

Fishing Permanently Banned Around the Channel Islands

A reserve, encompassing 175 square miles, takes effect Jan. 1 and is one of the largest in the U.S.

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SANTA BARBARA -- The California Fish and Game Commission on Wednesday permanently banned fishing from 175 square miles of ocean around the Channel Islands, approving one of the largest marine reserves in U.S. waters.

The decision culminated four years of scientific and public study and debate over the wisdom of substituting traditional fishing restrictions, such as size and catch limits on selected fish, with a reserve system that protects all forms of marine life.

"California once again is in the vanguard of environmental protection," said Fish and Game Commissioner Bob Hattoy. "This is good for the fish, good for the fishermen and good for future generations."

Hundreds of angry, placard-carrying fishermen said the decision would cut into their livelihoods as well as put some of their favorite fishing grounds off limits.

"We pay a lot of dollars [in fishing license fees] to the Department of Fish and Game for the management of fisheries," said Tom Raftican, president of United Anglers of Southern California. "I have a very difficult time paying for an area I cannot fish."

The commission's 2-1 vote establishes a network of 13 marine reserves and conservation areas in state waters strategically placed around the five islands to give a wide array of fish and shellfish a chance to recover from decades of excessive fishing.

Enforcement of the marine reserves will begin Jan. 1. The size of the areas set aside could grow depending on action by the federal government. Over the next year or two, federal officials will decide whether to expand the cluster of reserves into federal waters, which begin three miles from shore.

A combined state and federal reserve system could ultimately encompass 426 square miles, making it the largest complex of marine reserves in the continental United States. The nation's largest surrounds the northwest Hawaiian Islands.

The reserves established Wednesday are considerably different from the federal

actions taken over the summer to ban bottom fishing for rockfish across much of the continental shelf off California.

Under those rules, fishermen may continue catching tuna, barracuda or squid near the surface. They also can fish for halibut, which generally live on sandy bottoms, away from the rocky reefs that are home to rockfish.

In contrast, the new Channel Islands marine reserves are permanent and protect all sea life, from the biggest bass to the tiniest snail.

Eleven of the 13 areas are no-take reserves, which means no fishing of any kind, no diving for lobster or urchins and no harvesting of kelp.

Two of the 13 areas are designated as "conservation areas" and allow for limited recreational fishing and commercial lobster trapping.

Gov. Gray Davis said he was "delighted" by the vote.

Approving the Channel Islands reserves was a test case for state Fish and Game officials, who next year will consider imposing no-fishing zones and conservation areas along the state's 1,150-mile coastline.

Although the concept of reserves is not new, existing reserves are tiny. Around the Channel Islands, for instance, the only reserve is a 37-acre area off Anacapa Island.

Still, scientists say the sea life inside the reserve boundaries is remarkably abundant compared to surrounding waters that are open to fishing.

According to Mark Hixon, a marine scientist at Oregon State University, the larger the reserves, the larger the potential benefits, including the size of the resident fish. The larger the fish, the more eggs it tends to produce, Hixon told the commissioners.

"You have to have big, fat females in the system, because they produce an enormous amount of eggs," he said. The problem, he said, is that with intensive fishing, most fish never get a chance to reach that size.

Only about 1% of the world's oceans are now closed to fishing. In California waters, less than .02% is inside no-take reserves.

But reserves have begun to appear all over the globe, as the world's leading marine scientists have called for 20% of the oceans to be set off-limits to keep many types of fish from becoming extinct.

Bob Fletcher, a lobbyist for charter boat operators, insisted that the

commissioners were being misled by "theoretical science" about the benefits to sea life while failing to consider the very real economic loss to fishermen.

Recreational fishermen argued passionately that they were not responsible for the decline of fisheries. Instead, they pointed to commercial fishermen who sweep through with massive nets that kill tons of fish.

But government scientists say that's not entirely true around the Channel Islands and elsewhere in Southern California. Fish have declined to such an extent that many of the commercial fishermen have moved on or gone out of business.

Recreational anglers caught 150 tons of bocaccio from 1998 through 2000, while commercial fishermen caught 23 tons during those same years, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Bocaccio, a popular red-colored fish commonly sold as "rock cod," is so depleted it is being considered for listing as an endangered species.

A number of fishermen directed their wrath at commissioner Hattoy, a former Sierra Club regional director and Clinton administration official who was recently appointed by Davis to the commission.

"Some of you will call me wrong," Hattoy told several fishermen who heckled him. "But your grandchildren will call me right."

In voting for the reserves, Hattoy was joined by fellow Davis appointee Sam Schuchat. Commissioner Mike Chrisman, who was appointed by former Gov. Pete Wilson, voted no. Two other commissioners were absent.

Now, the staff of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and National Marine Fisheries Service will begin a lengthy process of federal rule-making that will help determine the ultimate size of the reserve system.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council, which sets federal fishing rules, will also take up the matter. Executive Director Donald McIsaac said that while the council generally supports marine reserves, it had not come to a decision about the Channel Islands.

A panel of scientists had recommended that 30% to 50% of the waters around the Channel Islands be protected to allow depleted species to recover and begin "seeding" surrounding areas with larvae and spillover fish.

Fishermen wanted 13% or less placed off limits.

When a two-year effort to reach consensus failed, the state Department of Fish and Game and the Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary came up with a

compromise plan. The first phase was approved Wednesday.

If the federal officials follow suit, the combined reserve system would protect about 25% of the waters immediately surrounding the islands.

"This is a good first step," said Linda Krop, chief counsel of Environmental Defense Center of Santa Barbara. "Hopefully, this will be seen as a model for additional reserves along the West Coast."

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