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Dr. Sylvia Earle

A platform for debate

Conference discusses the fate of unused oil platforms and their surrounding sea life

By CATHY TRAN
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HUNTINGTON BEACH- Beneath the tips of the steel oil platforms off California are millions of sea creatures—clusters of pink and yellow sea stars, bright orange anemones that overlap one another, and schools of striped fishes.

By law, the 27 oil platforms need to be removed after they dry out. Seven of those platforms are off Orange County and are expected to be taken down within the next few decades.

And that worries many people – everyone from divers to fishermen — because these platforms have become artificial reefs.

"It's hard to tell sometimes whether a picture has been taken on a natural reef or on a rig if you don't look up and see this great structure above you," said Sylvia Earle, the oceanographer who helped pioneer deep sea exploration in mini-sub.

"You've got a cross-section of life in the sea. Its diversity is greater than most rain forests."

Earle was talking to about 170 people including scientists, stakeholders, and policy-makers who turned out for the "Rigs to Reef Conference" on Friday at the Waterfront Hilton.

The attendees were there to address a couple of contentious questions: Should California allow oil companies to leave their platforms in the ocean to maintain these habitats? Or should they be removed?

"If I had a vote, I'd stay let them be," said Earle, the former chief scientist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "They're thriving."

Others, however, would vote differently.

Linda Krop, chief council of the Environmental Defense Center, said that if the state were to create an artificial reef system, there needs to be consideration of where to place the structure and how to build it.

"You don't just say there's a platform—let's just leave it," said Krop. "There are birds on telephone lines and sea gulls in landfills. Just the presence of animals does not mean that it's providing habitat."

But some studies suggest that the oil platforms are beneficial to ocean life.

Milton Love, a marine biologist at UC Santa Barbara, found that between 1996 and 2001, the densities of both bocaccio rockfish and their larva in the Santa Barbara Channel were greater on the artificial reefs than natural reefs.

"It's much easier to see a water column if you're drifting around than it is to see a reef," said Love.

Christopher Lowe, a researcher at Cal State Long Beach, found that when his team tagged fish and took them to natural reefs, some run back to the platforms.

"I just hope people will think of what's good for the ocean [and]what's good for the future, not just what's good for their psyche because it feels good to beat up the oil industry or it feels good to get that old structure out of there," said Earle.

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**Fish Ecology in the News
"A Platform for Debate"**

**Asa Spiller
4/10/07**

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http://www.ocregister.com/ocregister/homepage/abox/article_1637579.php

"A platform for Debate" describes the issues related to a recent conference in Huntington Beach, California. The conference focused on the artificial reefs that have developed on decommissioned oil rigs off the California coast. Stakeholders in attendance included scientists and policymakers. They discussed the environmental, economic and policy implications associated with leaving the rigs in place or removing them from the ocean.

The article reports that a diverse array of fish and invertebrates make a home in the artificial habitat provided by an oil rig's structure. Sylvia Earle, a former chief scientist for NOAA suggests that these rigs hold more species than some rain forests.

There are many anthropogenic interests associated with the reefs. Scuba divers and fisherman enjoy the fauna and aesthetics of the reef. The ecologists in attendance at the conference are interested artificial environment created by the rig itself. Some oppose leaving the rigs in place, such as Linda Krop of the Environmental Defense Center. Oil companies and contractors undoubtedly have a role in this debate, but were not mentioned in the article.

Oil rigs are not well liked, because of their obtrusive appearance and effects on the environment. Supporters of the artificial reefs contend that opponents are caught up in the stigma surrounding the oil business, and are looking for a chance to "beat up the oil industry."

The account given by the author of this article seems biased towards leaving the rigs in place. The author offers poor supporting details to justify the benefit of rig reefs. The scientific studies used in the article do not point out distinct relationships, however, the author suggests the relationships exists. For example, the author says that the reefs may be beneficial to ocean life. To further the point, the author cites a study showing an increased density in one species relative to artificial reefs. While interesting, this study does not support the conclusions.

Knowledge of the benefit/harm that artificial reefs cause should be investigated by fish ecologists. Perhaps through observation and study, fish ecologists could legitimately conclude if the rigs offer a needed service to the coastal communities of oceans. Opponents of the rigs concede that artificial reefs could be beneficial if constructed properly and placed in an optimal location.