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News

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Traffic Report

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Coastal kelp forests disappearing

By Paul Young
Staff writer

Urban runoff, layers of toxic sediment and overfishing have caused many kelp forests to disappear along the Southern California coast over last three decades. But if a group of local biologists has its way, the ocean's fastest growing marine plant will soon be cropping up all over the place.

The California CoastKeeper Alliance on Tuesday opened a kelp restoration laboratory on Terminal Island, where the algae will grow in four, 8-foot-long containers until it's ready to be replanted. The idea is to help the plant make a comeback along the coast between Santa Barbara and San Diego, where sea life thrives.

"It's an ecosystem that provides habitat, food and oxygen," said Brendan Reed, a biologist who is working on the project. "It's called the ocean's rain forest."

As an employee of Santa Monica BayKeeper, Reed will be working with four other BayKeeper programs - in San Diego, Orange County, Ventura and Santa Barbara - to plant and monitor the kelp at 15 restoration areas over the next three years.

Called the Southern California Regional Kelp Restoration Project, it is being funded by a \$625,000 grant from the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"We target areas where no kelp is nearby," said Bob Hoffman, the service's acting regional administrator for habitat restoration. "The more we start these individual sites away from kelp, the greater chance we have of expanding (the kelp forests)."

Divers swim to reefs about 40 feet below the ocean's surface where they gather reproductive tissue, or sporophylls, from certain blades near the base of the large, golden plant. These are then taken to the lab where biologists manipulate temperature, light and moisture levels that will make the sporophylls release spores.

Next, the spores are placed in a container filled with ceramic tiles about 1 inch wide and 4 inches long where they can latch on and begin to grow. When the plants are about 2 months old divers attach them - and the tile they're growing on - to a reef with a rubber band. They check on the kelp once a week, then remove the tile and rubber band a year later, when the plant reaches full size - about 100 feet tall.

By placing one tile strip every square meter, biologists expect to restore some 30,000 square meters of kelp forest to Southern California - something that would be a boon to the marine environment.

"The kelp has been reduced to such a state that it's reached a point where it can't recover," said project manager Chantal Collier.

Between 1967 and 1999, kelp forests decreased in Southern California by 80 percent, with some areas reaching near destruction. Collier said sewage, coastal development and storm runoff have made it difficult for kelp forests to recover after natural contributors, such as a large storm.

Reed also said overfishing has led to a disruption of the ecosystem. A decline of lobsters and the California sheepshead - which prey on urchins - caused urchin populations to dramatically



increase. The urchin, meanwhile, preys on kelp - home to more than 800 marine species.

In hopes of turning this trend around, biologists on Tuesday also urged community members to help with the project.

"The community is paramount," said Brian Machovina, executive director of the alliance.

Those interested in helping with the program, which is largely dependent on volunteers, can call (310) 829-1229 or (310) 825-6820.

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