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Protection zone established for endangered black abalones

Greenspace Environmental news from California and beyond

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Federal wildlife officials on Wednesday issued a final ruling designating about 140 square miles of critical habitat for endangered black abalone along the California coast.

The hard-shelled, edible marine snails were once abundant in rocky intertidal areas from the state's northernmost waters down to the tip of Baja California, but their numbers plummeted in the 1980s, mostly due to a bacterial disease called withering syndrome.

The decline may have been worsened by warming coastal waters, power plant discharges, overfishing and poaching, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service.

Black abalone was listed as an endangered species in 2009, which requires the government to set aside as much critical habitat as possible to aid their recovery.



In the areas, which stretch from Del Mar Landing Ecological Reserve in Sonoma County south to the Palos Verdes Peninsula and Catalina Island, projects that go before federal agencies or receive federal funding will be reviewed to make sure they do not threaten black abalone habitat.

The rule will take effect next month.

Excluded from the designation was an area of rocky habitat from Corona del Mar State Beach to Dana Point.

That was because “the economic benefits of exclusion outweigh the benefits of inclusion, and the exclusion will not result in the extinction of the species,” according to a NOAA news release.

Black abalone are one of seven abalone species that live in California waters, typically wedged between rocks near the shore.

Their commercial harvest dates back to the 1800s and peaked in the 1970s. The fishery was closed in 1993 after landings plunged by 95%.