists at the department, but he thinks they are too underfunded and understaffed to be effective.

"In that entire time that I've been here, the Department of Fish and Game has never been a physical presence in the field. I've shared one afternoon [with a department employee] when a fish and game boat came by," Ford said.

In the face of frequent budget cuts and an infamously inflexible financial structure, the department that develops and manages the state's marine resources relies on private environmental groups for data on Malibu and the rest of the Santa Monica Bay.

In a conversation with The Malibu Times, Mary Bergen, the department marine biologist responsible for studying Malibu and the Santa Monica Bay, acknowledged the department's inadequate knowledge of the region.

"Except for collecting data on [fish] catch, we don't have much regular sampling... We really do need to have regular fish surveys, but, unfortunately, we don't have the funding to do it," Bergen said.

State law requires that the department must use the funds collected from selling hunting and fishing licenses to support programs that benefit hunters and fishermen. Substantial and steady declines in the demand for licenses since 1980 have made conservation efforts increasingly difficult to fund, according to a study by the independent Legislative Analyst's Office.

Employment within the department's Marine Region is down 25 percent in the past five years, and the department biologist, Bergen, who monitors the Santa Monica Bay, is a part-time employee.

Although numerous government agencies and nonprofit groups study the Santa Monica Bay, their decentralization obscures attempts to understand the overall health of the ecosystem.

"There are a lot of different groups collecting data right now, but they are not using the same methods. So you can't really compare what someone is doing in San Diego to what someone is doing in Santa Monica Bay or Santa Cruz," Craig Shuman, director of Reef Check's California operations, said.

In an effort to create a more universal standard for studying fish populations, Reef Check crafted a solution: the California Monitoring Protocol. Developed in collaboration with marine biologists throughout the state, the protocol was intended as a human impact survey rather than a detailed environmental study. Following the protocol, key vertebrate and invertebrate species would be studied as a proxy for the overall health of marine ecosystems.

In the absence of a statewide government effort and a large budget, Reef Check plans to train volunteer divers rather than scientists to survey fish populations. Encouraged by its experience with networks of volunteer divers in the Caribbean, Reef Check has begun training California divers recruited locally. Many divers from Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades are currently training with Reef Check. No divers from Malibu have enrolled.

Reef Check has raised the financial support to fund dives in similarly understudied sites along the central coast of California, but it has not yet raised enough funds to study fisheries off Malibu's coast.

Trends in local diving, however, might make an all-volunteer crew difficult. Carter Crary, owner of local dive shop Malibu Divers, started and managed two diving clubs in Malibu that died a "slow and painful death." He welcomes the efforts of Reef Check, but he said that his expectations are tempered by his experience.

"My impression is that the local diving population is diminishing ... which is unfortunate. You just don't see it as much as you used to," Crary said.

Officials at the department do not expect "big changes" in funding, and the department's policy toward the Santa Monica Bay is unlikely to change.

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