



July - 2017



THE PURPLE CORAL DILEMMA

Every now and then, the issue of purple coral protection raises its head and specifically, the purple coral at Farnsworth Bank.

Farnsworth Bank was declared an Ecological Reserve in 1973 specifically to offer protection for the purple hydrocoral. It was also protected by the South Coast MPAs put into place in 2012.

What's very interesting to me is that when I was Googling to get some background on all of this, I came across a study from the State Water Resources Control Board from 1981 that included this: "It is recommended strongly that alternatives to anchoring directly on the Bank be developed. A permanent mooring established on the Bank would reduce destruction caused by anchoring but would require periodic maintenance and may increase diving activity by private vessels. Another solution may be to select an 'Anchor Drop

Zone' and require all vessels to anchor within this zone."

There's no question that dropping anchors on Farnsworth, even when the anchors are dropped in the sand but then the chain drapes over the Bank, causes damage and destruction to some of the purple coral. But the trick to solving this has always been weighing public access with the need to protect the area and it's not a simple matter.

What prompted me to write this is a written article through KCETLink that addressed the issue with the inference that this is a simple problem that authorities ignore. Nothing could be further from the truth. And, since the article is primarily based on interviews and opinions of one guy who's advocating a mooring system, I view it as somewhat one-sided and distorted.

I'm not going to claim that I think about this issue every day, but the main reason I got involved in the whole MLPA process was to make sure that diver access to Farnsworth was preserved. In fact, when the final language of the Southern California MPAs was being drafted, I was asked to frame the language for anchoring at Farnsworth, which included a request for a feasibility study about a mooring system, and then implementation if it was found it could be

done in an acceptable manner (and acknowledging that that's a very fluid term).

Personally, I like the "Anchor Drop Zone" idea and we sort of have that defacto, since all the commercial dive boats pretty much anchor in the same area which is near the high/shallow spot on the Bank.

But some other things to consider:

1. Farnsworth is a very large site. Tip-to-tip, it's a little over 3/4 of a mile long. 99% of the purple coral on Farnsworth is untouched. So statements implying anchors are destroying ALL the purple coral at Farnsworth are simply not true.
2. No question there's anchor damage, IMHO somewhat minimal relatively speaking, around the high spots where the boats anchor.
3. No boat captain wants to take recreational divers out there and live drop. With the depth and the currents, it's a recipe for disaster and lost or dead divers.
4. Moorings in places like Florida, Bonaire, etc., are done in relatively shallow water relatively close to shore. Farnsworth is nothing like that. It's almost 2 miles offshore from the nearest point of land, and a little over 5 miles from the nearest harbor.
5. It's also really deep. While the shallow spot is roughly 53 feet, in general the ocean floor surround-

ing Farnsworth is 150+ and that's where you'd need to put a mooring base to avoid damaging the reef itself.

6. If you're going to do a mooring system, you need to make it accessible to all commercial dive boats. Moorings to hold 80-foot long boats need to have a lot of heft to hold them. If you put those on top of the reef, you'll be destroying for the mooring what you're trying to save by installing the mooring.

7. If you put the mooring in deep water (which is likely the only practical solution), then you will require divers to swim to where they think the top of the reef is, drop down through water that's not always crystal clear, hope they're watching their depth, and hope they actually do it right and hit the high spot. (And before someone says, "We'll just put a down line on the high spot," it would never survive the annual boat traffic or the seas over the course of a year.)

8. At the end of this mythical dive, you're then hoping your divers can do an ascent through blue water (or green water - but open water without reference points) from the high spot, not get blown off by any currents while they're in blue water, and also hope the boat hasn't swung 180° while they were under, making the swim back even longer.

9. How do you intend to police the moorings? Are they open to anyone who wants to tie up? Can you stay on them as long as you like? What happens when you have a large commercial boat pull up with 30 divers and there's a small private boat on the mooring and he refuses to leave? What if he stays

for hours and hours?

10. Because these are in open ocean, what happens when some boat rams it at night and sinks, or just destroys the mooring?

11. How many moorings should there be, because the number limits the accessibility?

This is why a study is needed. This isn't as easy as everyone thinks. If the goal is to make Farnsworth an off-limits diving area to protect the purple coral, or to make it a live-drop-only dive area (which will effectively do the same thing because I don't think boat captains will be comfortable running trips under those conditions - it's scary enough already), we don't need moorings to accomplish that. But if the goal is to maintain access and minimize damage - a commendable aim - then we've still got a lot of work to do.

NEW LOBSTERS REGS TAKE EFFECT IN SEPTEMBER

The one that will have the most impact is that the official opening of lobster season is being delayed by six hours. Normally, the season

opened at 12:01AM on the Saturday preceding the first Wednesday in October (which will be September 30 this year). The new regs have the same date matrix, but time will now be 6:00AM on that date. The new opening time, which has been discussed informally for a number of years, was adopted by the Fish & Game Commission on June 22, and the stated reason was "for safety purposes."

Personally from what I've seen, I think it's a good idea. We always avoided booking Opening Night trips like the plague, mainly because what you end up with, especially in the wee hours of the morning, are bug-crazed divers operating on little sleep and sometimes safety concerns go by the wayside. While things have been OK in very recent years, there were certainly a number of years where we've either had serious injuries or fatalities that first overnight, and we've long felt that lack of sleep and fatigue likely factored in.

This is certainly not a good thing for the boat captains, as some of them have already mentioned altering dive plans with the later start. By the same token, there would be nothing stopping them

2017 DIVING VACATIONS

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Where to in 2018????

(and you) from still going out Friday night, scout out some spots in the wee hours, get some sleep, and then hit the water at 6:00AM before the bugs have a chance to scamper away. And while hunting lobsters during the day is trickier than at night, all that's really lost here is that initial six hours, which might (as some would argue) be fraught with the most danger, both for you and the lobsters.

As we've said for years, no lobster is worth losing your life, and while the initial reaction might be, "Oh, that would never happen to me," it's always better to be safe than sorry.



SHARK STAMPS

I was going to start with "Wanna lick a shark?" But since everything today is self-adhesive, that doesn't work. I'm talking, of course, about U.S. postage stamps.

The United States Postal Service has announced a series of five (the fifth is a Hammerhead) Forever (49¢) shark stamps and they'll officially unveiled on July 26, at the Newport Aquarium in Newport, Kentucky. They should be available shortly after that in local post offices.

While we as divers know this, here's the official statement from USPS: "Possibly no other crea-

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES

BEGGING YOUR INDULGENCE AGAIN
AS I'LL BE IN YAP MOST OF JULY
AND I'VE GOT SOME OTHER TRAVEL IN AUGUST.
I WILL TRY TO TACKLE THIS
ON THE PLANE RIDE(S) TO YAP.
PATIENCE, MUDSKIPPER.

tures are as mythologized — or as misunderstood — as sharks. Blockbuster thrillers and sensationalized media have fueled the belief that sharks are monsters: unthinking, bloodthirsty, vengeful and primitive. While they are ancient creatures, having emerged long before the first dinosaurs, after 400 million years the 500 or so known shark species have adapted to their ecological role. Sharks' adaptations include light, flexible skeletons of cartilage, teeth replaced without limit and skin covered by a hydrodynamic surface of tiny tooth-like structures. Their keen senses include one that detects electrical signals given off by prey and enables navigation by Earth's magnetic field. Their nervous systems are also adapted to sense miniscule water movements, such as the struggles of a far-off fish."

We plan on getting a bunch of the shark stamps, so any mail you get from Reef Seekers in the near future will likely be shark-adorned.

ABALONE PROBLEMS

A recent survey of abalone stocks in the North Coast area indicates that new regulations and/or closures may be necessary. One of the issues has been that there's been two years of warmer-than-

normal water temps, which has prevented the kelp from spreading as well as one would hope. Add to that a sea star wasting disease which has allowed purple urchins to flourish (they're usually eaten by sea stars). The urchins have in turn been grazing on the already-thinned kelp beds and that deprives abalone of their primary food source.

One of the problems is that it takes red abalone (which they still find up there) 10-12 years to reach legal size, so the effects of what's going on may not be really known for some time. While no decisions have been made about the 2018 season, this year's 2017 season has already been reduced by two months (ending now in October), and the season limit has been dropped from 18 to 12.

The study was presented to DF&G commissioners by Sonke Mastrup who used to be Executive Director and is now invertebrate program manager. It seems there's widespread consensus that the fishery is in trouble and that the current management plan is not sustainable. The trick is trying to figure out what exactly the new direction should be. Mastrup said all options should be on the table, including a total shutdown.

We'll try to keep you posted as this situation evolves.



NEW LAPTOP RULES

The good news is that it's not an outright ban of laptops in your carry-on to use during the flight as many had feared would be the case. The bad news is, well, we're not sure what the bad news is yet because the guidelines are pretty vague, at least as of this writing.

But on June 28, new security measures were unveiled for foreign flights arriving in the United States.

This affects all airlines, not just foreign ones. And it's not just limited to a few countries.

So to be clear at the outset, none of this affects domestic flights within the U.S., nor does it seem to affect international flights leaving the U.S. for foreign airports, nor does it affect flights from Hawaii or Alaska which are also considered domestic flights.

The new regs require "enhanced screening measures" without really specifying what those are. Some of it may involve more/better explosive detection of laptops, other things might be better vetting of airport personnel with access to planes and the like. So, the way I read most of this, it's sort of unclear as to what the specifics are except that our official policy is

now "we'll do it better."

But again, it's not an outright ban. And it basically, unless other governments institute something similar, it will only affect you when you're returning to the U.S. and only on the specific flight that will land in the United States. So when we returned from Egypt, it would not have affected the Hurghada-Cairo flight, it wouldn't have affected the Cairo-Frankfort flight, it would have affected the Frankfurt-Chicago flight, but not the Chicago-LAX flight. So expect some confusion.

Also, if you're flying internationally in the next month or so, allow extra time when you arrive at your departure airport as there are bound to be some delays while they work out the kinks in all of this.

PICTURE PAGE - SoCal critters

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2017)



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