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Dateline Earth

<http://blog.seattlepi.nwsourc.com/environment/archives/121354.asp>

Enviro: We otter be careful about what wildlife is telling us about immune suppression

It's been accepted as common knowledge for some time now that a parasite carried in cat feces and flushed down Californians' toilets in cat litter was responsible for [killing sea otters along the central California coast](#).

But on a tour of an area near Monterey Bay, participants in the annual [Society of Environmental Journalists](#) conference learned from a guy who heads up something called [The Otter Project](#) that the explanation is probably more widespread – and potentially much more important for human health – than previously believed.

[Steve Shimek](#) says that explanation really makes him mad because it's oversimplified. [Toxoplasmosis gondii](#) has been around for a long time, is relatively widespread, and it doesn't just come from cat poop, he says. While it's being found in dead otters, it shouldn't be killing them – if their immune systems are working right. And there lies the potentially blockbuster story for other species, including humans: Maybe something's mucking with our immune systems. What's going on with California's sea otters, he says, sounds a lot like [what we've heard from scientists who are studying Puget Sound's orcas](#):

"You have an immune-suppressed sea otter population swimming around in a ever-thickening sea of contaminants."

In fact, research shows the otters are being exposed to another parasite carried in California only by possums, Shimek says. And again, that's a widespread critter that oughtn't be laying anyone low, furry beast or human.

You could hear the buzz in the room as SEJers started realizing: Hey, this guy's saying that what's going on here could be much bigger than just otters and cats.