



MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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AQUARIUM SHIFTING FOCUS OF ITS SEA OTTER PROGRAM TO EMPHASIZE RECOVERY OF THE SPECIES

New direction responds to crisis in otter population, aligns with goals of federal recovery plan

With 20 years of leadership in sea otter conservation efforts, the Monterey Bay Aquarium is taking its pioneering sea otter research program in a new direction – one that puts greater emphasis on discovering why California’s threatened otter population is in crisis and how the aquarium can help the population thrive.

The new approach, which will evolve over the next few years, comes in response to the release of a comprehensive federal sea otter recovery plan and completion of an evaluation of the aquarium’s program by a blue-ribbon panel of wildlife rescue experts and conservation biologists.

“This new direction holds the greatest promise for the long-term survival of the southern sea otter,” said aquarium Executive Director Julie Packard. “That has to be our highest priority.”

Neither the federal plan nor the expert panel supports rescue and rehabilitation of stranded otters as a major part of the sea otter recovery effort. Both assign the highest priority to research into the underlying causes behind the sluggish population growth among southern sea otters.

“Our patient is no longer the individual animal, but the entire population,” said Dr. Mike Murray, the veterinarian for the aquarium’s sea otter program. “By collaborating with the best minds in the field, we’re hopeful that we can save not just a few otters but the whole species.”

“Sea otters are in crisis,” Murray added. “A new approach is essential if we want them to survive and thrive in the face of some very serious threats.”

The aquarium will continue to invest about \$600,000 a year in sea otter recovery efforts. And it will still respond to every report of a stranded sea otter, as it has in the past. But it will attempt to rehabilitate and release only those animals that can contribute to the recovery of the wild population.

“Based on our extensive tracking data, there’s mounting evidence that the younger sea otters we

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rehabilitate and release rarely enter the breeding population,” Murray said. “If they're not breeding, they're not contributing to recovery of the species. We have to focus all our energy on helping the population survive.”

Top-priority animals for rehabilitation and release will be ill or injured females of breeding age. Fewer stranded otter pups will be release candidates, Murray said. Animals, whether pups or adults, that cannot find homes in research programs, aquariums or zoos will be humanely put to sleep. Some pups that can be raised by female otters serving as “surrogate mothers” may be released, transferred to other facilities or kept in the program. Aquarium staff will continue to improve the rehabilitation techniques they will need in the event of an oil spill or other catastrophe affecting the wild population.

In the months and years to come, the aquarium will collaborate in more extensive research relating to sea otter recovery, and will announce new research initiatives. And, Packard said, “We will push for stronger policies to protect sea otters and sea otter habitat.”

“To save the sea otter, scientists and conservationists together have to reach out and engage the public,” Packard added. “Success will be measured in the ocean. If California’s sea otter population begins to thrive, then we will have accomplished what we set out to do.”

The new direction was recommended last fall by a blue-ribbon panel of wildlife recovery experts convened to advise the aquarium on how best it could contribute to the sea otter recovery effort.

The research-oriented approach supports the priorities of the federal sea otter recovery plan released in April 2003 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The plan calls for more research to identify the possible causes limiting southern sea otter growth, including the increased rates of infectious disease and parasites within the wild otter population. Rescue and rehabilitation of stranded otters for release is not mentioned in the plan.

Other priorities in the federal recovery plan are: reducing or eliminating the threat to southern sea otters from human activities, including the potential of oil spill; minimizing contaminants in ocean waters; and working with commercial fisheries to reduce accidental deaths of sea otters from fishing operations.

The mission of the Monterey Bay Aquarium is to inspire conservation of the oceans.

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For other perspectives on the aquarium’s sea otter recovery program, contact:

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