

## LIVING ON EARTH, RADIO JULY 21, 2000

### SEA OTTER REVIVAL

TOOMEY: It's Living on Earth. I'm Diane Toomey. Coming up: Dealing with the demons of our better nature. But first, sea otters. For five million years sea otters made the coastal waters from Japan to Baja their home. And there were hundreds of thousands of sea otters before hunters began killing them for their luxurious fur. International law ended sea otter hunting in 1911, but the population had been decimated. The California subspecies was especially hard hit. Only in one remote spot, off the coast of Big Sur, did a small group survive. The offspring of those surviving sea otters are now moving south, reclaiming ancient territory. But, as producer Guy Hand explains, not everyone is cheering the return of the animal some call the poster child of endangered species.

(Music and milling voices, laughter)

HAND: It's hard to imagine that my favorite local sushi bar has a direct influence, however small, on the future of sea otters. But it does. The well-heeled patrons of this restaurant have something in common with those furry marine mammals: a taste for uni, sea urchin roe.

WOMAN: Yes, a lot of people like sea urchin here. Ah, one couple. Every time they come, before they come in they call and make sure we've got the uni. Plenty of uni. And then, they eat them all.

HAND: Otters are even more devoted to sea urchin. They can devour a third of their body weight in shellfish a day. And that puts them in serious competition with the California sea urchin industry, which grew up and boomed during the otter's absence. Terry Hawkins has been diving for sea urchins for 17 years.

HAWKINS: California, Channel Islands, produce the best sea urchins in the world, and it's a major export from California. It was one of the leading exports for many years.

HAND: But in March of 1998, 100-some sea otters quietly paddled their way south, through the rough seas off central California's Point Conception, into the placid waters of Coho Bay. This seemingly innocuous event was actually a homecoming of profound significance. Although otters had wandered into the area in small numbers before, they were now returning en masse to waters they hadn't occupied in over 100 years. While the environmental community cheered, their return sent a shock wave through the urchin industry.

MAN: Can I get your attention for a moment? I'll just give you a quick preview on the boat...

HAND: Fifteen of us board the 48-foot research vessel Spirit of Santa Barbara, hoping to catch a glimpse of those returning sea otters.

(Milling voices)

HAND: In addition to a motley crew of reporters, on board are members of The Otter Project, an otter advocacy group, and a single urchin diver. They've come to argue their causes to the press. Although it's not a subject suitable for compromise. Both sides agree that if otters return to these waters in large numbers, they will destroy the commercial urchin fishery. In anticipation of just such an event, and under pressure from the shellfish industry, the federal Marine Mammal Commission in the Fish and Wildlife Service created a no-otter zone in these waters back in 1986. Fish and Wildlife promised to capture any otters that crossed into that zone and move them back to northern waters. We motor through that otter-free zone today.

WOMAN: Right there. Went back down. (Laughs) No, he's right there!

MAN: Oh, yeah, it is an otter.

HAND: Only a few minutes out to sea, we spot our first otter floating on its back like a vacationer in some kind of kelpy hammock.

MAN: (On PA system) Watch the sea gull, there's an otter right beside it.

SHIMIK: All the otters that were seen and that we'll see today are within the exclusion zone, which is also called the otter-free zone.

HAND: Steve Shimik , Executive Director of The Otter Project.

SHIMIK: So these are, you know, I guess you would call them illegal otters. But there's a line that was drawn on a map from Point Conception due west, and any otters south of that line are in an area where they are not supposed to be. Now, how the otter knows that or how people expect the otter to know that, I have no idea. But that's what the law says.

HAND: The otter-free zone put the Fish and Wildlife service in the untenable position of protecting both the federally-threatened sea otter and the sea urchin industry. The agency struggled with the program into the 90s, capturing errant otters here and there, even flying them back to Monterey by plane. But otters kept returning, and Fish and Wildlife began having second thoughts. Carl Benz is Division Chief for Endangered Species for the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

BENZ: In 1993 we stopped what we were doing because we noticed that there were some animals that, after we moved them back to the parent range, were dying in a very short time period. We were concerned that our actions weren't non-lethal as required by law. We realized there were other steps that we probably could have taken to reduce the chance that these otters would die. But in order to do these things, it was going to cost the Fish and Wildlife Service a significantly greater amount of money.

HAND: For most of us it's hard not to smile when we catch a glimpse of a sea otter. Otters look like the essence of cuddly contentment. But not for sea urchin divers. They were infuriated when the government quit capturing otters. Diver Terry Hawkins.

HAWKINS: Otters first will eat abalone. The next thing they eat is urchins. They'll eat lobster, crabs, whelks, any kind of snails. They've been seen to rip the legs off starfish to eat their legs. They've been recorded to pull shore birds right from the surface down. They eat anything. They are the biggest weasels in the world. They are in the weasel family.

HAND: But according to otter advocates, urchins over-graze the kelp forest. Otters, by eating urchins, restore balance, allowing that kelp forest, one of the most productive ecosystems on Earth, to flourish. Ed Keller is Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

KELLER: Certainly the ecosystem without the sea otter, as well as without other top predators, such as some of the sharks that are also endangered, is a fragmented ecosystem. And we know from studying ecosystems that such fragmentation of an ecosystem is not healthy. My guess is the presence of sea otters affects the diversity of the entire kelp forest.

HAND: Diver Terry Hawkins says there's nothing ecologically balancing about otters.

HAWKINS: How can you say with a straight face that otters increase biodiversity and the balance of the ecosystem? They blast it all to hell. Totally and completely. And they destroy the fishing fleet, and they violate a public law.

HAND: Fishermen have finally lost patience with government inaction. In May of this year, three commercial fishing groups filed a lawsuit against the Fish and Wildlife Service, demanding that they remove otters from the no-otter zone. It promises to be a long, angry battle.

(Boat cuts through water)

HAND: As our boat nears Coho Bay, the area where large groups of otters have been sighted in their move south of Point Conception, that anger infuses a conversation between The Otter Project's Steve Shemik and urchin diver Eric Schulenberg. Steve Shemik.

SHEMIK: We're not feeding the masses here. You know, we're talking about going out and getting sushi topping for Japan. Let's not portray this as an essential commodity here.

SCHULENBERG: Wow. Once again, your ego impresses me, Steve, to be able to decide what is essential. It was well over a million pounds a year of food, and yeah, it's a highline food, to be sure. But nonetheless, it is tons and tons and tons of a product that goes to Japan, that brings Japanese money to America and feeds hundreds of thousands of Japanese people.

HAND: Finally, after several hours, running west along the Gaviota coast, we're inside of Point Conception and lots of otters.

MAN: Just cut the engines and drift.

HAND: This is a beautiful spot, teeming with life. And yet, it's also a battleground, a hard line drawn across moving water, where visions of just where otters and urchins and humans rightfully fit in the world clash. Environmentalists come to these fights because they love nature. Yet fishermen often come to fishing for the same reason. Diver Bruce Steele.

STEELE: For most of us there is something besides money. It gives you a platform and an opportunity to really know the ocean in a way that most people are never going to, in good weather, bad weather, every season of the year. And once you've watched it enough, can see when it comes alive, and all of that kind of sums up what it is to be a fisherman. We're a creature of the ocean, and (laughs) it's worth all the hassle.

HAND: The sad irony of this hassle is that otter advocates and urchin divers love and depend on the same thing: a healthy ocean. Yet otters and urchins are declining in numbers and neither group knows why. All agree that something is wrong with the sea, whether it be pollution, global warming, or factors yet unknown. Environmentalists and fishermen place their emphasis on different areas, on different animals. But without the health of that vast world of water, both would have little to fight for.

MAN: Okay, what we've got is -- I don't know how many but probably 15 to 18 otters. Maybe a little bit less than that.

HAND: For Living on Earth, I'm Guy Hand.

MAN: Now we are, this is Canada Coho area...

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