



## Commentary

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### **Hold onto this ocean of a chance**

*A new marine sanctuary would boost the Central Coast economy*

**BY ENRIQUE SANCHEZ-RIVERA AND KARA WOODRUFF**

It's the conservation opportunity of a lifetime for the Central Coast--a proposal to create a new National Marine Sanctuary to safeguard San Luis Obispo County's wild and wonderful ocean ecosystem. A new National Marine Sanctuary would also provide long-term support for commercial fishing and recreational tourism, as well as an opportunity for our community to work together to shape the future of our region.

A Central Coast sanctuary, which would include part of Northern Santa Barbara County, would be home to kelp forests, the southern sea otter, and gray whale migration routes. It also provides an important stopping point for migratory birds. But while the environmental benefits of a new marine sanctuary are obvious, there's another factor to consider: the big infusion of cold, hard cash it could deliver to our local economy.

Our neighbors to the north know what we're talking about. The Monterey Bay Sanctuary has brought a sustained financial boost capped by the recent construction of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Visitor Center and Education Facility, which now contributes \$10.9 million annually to the local economy.

This chance comes our way because the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced this summer that it would start considering new areas for National Marine Sanctuary designation for the first time since 1995.

San Luis Obispo County should seize this opportunity with both hands.

A Central Coast National Marine Sanctuary could create 600 or more permanent, local jobs and bring more than \$23 million a year into our region, according to a new report from experts with the Center for the Blue Economy at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

Sanctuary designation could increase economic activity through grant funding for research in the region, government spending, and tourism-related revenue likely to be generated by a better-protected coastline, according to the report.

A new Central Coast Sanctuary would bring new government offices, staff, and infrastructure. Research institutions such as California Polytechnic State University and Morro Bay National Marine Estuary would likely become anchors for research. Looking at the track record of the four existing National Marine Sanctuaries in California, the institutions are likely to attract significant outside funding to support the kind of research that is only possible in a protected natural area.

Tourism would also get a boost. Most obviously, a marine sanctuary would protect the natural wonders that keep sightseers, scuba divers, surfers, and other recreationalists visiting our coast.

A sanctuary designation could also help to attract whole new populations of recreational and environmental tourists to enjoy our coast and boost our economy. It would signal that there is something special about our coastline—something worth protecting. A Central Coast sanctuary could increase tourism in San Luis Obispo County by 5 percent or more, providing an annual economic impact of \$11.8 million in new tourism revenue alone and 334 new jobs.

Our fishing industry would also benefit. The proposed sanctuary area is home to one of the most sustainable fisheries in the country. Commercial fishing, like other economic activity that works in concert with natural ecosystems, would be unaffected by this designation—and would benefit from being protected from pollution and the risks associated with offshore oil and gas development.

The federal government is placing particular emphasis on community support as it considers new applications for sanctuary designation. With broad support from across our community, the San Luis Obispo coastline could become one of only a handful of truly protected coastal regions in the United States.

Sanctuary designation would preserve cultural and natural resources on one of America's most beautiful stretches of coastline. And we will have secured a vision for San Luis Obispo's future that makes both economic and environmental sense.

*Kara Woodruff is a financial planner and attorney, and former chair of American Land Conservancy. Enrique Sanchez-Rivera owns La Isla Fashions, a San Luis Obispo-based clothing company. Send comments to the executive editor at [rmiller@newtimeslo.com](mailto:rmiller@newtimeslo.com).*