

Mercury News, June 16, 2004

## **Sea Otter Population Shows Second Yearly Gain**

By Ken McLaughlin

Mercury News

After a long, frightening decline, a new survey shows that the number of California sea otters living along the coast has increased sharply for the second straight year.

Observers peering down from planes and standing on coastal bluffs with high-powered binoculars spotted a record number of 2,825 otters, fewer than 300 otters away from a target that could mean they'd no longer be considered "threatened" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

But marine biologists and environmentalists cautioned that there are still plenty of reasons to worry about the Golden State's cute, intelligent mascot -- among them a perplexing surge in the death rate of otters in their prime years -- ages 3 through 12.

Other mysteries of the not-so-deep ocean waters where otters feed on shellfish include the fact that most of the recent increases have been in areas dominated by males. The numbers of females of reproductive age have remained stable for the past decade, perhaps even longer, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

"We'd like to see the number of females increase and the high level of mortality drop," said survey organizer Brian Hatfield, a USGS biologist based at Point Piedras Blancas, near Hearst Castle.

"Not by any stretch of the imagination can we say that we're out of the woods," said Jim Curland, a Moss Landing-based marine program associate of Defenders of Wildlife.

The USGS leads the survey with the help of the California Department of Fish and Game, the Monterey Bay Aquarium and experienced volunteers. A team of scientists from the aquarium, universities, and federal and state agencies are also grappling with the question of why the otter has not yet fully recovered.

The survey was conducted May 6 to 21 from Point San Pedro, just south of Pacifica, to Rincon Point near Ventura, in weather conditions that were slightly less favorable than in spring 2003. The 2,825 otters spotted represented a 12.8 percent increase over the number from last year, when the number jumped 17 percent from the previous year -- the largest increase in the two-decade-old survey.

For the sea otter to no longer be considered threatened, observers would have to count an average of 3,090 otters for three consecutive years, said Greg Sanders, southern sea otter coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But the otters would still be protected by the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Once numbering about 300,000, otters were hunted to near extinction in the 19th century for their pelts.

Protected by strong federal laws, they began a comeback in the early 1980s. By 1995, their numbers hit 2,377 but then began falling. Only 2,139 otters were counted in the spring of 2002, a 10 percent drop from seven years earlier.

Scientists haven't yet pinpointed why an increasing number of dead otters are washing up on California beaches. In the first five months of this year, 135 otters were found dead, compared with 116 for the same period last year, said Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project in Marina. The average for the past decade for the five-month period has been 72, Shimek said.

Researchers have numerous theories: a shortage of clams, urchins and mussels; high levels of pesticides; PCBs, a banned chemical found in electrical transformers; and TBTs, a toxic substance still found on many boats.

In 2002, scientists found evidence that the steady drop in the state's sea otter population can partially be blamed on a parasite found in cat feces -- *Toxoplasma gondii*. One possible reason for that: cat owners flushing kitty litter down the toilet, which eventually drains into the sea.

So despite the good news on the latest otter census, those who know the otters best remain concerned.

"The count is up, but we have a record number of sea otters dead on the beach, the breeding adults are dying and sea otter pup production is at an all-time low," Shimek said.