

THE REEF SEEKER



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RIGS TO REEFS PETITION

I noticed on Facebook over the last week or so that there's a Change.org petition going around to support the idea of turning decommissioned oil rigs into artificial reefs. While it's a great idea in general, there are some serious diver-related issues - and they're in this petition specifically - that I thought I'd cover here. The idea - usually expressed as "Rigs2Reefs" - has been around for almost 20 years. I got involved in the first iteration in the late 90s but the issues raised then still haven't really been fully resolved.

The movement stems from the fact that when oil companies were first granted permission to build these rigs 40 or more years ago, the deal was supposed to be that when they reached the end of their useful life, the companies would then dismantle the rigs down to the seafloor, leaving the area as if the rigs had never been there in the first place. It's a very nice idea in theory but it becomes much more compli-

cated in when you try to put this into practice.

For one thing, it was going to cost the oil companies tens to hundreds of millions of dollars to dismantle these rigs. Needless to say, even though that was the original deal, it's not something they really wanted to do from a financial standpoint.

One unintended or unanticipated consequence of having these rigs in place - and the Eureka and Ellen/Elly ones off of Huntington Beach are excellent examples - is that sea life was attracted to them, just like sea life gets attracted to a shipwreck, and a reef developed and flourished. So now, many, many years after they were first built, you are no longer having hulks of steel in the ocean stretching down to the sea floor, you have true ecosystems.

The oil companies seized on that fact as a negotiating tool and made a fairly simple proposal: Instead of us spending tens of millions of dollars dismantling the rigs and ruining an ecosystem in the process, how about if we leave them mostly in place, dismantle the top part, and donate some of what we've save to the state to be used by Fish & Wildlife expressly for eco-friendly projects?

On the face of it, win/win. The oil companies save money (good for

them), the reef stays in place (good for the environment and the reef inhabitants as well as divers), and DF&W gets much-needed funds for other projects (good for them as well).

A bill to this effect actually made it through the state Legislature but was vetoed by then-Gov. Gray Davis in 2001.

But even back then one of the issues that concerned me as a diver and someone who takes people on the dive trips, was the idea of cutting the rigs below the surface waterline. The problem with that is that, according to USCG regulations, once you take something under the surface, you have to take it deep enough so that it's not a hazard to navigation. Generally, that's around 60 feet, especially in an open-ocean area like where most of these rigs sit.

So picture lopping off the rigs from the surface down to 60 feet - and ignore that fact that that's where the most prolific areas of sea life frequently are - and now you're about to do a dive on this structure. There can't be any buoys on these lopped-off rigs because the buoys would also be a hazard to navigation. No longer can you surface swim over to the exposed structure and use that as a guide for your descent. Instead, you will now be required to drop into sometimes-clear-but-often-not-clear water,

and hope that as you hit the 60-foot mark, you'll still be on target and a current hasn't drifted you off the mark. Because if you miss, and you're not watching your depth, the bottom in these areas is well beyond recreational depths and the dangers of missing the rig at depth are myriad. (Eureka is in 700 feet of water.)

Essentially, in my view, the idea of having a submerged rig that divers have to effectively blindly descend upon makes these into potential death traps. I can't picture any boat captain in his/her right mind feeling comfortable live-boating recreational divers in this type of a iteration. So cutting the rigs below the waterline effectively puts them off limits to most divers.

The petition that's currently circulating calls for the rigs to start at a depth of 85 feet which, again in my view, makes diving them exceedingly dangerous. This isn't the same as diving a wreck where if you miss the main deck the seafloor may only be another 30-40 feet away. If you miss the rig structure and if you don't have your buoyancy under control, you'll just keep on going to a bottom that could be hundreds of feet deep.

For that reason alone, I'd ask you not to support this specific iteration of Rigs2Reefs. But that doesn't mean we can't make this concept work.

My idea has always been to dismantle the above-water structure but leave the top 10-20 feet of it in place. This way, the structure is still visible to marine traffic both visually and on radar. For those who are concerned that even leaving this minimal amount above the

water would be an "eyesore" when viewed from land, paint the side facing the land blue so it visually blends in with the water.

The other advantage of leaving these slightly above the surface, in addition to having solid structure to guide you on your dive, is that you could also establish a research station with labs and living quarters, or even a rudimentary resort, on the parts of the structure still above water. In the latter case, you might have a little mini-industry going where you could take a boat out to the rigs, be housed in a hotel-like rooms for a few days, and dive the rigs at your leisure. Or, in the case of researchers, they'd be able to do a much more thorough job of observing and detailing their finds than they are able to do now.

I also wish we'd stop calling these things "artificial reefs". They're not artificial. They're real reefs. I dive an artificial reef every Thursday at the Aquarium of the Pacific. The fish are real but all the other components of the reef - the corals, the seafans, etc. - are artificial. Not so with oil rigs. The rig to which everything attaches is man-made, but all the animals, fish and

invertebrates alike, that comprise the reef and the ecosystem are very real. So let's stop calling them "artificial" because they're not. Plus, semantically, using a word like "artificial" makes it seem more OK to destroy part of that reef. It's not OK.

That's the other thing that amazes me about those who insist the rigs be totally dismantled. They claim to be pro-environment and are just asking the oil companies to return things to the way they were, but they're quite willing to destroy tons and tons of biomass and habitat to do that. If an oil company wanted to go drill at a place like Farnsworth and proposed destroying much of the reef to do that, there would be - justifiably - an outcry and opposition. But isn't destroying an entire reef/ecosystem that happens to be dependent on a man-made structure essentially the same thing? Yes, I know that was the original deal. But things change and the creation of these reefs - the one at Eureka is massive and thriving - is an unintended consequence that can't be ignored or just brushed aside.

So the idea of keeping the reefs that have sprung up on these oil

2019 DIVING VACATIONS

July 6-18 • Indonesia

August 10-17 • Isla Mujeres

October 12-24 • Maldives

December 4-10 • Cabo Pulmo

rigs is noble, commendable, and doable. But we don't have to risk the lives of divers who will still want to explore these rigs to achieve this goal. There are alternatives. But the petition currently being circulated through Change.org isn't it. I urge you to not only hold out for a better deal, but actively participate in creating a better plan that will produce the same outcome.



A BASKIN' SUMMER

As you may have heard by now, there are numerous reports coming out about sightings of basking Sharks. These are enormous sharks - only the Whale Shark is bigger - that cruise at the surface and, like their larger cousin, are plankton-eaters. They're been sighted a number of times off of the Northern Channel Islands and there have even been some sightings off of Los Angeles county.

This appears to be some sort of a trend. Over the past 10-15 years, it seems we get more and more whale sightings during the summertime. There are two seemingly opposing theories for this. One is that the plankton and krill these animals feed on has become abundant in our waters and the animals simply move south to follow the feeding opportunities.

But the other theory is 180° opposite which is that food sources have become depleted in their usual

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES				
DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Sun.	June 9	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Thu.	6	Redondo	••• Night Dive •••	\$25
Sat.	15	Redondo	Beach dive (single tank)	\$25
Wed.	19	- CLASS -	- PHOTO WORKSHOP -	\$25
Sat.	29	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Sun.	July 28	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Sat.	Aug. 10	Redondo	Navigation dive (single tank)	\$25

hunting/eating grounds, and so the animals have to venture further south and expand their range to be able to eat. I don't know if there's any way to prove either theory is true or if any researchers are actively doing that.

But the bottom line is that you should plan to keep your eyes peeled this summer, especially when you're in transit to any of the offshore islands. You never know what you may spot and hopefully if you get lucky, you'll get a chance to jump into the water with one of these leviathans as well.



PACIFIC VISIONS AT THE AQUARIUM OF THE PACIFIC

The next time you visit the Aquarium of the Pacific (in Long Beach, in case you didn't know), be sure to check out the brand new Pacific Visions wing. This was a huge (\$53 million) undertaking by

the Aquarium and it features some interactive displays about ocean health, a ten-minute very immersive movie dealing with ocean issues and what we can do mitigate those, and then another interactive gallery which also house tanks containing Delta Smelt, Yellowtail, and Oysters. Those three factor into the story as endangered, farm-raised (reduces wild population stress), and great ocean filters. From start to finish, the whole thing takes about 45 minutes.

It's also a great way to start off your Aquarium experience as it then sets you up for viewing all the other galleries and exhibits and understanding some of the issues facing our oceans and what you can do to make a difference. As we say, if everyone just does ONE thing every day . . .

Be sure to check it out. Also make note that if you're a recent recipient of any guest passes to the Aquarium (from a dive volunteer or perhaps you won them in a contest), because they're expecting some crowds, those passes aren't good again until after Labor Day.

The Aquarium Is located at 100 Aquarium Way in Long Beach, which is basically where the 710 freeway ends, and Shoreline Drive begins. There's easy parking and plenty of other stuff in the area to do when you finished your Aquarium exploration.

GET YOUR GEAR READY FOR SUMMER DIVING

Even though you can dive SoCal year-round, we realize that some you consider Memorial Day to Labor Day to be the actual diving season. So be it. But regardless of when you think the right time to dive is, you want to make sure your gear is in proper working order before you take that first plunge. This is especially true if your stuff's been sitting around for a while.

That's where ace repair guru and service tech Robert Stark comes in. He can do anything from a bench check up to a full service to make sure your gear is good-to-go. And while we generally get

everything done within a week, if you need it quicker than that, rush service is available for a slight extra charge.

Even better, Robert will come get the gear from you if you don't want to trek to his place (near LAX) to drop it off. Just let him know you'd like to use our Concierge Repair Service and he'll pick it up from you and deliver it when it's done, all for an extra \$25 on top of the repair charges.

If you've got questions or you want to schedule something, you can contact Robert directly through our dedicated Reef Seekers repair number, which is 310/947-8523. or reefseekersrepair@gmail.com. But don't short-change yourself. Make sure both you AND your gear are ready to hit the water.



JUNE 2 TO AVALON

We've got an Avalon Underwater Park trip scheduled for this Sunday, June 2. But I need to move it to maybe the following weekend, and could do either Saturday, June 8, or Sunday, June 9. If you were interested either in going this weekend, or would want to go next weekend instead (maybe it's better for your sked), please let me know by calling 310/652-4990 and I'll make a decision. (Next one after this is June 29.)

PICTURE PAGE - Summer diving

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2019)



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***The ubiquitous
CA state marine fish***



***Plenty
of Kelp Bass***



***Who's looking
at whom?***



***Nice
CA Scorpionfish***