Facts on the Southern sea otter

Background

The Southern, or California, sea otter (Enhydra lutris nereis) is listed as Threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and as “fully protected” by the State of California.

Hunting of sea otters during the fur trade of the 18th and 19th centuries caused sea otter populations to collapse, and by the early 1900s, sea otters were believed to be extinct in California. In 1938, with the opening of Highway 1 between Monterey and Morro Bay, the public became aware of a small remnant population of otters living off the Big Sur coast. The population has slowly expanded in range and numbers, but population growth has been relatively stagnant during the last decade. The most current population index of southern sea otters is 2,792. Today, the current Southern sea otter range extends from Gaviota (Santa Barbara County) in the south to approximately Pigeon Point (San Mateo County) in the north.

Other populations of sea otters also occur in Washington, British Columbia, Alaska, Russia, and Japan.

Sea Otter Facts

Sea otters are the smallest marine mammal.
Average adult sea otter:

- Length: approximately 4-4.5 feet
- Weight: 45 lbs (females); 65 lbs (males; max. southern sea otter 88 lbs).
- Lifespan: 10-15 years (some tagged, known aged have exceeded 18 yrs)
- Mate/Pup production: Occurs throughout the year
- Diet: Sea urchins, abalone, mussels, clams, crabs, squid, snails and many other marine invertebrate species. Sea otters eat approximately 25% of their weight in food each day.
- Fur: Thickest fur in the animal kingdom; 250,000-1,000,000 hairs/square inch. Relies of fur for insulation; no layer of blubber (fat) to help keep warm.
- Threats: Oil spills, habitat loss and degradation, food limitation, disease, shark bites, fishing gear entrapment.

Additional resources

seaotters.com/
www.werc.usgs.gov/Project.aspx?ProjectID=91
www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr/Science/marine-wildlife-vetcare/index.aspx