

# OIL RIGS PROMOTE FISH HABITATS

*Oil rigs are a boon to fish & coral populations. Though there exists significant opposition from so-called environmentalists, scientific research (in particular, the research done in the Pacific by marine biologist Milton Love) indicates that oil rigs can have environmental benefits, helping to restore currently declining numbers in various fish and marine species.*

## DRAFT

### *Oil rigs are “havens” for numerous types of fish.*

- “A marine biologist has found that 27 oil platforms off California’s Central Coast may be havens for bocaccio, cowcod and other fish...Oil companies are already pressing state and federal officials to keep the rigs in place, citing the findings of the marine biologist, Milton Love, a researcher at the [University of California](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html), Santa Barbara. Dr. Love said many fish adopted the platforms because they could not reach the natural reefs, now decimated, where they once thrived.” (“Citing Oil Rigs as Fish Havens, Companies Resist Removal,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html>.)
  - These Pacific rigs produce 72,000 barrels of oil a day. (“Citing Oil Rigs as Fish Havens, Companies Resist Removal,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html>.)
- “At Platform Gail, which stands in 739 feet of water nine miles off the Ventura coast, Dr. Love found what he believes to be the highest density of two species of overfished rockfish in Southern California.” (“Citing Oil Rigs as Fish Havens, Companies Resist Removal,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html>.)
- “Juvenile rockfish need something hard, like a rock overhang or a man-made structure, to “settle out” and develop a home base. Then they join a school and swim around their structure. The school helps to protect them from predators. Staying in one place allows them to eat the plankton that drift by in the ocean currents. If the juveniles were to drift out to sea with the currents, they would likely be eaten by predators, or starve to death once they ate all the nearby plankton floating with them. The platforms provide structures that the rockfishes need to thrive. ‘Natural reefs are small,’ said Love, ‘and before the time the fish finds one it often gets eaten.’ By contrast, platforms cover the entire water column.” (“Studies show that rockfish thrive with offshore platforms as their home base,” *ScienceDaily*, June 29, 2006. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/06/060629122443.htm>.)

- “The MMS [U.S. Minerals Management Service] Web site trumpets each rig as a fish-rich ‘oasis’ in the vast desert of the Gulf [of Mexico]. Federal studies state that a rig supports resident colonies of up to 30,000 fish, with important commercial and recreational species, red snapper and amberjack listed as two of the most abundant species.” (Ben Raines, “Mercury concerns hit West,” *Mobile Press-Register*, April 7, 2002. <http://www.al.com/specialreport/mobileregister/index.ssf?merc13.html>.)
- **Rigs also produce habitats for coral.** “Coral larvae need a hard surface where they can settle, creating a strong attachment point for a new colony. Most of the North Sea bed is unsuitable for reefs - the bottom is muddy and has few rocky areas. But the oil and gas platforms are ideal platforms for corals. In turn, the reefs provide critical habitats for a multitude of other aquatic animals. This deep-water coral supports a diverse community of sponges, seamats (bryozoans), anemones, bristle worms, crustaceans - the list goes on. As they flourish, they provide food and hiding places for little fish, which in turn provide food for bigger fish, building a diverse and complex habitat.” (Roger Highfield, “North Sea rigs offer coral oasis in the mud,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 14, 2006. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/connected/main.jhtml;jsessionid=X2KKNFQJ4X2HXQFIQMFSFGGAVCBQ0IV0?xml=/connected/2006/03/14/ecncoral14.xml&sSheet=/connected/2006/03/17/ixcon.html>.)
- **“Rigs as artificial reefs” already exist in the Gulf of Mexico.** “Proposals to keep the platforms are modeled on programs in the Gulf of Mexico, where, under arrangements with states, more than 200 rigs have been converted into artificial reefs either by toppling them or by cutting them below the waterline.” (“Citing Oil Rigs as Fish Havens, Companies Resist Removal,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html>.)
- **Nova Scotia energy minister supports greater oil & gas development, believes it can be done in an “environmentally safe manner” in terms of protecting fish.** “Nova Scotia’s minister of energy insists he’s not ‘crazy’ for reopening a once bitter debate about oil and gas development on Georges Bank, one of the richest fishing grounds in the region. Richard Hurlburt told members of the oil and gas industry Tuesday in Halifax he supports exploration in the area off southwest Nova Scotia, where development is banned. . . The federal moratorium on petroleum exploration and development on Georges Bank was put in place in 1988 because of fears of accidents and oil spills. The ban was extended eight years ago and will expire in 2012. But times have changed since the moratorium was introduced, Hurlburt said, and the fishing industry is now struggling. ‘Southwest Nova needs a new industry,’ he said. ‘The findings that they have today show there are reserves out there. It belongs to Nova Scotians, so why shouldn’t we explore it if we can do it in an environmentally safe manner, which I believe we can.’” (“Fish, oil rigs can coexist, energy minister says,” *CBC News*, February 12, 2008. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/nova-scotia/story/2008/02/12/hurlburt-georges.html>.)

- **Removal of oil rigs could kill millions of animals.** “[Marine biologist Milton] Love gets about 80 percent of his research money from the government, and the rest from the California Artificial Reef Enhancement Program, a Sacramento nonprofit group funded almost entirely by oil companies. The group has contributed about \$100,000 a year to Love's research since 1999, executive director George Steinbach said. Love says no amount of oil industry money can sway his research — fish either cluster at the platforms or they don't. And because they do, his personal view is that the rigs should stay in place, cut below the waterline so that ships can pass safely over them. ‘It's immoral to kill large numbers of animals anywhere on earth, and if you remove a platform you'll kill many millions of animals,’ he says.” (Tim Molloy, “Fish a factor in what to do with offshore oil rigs,” *MSNBC.com*, March 15, 2006. [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11808271/.](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11808271/))

**Environmentalist opposition to oil rigs as fish habitats is based upon:**

- **Perceived threat of oil spillage.** “The [Canadian] Ecology Action Centre said oil and gas development could pose a risk to the fish and marine life on Georges Bank, noting there have been three major oil spills in the last three years in Atlantic Canada.” (“Fish, oil rigs can coexist, energy minister says,” *CBC News*, February 12, 2008. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/nova-scotia/story/2008/02/12/hurlburt-georges.html>.)
- **Toxins in the water.** “Independent scientific studies show the sea floor around oil rigs not surprisingly contains high levels of mercury, lead, and other toxins. Peer-reviewed studies in Alaska show that even minute concentrations of common hydrocarbons routinely released at offshore oil facilities are mutating the eggs of pink salmon.” (Linda Sheehan, “Oil rigs as sanctuaries is an idea that’s all wet,” editorial. *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 2006. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4176/is\\_20060323/ai\\_n16164712](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20060323/ai_n16164712).)
- **Oil companies support oil rigs as fish habitats!** “Environmentalists say oil companies are hiding behind fish to escape their obligation to remove the rigs. ‘Just because fish are there doesn't mean the platform constitutes habitat,’ said Linda Krop, a lawyer for the Environmental Defense Center. ‘That's like taking a picture of birds on a telephone wire and saying it's essential habitat.’” (“Citing Oil Rigs as Fish Havens, Companies Resist Removal,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html>.)
- **The belief that fish will return to natural habitats if rigs are removed.** “If the platforms are removed, environmentalists contend, fish will return to the natural reefs that hug Southern California's coast: boulder fields and low-lying, rocky outcroppings that can be home to sponges and other invertebrates.” (“Citing Oil

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/13/national/13rigs.html>.)

- **BUT...scientific evidence contradicts this argument. Oil rigs may actually act as sanctuaries for young fish populations.** “Brian M. Emery, a physical oceanographer with MSI, is the lead author of a second paper which reports on ocean currents in the region of Point Conception to Point Arguello, north of the Santa Barbara Channel and near Platform Irene. The results of a study of ocean currents, using high frequency radar, show that Platform Irene almost certainly increases the survival of young bocaccio in this region. The study was conducted twice, in 1999 and 2002, from May through August, the season when young bocaccio settle out. Emery explained that the research team used radar equipment housed at three locations along the coast and provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the W.M. Keck foundation. **The results showed that, on average, about three-quarters of the young bocaccio settling around Platform Irene would not survive in the absence of the platform. Rather, the prevailing currents would move them offshore where they would have a very low probability of survival.**” (Roger Highfield, “North Sea rigs offer coral oasis in the mud,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 14, 2006.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/connected/main.jhtml;jsessionid=X2KKNFOJ4X2HXOFIQMFSFGGAVCBQ0IV0?xml=/connected/2006/03/14/encoral14.xml&sSheet=/connected/2006/03/17/ixconn.html>.)