



New Blue Legacy

California's Waterkeepers are Pioneering America's First Marine National Parks.

**By Linda Sheehan,
Executive Director,
California Coastkeeper
Alliance**

If there is any stronger and more effective advocate for our waters than a Waterkeeper, it's a group of Waterkeepers working together. Take, for example, the California Coastkeeper Alliance (CCA)—which came together in 1999 as a coalition of Southern California Waterkeepers working to implement a giant-kelp restoration project. Launched in 2001, the six-year project re-established nearly 200,000 sq. feet of kelp beds, most of them in Santa Monica Bay, and educated the public about the critical role of kelp forests in marine ecosystems. CCA has since expanded to include all 12 California Waterkeepers, spanning the state's entire coast.

CCA's strength shows most clearly when its members work closely on a joint venture. A good example is the organizations' work on the implementation of the California Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA). Passed in 1999 with the strong support of California Waterkeepers, the MLPA directs the California Department of Fish and Game to develop and manage a network of marine protected areas off the state's shores. Similar to national parks on land, marine protected areas are designated for preservation by regulation of activities within their boundaries. The goals of the MLPA are to protect the natural diversity and abundance of marine life and the integrity of marine ecosystems; improve recreational, educational, and study opportunities consistent with

protecting biodiversity; and preserve the state's natural, cultural and historical marine heritage.

To implement the MLPA, California divided its coastal waters into several "study regions," each with its own Science Advisory Team, Regional Stakeholder Group and Statewide Interests Group. During the MLPA process, scientists identified hundreds of species of fish, birds, marine mammals, invertebrates and plants likely to benefit from marine protected areas, and researched ecosystems important to the survival of those species.

By 2007 the Fish and Game Commission had established 29 marine protected areas covering 204 sq. mi., including 85 sq. mi. designated as no-take zones in the first study region, the Central Coast. The North-Central Coast's protected areas are to be established this summer; the South Coast's in late 2009, the North Coast's in 2010, followed by San Francisco Bay's. The entire network of protected areas should be in place by 2011, making California the first state to enjoy the benefits of a scientifically conceived network of marine protected areas.

The California Coastkeeper Alliance and its member Waterkeepers, with their unique blend of statewide and local expertise, have been key participants in the implementation of the MLPA. The state has appointed CCA to the Statewide Interests Groups for all three study regions to date, enabling

California's Waterkeepers to present their perspectives. In particular, CCA has emphasized the need to protect water quality in the marine protected areas, a critical issue that might otherwise be given insufficient attention in a process driven not by a water-resources agency but by the state's Fish and Game department. For their part, the individual Waterkeepers, with their close connections to local communities, have been actively involved in the development of the proposed boundaries of the marine protected areas in their regions.

In the Central Coast region, the Monterey Coastkeeper and San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper have tasked themselves with educating the public about the 29 newly-designated protected areas in that region, along with supporting enforcement. (Observing that many of the designated areas overlap areas protected by water-pollution laws, San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper Gordon Hensley wryly notes that Waterkeepers' pollution experience is essential to marine-life protection, because "water shouldn't kill the things that live in it.")

In the North-Central Coast region, along the San Francisco Peninsula north to Mendocino County, the Russian Riverkeeper and San Francisco Baykeeper have been making the case for a strong network of protected areas to the Fish and Game Commission, which will make its decision on this network in August. "I took part in the MLPA process after I repeatedly saw endangered salmon and steelhead being targeted by recreational fishermen offshore, where the fish had no protection," says Don McEnhill, Russian Riverkeeper. "Together with other stakeholders, we proposed a no-take marine conservation area in the Russian River estuary and just offshore of the river, which would protect critical summer juvenile nursery habitat in the estuary and adult pre-migration staging offshore."

In the South Coast Region, San Diego Coastkeeper, Orange County Coastkeeper, Santa Monica Baykeeper, Ventura Coastkeeper and Santa Barbara Channelkeeper all have been working to develop marine protected area proposals that best ensure the conservation of important marine ecosystems. San Diego and Orange County sit on that area's Regional Stakeholder Group, and Ventura Coastkeeper is advocating for the first marine protected area to be co-managed by the state and Native American tribes, to best achieve the cultural preservation and education goals of the MLPA. CCA and Southern California Waterkeepers' Giant-Kelp Restoration Project has provided data to guide the Southern California MLPA process, as have Santa Monica Baykeeper's aerial surveys and sub-tidal rocky-reef research. "The sub-tidal research in Santa Monica Bay that we have done with Occidental College now comprises the most comprehensive rocky-reef data set in our area," says Santa Monica Baykeeper Tom Ford, "and we aim to improve it even more



Easy Glider: A sea lion enjoys one of Southern California's giant kelp forests.

to ensure that the MLPA uses the best science to protect our ocean."

San Diego Coastkeeper's operations director, Kate Hanley, has been coordinating much of the Southern California Waterkeepers' effort. "The Waterkeepers have brought their local expertise and strong voice for marine ecosystem protection to the MLPA Initiative," she says, "and their active role in bridging gaps among interest groups will lead to more effective marine protected areas."

Humboldt Baykeeper will be actively involved in the upcoming North Coast study region process in coordination with Klamath Riverkeeper, and San Francisco Baykeeper will closely track the last study region, in San Francisco Bay.

In addition to weighing in at official MLPA sessions, Waterkeepers send out action alerts and messages to their members to mobilize interested parties throughout the state to give testimony and send in letters in support of marine protected areas. CCA supports the local groups with statewide funding assistance and is coordinating MLPA advocacy. As an appointee of a key state bond oversight committee, CCA also works to provide specific recommendations on bond funding for clean-water projects in designated marine protected areas.

"The California Coastkeeper Alliance's local engagement and statewide reach are a perfect fit for the MLPA," observes CCA's Angela Haren, an appointee to both the current MLPA Statewide Interests Groups and the state task force charged with directing state water-quality funding to projects that prevent pollution in marine protected areas. "Together, the statewide Alliance and regional Waterkeepers are leading the way in California for healthy, thriving marine ecosystems."

For more information on the California Coastkeeper Alliance's marine ecosystem protection program and Giant Kelp Restoration Project, see <http://www.cacoastkeeper.org/marine-protected-areas.php> and <http://www.cacoastkeeper.org/kelp-restoration.php>. For information on the Alliance's 12 Waterkeeper organizations, see <http://www.cacoastkeeper.org/california-waterkeepers.php>. To learn more about California's Marine Life Protection Act Initiative, see <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/MLPA/>.