

# Karen Telleen-Lawton: Concerns Surface for Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary

The health of marine life and habitats don't quite make the grade in an NOAA report card

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 09.26.2009

Santa Barbara may rank at the top in beauty, but that beauty is only skin deep. This month, the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) released a Condition Report indicating that the marine life and habitats of the [Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary](#) rate just “fair to good.” I don’t think that’s good enough for an area that, since the [1969 oil spill](#), prides itself on its environmental consciousness.



The mediocre report card stems from several threats to the islands and marine waters. “The potential impact of global climate change on fragile sanctuary resources and habitats, and increased coastal growth, are issues of concern,” said Chris Mobley, sanctuary superintendent.

CIMS, established in 1980, has a lot going for it. For one, the water quality is good, largely because of its separation from our densely populated coastline. The other area where CIMS received a good score was in the status of nonindigenous species, for which the NOAA reports, “No problematic species have become established; there is concern that invasive algae from mainland harbors and [Santa Catalina Island](#) could reach the islands.”

The sanctuary also benefits from push-pull relationships with [Channel Islands National Park](#), the Chumash Maritime Association, fishers, treasure hunters and the rest of us who treasure it.

For the [Chumash](#), [Santa Cruz Island](#) is their traditional birthplace of civilization. Since 2001, each weekend after Labor Day, Chumash celebrate a return to the island with a ceremony, dance and traditional foods in the island campground. (This year, rough seas prevented paddlers from completing their crossing in a tomol, a plank canoe.)

Treasure hunters ply the waters of the sanctuary, which are the watery home to more than 30 large shipwrecks as well as countless small ones. The sites face threats of looting

and natural degradation. The sanctuary's lowest score — fair to poor — was received on the status of environmentally sustainable fishing. “Declines have occurred in several species of sharks, giant sea bass, swordfish, various rockfish, and abalone populations,” the report said.

In 2003, the sanctuary established a checkerboard of 13 marine zones, including 11 “no-take” marine reserves that may improve conditions. They have become fish nurseries that stock the rest of the [Southern California Bight](#). The protected zones, expanded in 2007, are governed by a new management plan emphasizing “ecosystem-based approaches to improving water quality, reducing vessel discharges and focusing research on emerging threats to ocean ecosystem health.”

Despite cooperation among the various agencies, the NOAA's report contends that habitat quality and living resource conditions have deteriorated in the past five years because of human encroachment, changing ocean conditions and disease. Global climate change is already affecting ocean chemistry, according to the NOAA, and is expected to affect marine biodiversity and biological productivity. Increasing seawater temperatures will change currents, and a rise in the sea level will present its own challenges. The results of these massive changes are far from clear.

Viewed from afar, the [Pacific Ocean](#) mirrors its tranquil name. Up close, it's action-packed — an important part of California's economy, its enjoyment and employment. With all of our watchful eyes, CIMS' health report card can improve. We can prove that its beauty is as deep as the ocean.

*— Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com).*