

LJTC Community Task Force ~ California Sea Lion Occupation of LJ Beaches Position Statement on Recent City Decisions and Actions

In the Spring of 2016 the La Jolla Town Council responded to community concern about the serious public health and safety problems caused by California Sea Lion (CSL) colonization of the La Jolla Cove area by creating a Community Task Force to study the problem and develop recommendations for dealing with it. The following pages summarize what has happened since then. Key points are as follows:

- The Task Force studied the problem with input from pinniped experts, relevant government agencies, and representatives of Cove users and local businesses affected by the CSL colonization. It summarized its conclusions and recommendations in a “Call for Action” submitted to the Mayor in November 2016. To date have received auto-reply to the email and no reply to Certified letter of Transmittal.
- The City developed a “Marine Coastal Management Plan – La Jolla” (MCMP) dated May 1, 2017, without involvement of the LJ and SD Communities. Further we see no evidence of significant input from the Task Force, Cove users, local businesses, or other broadly based Community representatives.
- However, since the Task Force and City had access to the same information (except for Community input), the “Call for Action” and MCMP generally agree on the scope and seriousness of the problem and alternatives for addressing it. In fact, the “Preferred Alternative” described in the MCMP is essentially the same as the Action recommended by the Task Force.
- Unfortunately, the MCMP deviates from the Task Force recommendations in two important ways:
 1. A stated objective of the MCMP is that “the situation in La Jolla [is] an opportunity for the City to be a world leader in wild animal management.” That’s nice, but it is also nice to ask the opinion of people living near those wild animals.
 2. The MCMP Action plan does not include implementation of its “Preferred Alternative.” Instead, the planned action is to allow and even encourage CSL-human sharing of the Cove area, including the beach. The large size, preference for crowding, and often aggressive behavior of the CSLs makes this impractical. It certainly will not solve the existing and increasing public health and safety problems the Task Force was created to address.

We have two recommendations for the City:

- *Public health and safety should be a very high priority for City authorities. Modify the MCMP accordingly.*
- *Gather and respect input from the La Jolla community. These are the people who live near the CSLs, and their opinions should be considered.*
- The Task Force recommended a solution and sent it to the City authorities in November 2016. So far, the City authorities have not acknowledged or responded directly, but seem to have been addressing the issues independently and recently released a document called “Marine Coastal Management Plan – La Jolla.” It provides a thorough study of the problem and alternatives for dealing with it. The LJ Task Force strongly supports the “Preferred Alternative.” solution in their own consultant-funded report. However, the City **retreats from its own Preferred Alternative in its own report to a human/pinniped beach-sharing solution.** La Jolla has ample experience to know that this approach does not work. It inevitably leads to excluding human use for most or all of the year.
- The City plans to address the CSL problem at the Cove by **signs** which have been installed and **gates on the stairs** to the Beaches, an inconvenient barrier to human access in order to keep CSLs from polluting more than the beaches.

May 28, 2017

- *What we do know is that the City has a choice to make – is the beach for human recreation or CSL convenience? The La Jolla Community has treasured recreation at the La Jolla Cove and surrounding area for more than a century, and it very much wants to keep it. Come to the July 13th 2017 LJTC Monthly Meeting and let your voices be heard!*

La Jolla Town Council “Call for Action” Update Summary

In the summer of 2016 the La Jolla Town Council (LJTC) formed the “LJTC Joint Community Task Force on California Sea Lions” (Task Force) to address the serious problems caused by California Sea Lion (CSL) colonization of the popular La Jolla Cove area (Cove). In essence, the problem is that the growing CSL presence is already limiting human use of the popular Cove beach and adjacent ocean. Without action, the problem will continue to grow as a hazard to public health and safety.

The Task Force recommended a solution and sent it to the Mayor in November. So far, the Mayor has not responded. But the City does seem to be addressing the issues independently. It recently released a document dated called “Marine Coastal Management Plan – La Jolla” (MCMP). The MCMP content appears to be mostly or entirely reproduction of a report written by Dr. Doyle Hanan, a paid consultant. This provides a thorough study of the problem and alternatives for dealing with it. The Task Force strongly supports the MCMP’s “Preferred Alternative.” However, the MCMP concludes with a section called “Action Items” that retreats from the Preferred Alternative to a human/pinniped beach-sharing solution. The Task Force is convinced that this approach will not work because it will lead to excluding human use of the Cove for most or all of the year.

We don’t yet know how the City plans to address (or allow others to address) the CSL problem at the Cove. *What we do know is that the City has a choice to make – is the beach for human recreation or CSL convenience? The La Jolla Community has treasured recreation at the La Jolla Cove and surrounding area for more than a century, and it very much wants to keep it*

Background

In 2016 the LJTC conducted a series of Hearings to address the serious problems caused by California Sea Lion (CSL) colonization of the popular La Jolla Cove area (“Cove”). At the first Hearing LJTC formed a Task Force including representatives of all relevant community organizations, as well as independent experts on the California Sea Lions (CSL’s), the problems they are causing (especially in the popular La Jolla Cove area), and the solutions permitted by relevant laws and regulations. The Task Force was strongly influenced by the results of a 2016 study by pinniped-expert Dr. Doyle Hanan (Hanan, 2016). This Hanan report outlined options for dealing with the CSL problem at the Cove, but made no specific recommendations.

The Task Force developed a “Call for Action” recommending an approach to addressing the problem and offering resources (money and manpower) to implement it. This Call for Action was endorsed by La Jolla business leaders and sent to the San Diego Mayor in early November 2016.

As of this date, there has been no response to the Call for Action other than a routine acknowledgement of receipt.

The City has funded a second study by Dr. Hanan, The results of this study provide most of all of the content in the MCMP. It is dated May 1, 2017.

LJTC Call for Action Summary

The Task Force that developed the Call for Action carefully studied the Hanan, 2016 report and agreed that its analysis of the CSL problem is entirely consistent with the experience of the La Jolla community. The Call for Action summarized the problem as follows:

- The CSL occupation of the La Jolla Cove area does indeed pose a serious public health and safety problem.
- The CSL population is expanding rapidly, so without mitigating action the problem will very likely get worse and spread to other areas in San Diego and elsewhere in southern California.

- Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), there are legal methods for moving and excluding CSLs from areas where they pose a hazard to human safety and property.

The Call for Action recommended a specific set of actions to be taken by San Diego government officials and offered the assistance (manpower and funding) of the La Jolla Community.

Summary of Recent San Diego City Actions

According to MPCA, in November 2016, the City conducted an “expert panel workshop” (partly via teleconference) to discuss the CSL problem in the Cove area. These experts agreed that “sea lions inhabiting and reproducing near a large southern California city is new and certainly rare.” They also agreed that their population is likely to expand, and that “sea lion behavior [warrants] the need for constant attention by the City.”

The MPCA says that the Workshop concluded that “the situation in La Jolla [is] an opportunity for the City to be a world leader in wild animal management.” No representatives of the La Jolla Task Force were consulted, and as far as we know, there was no input from frequent users of the La Jolla Cove beach or other members of the La Jolla Community who must live with the problems caused by the CSLs.

The MCMP is a lengthy document (91 pages) that is almost entirely description and analysis by a scientific expert (presumably Dr. Hanan). The very small fraction that addresses policy issues may include input from City authorities, but there is no way to tell. In any case, the City claims responsibility for the entire report.

The MCMP expands the earlier Hanan, 2016 report by: (1) widening the focus from the Cove area to include the entire Scripps Pier to Windansea Beach area; and (2) providing much more detail about the wildlife frequenting this area and the way other communities have dealt with problems caused by CSLs. While this wider and deeper study is useful and interesting, it doesn’t change anything. That is, the problem description is the same as in Hanan, 2016, as are the potential solutions.

From the Task Force perspective, the MCMP omits serious consideration of several important factors. The most important is that CSLs are very different from the Harbor Seals (seals) that occupy the nearby Children’s Pool area. Seals are not aggressive, don’t like crowding, and their densest population is in the winter pupping season when very few people want to use this beach (it is closed to humans from 15 December to 15 May). Humans do share the beach with the seals in the other seven months, but relatively few of them are there. In contrast, CSLs are several times larger, have a social structure with bulls controlling harems as large as 30 females, can be very aggressive with each other or other intruders, rest in very close contact, and have the densest population in their summer pupping season when the Cove Beach is most popular with human users (the Cove Beach is used all year by divers and swimmers). Their waste contaminates the shoreline and nearby ocean, thereby causing health hazards for humans.

Also, the MCMP does not even mention the effect of the growing CSL population on the adjacent marine protected areas. The ocean adjacent to the La Jolla Cove is within the Matlahuayl State Marine Reserve (SMR) where taking of all living marine resources is prohibited. CSLs are very large (adults weigh 250-800 lbs) fish-eaters. A single CSL will take far more fish per year than any recreational diver or shoreline angler. What effect does this have on the “protected” fish population? Is there a conflict between the legally mandated protection of marine life in these reserves and the reluctance to disturb the growing CSL population that feeds there? These questions should be addressed in a comprehensive “Marine Coastal Management Plan.”

The penultimate section of the MCMP provides a list of alternatives for addressing the CSL problem. These alternatives are essentially the same as those in Hanan, 2016, but they are presented more clearly and crisply. They are as follows (details are provided for each, but are omitted here for brevity):

Alternative A: No Change

..... This method would likely lead to loss of public beach areas as pinniped populations *increase*.

Alternative B: Increase signage, education, interpretive centers, and docents

Alternative C: Harass pinnipeds off select beaches and bluffs

Alternative D: Fencing

Alternative E: Livestock fencing

*Alternative F: **Preferred Alternative***

A mix of selected management measures described above:

- *Implement expanded signage and docents to educate the public regarding pinnipeds and pinniped behavior.*
- *Use the NMFS approved harassment techniques to try and keep sea lions off LJ Cove beach and any other selected haulout areas. First test and then if this appears to work, use the technique at other sites chosen for public use.*

The Task Force notes that it found an attractive Alternative not mentioned in the MCMP. This is a tested and proven method for excluding CSLs from selected areas without unsightly fencing or harassment. This is should be considered in a comprehensive MCMP.

Conclusions

The “Marine Coastal Management Plan – La Jolla” concludes with a section called “Action Items.” This section retreats from straightforward action to implement Alternative F, the “Preferred Alternative.” Instead it recommends that the City implement Alternative A, extended a bit with Alternative B, plus some fencing to keep the large and mobile CSLs from invading “urban areas.” A weak acknowledgement of Alternative F (Preferred Alternative) is added via this sentence: *The City may consider at a later date NMFS approved procedures to move sea lions from certain beaches should the beaches become unusable or unavailable because of pinniped incursion.*

So, it seems that the final recommendation of the “Marine Coastal Management Plan – La Jolla” is to implement the same beach-sharing approach used to deal with the Harbor Seal occupation of the Children’s Pool area, plus a statement that someday the City might allow solutions that protect the beach for exclusive human use.

While beach sharing can be said to work at Children’s Pool (albeit with continuing controversy), it works as well as it does due to the very different behavior of Harbor Seals. As described in the earlier discussion of important factors not emphasized appropriately in the MCMP, CSLs have very different characteristics that make human/CSL beach sharing impractical and unsafe. Allowing humans to use a beach occupied by large numbers of CSLs will pose serious public health and safety problems. This will limit human use and probably eliminate it eventually. This is the growing threat that motivated the formation of the Task Force. This Task Force recommends immediate ACTION to implement the Preferred Alternative (Alternative F) described in the MCMP.

Finally, the La Jolla Community strongly recommends that the City listen to input from the people who live in La Jolla who want to preserve human recreational use of our beaches. The La Jolla community is willing and able to provide manpower and financial support to implement and sustain solutions toward that objective.