



SEA OTTERS

LEARN THE FACTS

Sea otters are the smallest of the marine mammals, known for their charismatic faces, use of tools, and thick coat of fur. California sea otters have struggled to survive alongside increasingly developed coastlines where they face threats from poor water quality, fisheries conflicts, oil and gas development, boat strikes, and entrapment in fishing gear. The struggling population of otters is expanding southward into its historic range, but without proper legal protections. The Otter Project and the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) are committed to seeing the full recovery of the California sea otter by ensuring otters full protections under the Endangered Species Act.

RANGE:

- Otters used to ring the entire Pacific Rim, but were driven to the brink of extinction by the Pacific Fur Trade of the 1700 and 1800s.
- Scientists now recognize distinct sub-populations of sea otters in California, Alaska and Russia, and transplanted populations in Washington state and British Columbia.
- The California sea otter range is officially from Pigeon Point in Half Moon Bay to Point Conception, just north of Santa Barbara. In reality, otters moved south of Point Conception more than 10 years ago. Although they are occasionally spotted north of Half Moon Bay, regular range expansion is occurring in southern California.

HABITAT & FEEDING:

- Sea otters live in the near-shore ocean, where they tend to inhabit kelp forests and rocky intertidal zones rich in marine invertebrates like clams, sea urchin, abalone and lobster.
- Sea otters are known for their use of tools such as rocks and hard shells, which they use to crack into tough prey like abalone. When foraging, they wrap their loose fur coat to create a pouch which they stuff full of prickly prey like sea urchin.
- Otters are the only marine mammal without blubber to keep warm—in order to keep their metabolisms going they eat up to 25% of their body weight every day! At about 60 lbs, that's a lot of sea urchin—if human children ate like that, you would have to feed your child up to 60 quarter-pounds a day!
- Otters are keystone species, which means they are extremely important to the existence of their habitat. Otters eat herbivorous creatures like sea urchin, which, if left unchecked, will mow through a kelp forest resulting in urchin barrens that are low in productivity and biodiversity.



Photo by Jeff Foott

THE NO OTTER ZONE:

- The no-otter zone encompasses the coastal waters of California south of Point Conception
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) declared this area the no-otter zone in 1987 as part of a translocation program that established an experimental population of otters on San Nicolas Island. The intention of establishing an otter population at San Nicolas Island was to provide protection from an oil spill.
- From its beginning, the translocation effort was plagued with difficulty, and after the fourth year of translocation only 10 percent of the 140 translocated otters remained at San Nicolas Island. The remaining 90 percent died during translocation, attempted to swim back north of Point Conception, or moved into the no otter zone and were removed. In 1991, FWS stopped translocating otters to the island, due to its concerns that the effort was resulting in unacceptable levels of mortality.
- As part of the translocation program, FWS promised to move otters in the no otter zone back out of the zone. This proved fatal to the otters, so FWS stopped moving them, but left the no otter zone in place.
- The no otter zone was part of the sea otters' native habitat before they were wiped out by fur hunters.



Photo by Jeff Foott

STATUS & PROTECTION:

- Sea otters were first given protection under the 1911 North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty—the first international treaty for wildlife protection.
- Today, California otters are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act everywhere except the no-otter zone.
- Otters in the no otter zone are not fully covered by the Endangered Species Act or the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FAILS TO PROTECT SEA OTTERS:

Sixteen years have passed since FWS began assessing the failure of the no otter zone. In that time, they have stated multiple times that the no otter zone puts sea otters in jeopardy, including in the 2003 Recovery Plan. The Service has begun the process of ending the no otter zone several times, but never finalized its ruling. The Service last held public comment hearings in 2005, with a promised ruling by the end of 2006. Since then, no further action has been taken. Failure to end the no otter zone puts sea otters at unreasonable risk.

EDC & THE OTTER PROJECTS'S ACTION—HOW YOU CAN HELP

The Otter Project and EDC have requested that FWS issue a final ruling on the no otter zone by releasing the final version of the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) immediately. This would result in the end of the no otter zone, with full protections restored to otters in Southern California. Having exhausted other means, The Otter Project and EDC have filed a lawsuit against the Service, in hopes that an agreement can be reached, but with the full intention to pursue legal action as necessary.

You can join our campaign to protect the southern sea otter by supporting The Otter Project and EDC .

Together we can ensure that sea otters have the right to return to their native habitat without fear of getting shot. Please visit www.edcnet.org or www.otterproject.org to support this important cause.