

Opinion: Congress' politics getting otter

By David Helvarg

The U.S. economy remains in such dire straits that Congress barely has had time to introduce a bill to exclude sea otters from migrating into Southern California waters. And if you think they ought to take a more commonsense approach to our coastal economy, they just voted to defund that, too.

Rep. Elton Gallegly, a Republican from Simi Valley (Ventura County) has introduced the Military Readiness and Southern California Sea Otter Conservation Act, on what must have been an Opposite Day because the bill's aim is to exclude sea otters from migrating back into their historic range south of Point Conception, though no one at the Pentagon seems to care.

The bill was inspired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recent decision to give up on a failed 25-year policy – supported by commercial fishing interests – of trying to stop otters heading south. Past captures and relocations killed a number of young otters trying to colonize new territory. But in recent years, the small population around Monterey has failed to grow and so is at risk of extinction should a major oil spill or other disaster strike.

The bill claims that if the otters are allowed to establish a new population off someplace like Malibu, then they'll interfere with military exercises. Six months ago, I spent time with the Navy and Marines training off Southern California and not one sailor or Marine expressed fear of otters to me. In fact, they got kind of excited when we'd spot dolphins, whales and sunfish in the waters off our ship.

Still, a California sea urchin diver told a House committee, "We need to balance the needs of all species, including human

beings.” Apparently California’s sea otters, now numbering around 2,700, threaten to crowd out California’s 37 million people. The citizens group Friends of the Sea Otter calls Gallegly’s bill “dangerously counter-productive.”

It’s stories like this that make one wish that President Obama’s National Ocean Policy, which he signed in the wake of the BP oil blowout in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, would get implemented sooner rather than later. This initiative, after all, is based on the recommendations of two blue-ribbon commissions, one appointed by President George W. Bush and the other headed by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.

David Helvarg is an author and executive director of the Blue Frontier Campaign. His book, “The Golden Shore – California’s Love Affair With the Sea,” will be out in 2013.

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