

Dan Haifley, Our Ocean Backyard: Sea otters' fate mirrors our own

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She could have had an idly comfortable life in Big Sur, but instead Margaret Owings devoted herself to the preservation of wildlife. In 1968, she helped to start Friends of the Sea Otter to advocate for a species returning from the brink of collapse.

Sea Otter Awareness Week, to promote a species whose fate remains uncertain, begins today. That fate depends, in part, on our ability to control the waterborne pollution carried from our neighborhoods through our storm drains and into near-shore ocean waters.

The southern sea otter is called a "keystone species" for its role in controlling the urchin population and thereby maintaining a balance in the kelp beds and supporting a healthy slice of the Central Coast's ecosystem. You can see them near shore devouring shellfish and nurturing their young. Kayakers in Elkhorn Slough must occasionally contend with otters used to human contact attempting to climb aboard their boats.

According to Steve Shimek of the Marina-based Otter Project, otters once lived around the entire fringe of the north Pacific Rim -- from Hokkaido, Japan across to the Aleutian Islands and down the American continent to Baja California. They were hunted for their furs and their numbers dwindled to nearly nothing by 1850.

The California sea otter was believed to be extinct until 1938, when a remnant population of about 50 otters was discovered off Big Sur. The population's steady expansion has slowed in recent years; currently there are around 2,800 animals. According to Jim Curland of Defenders of Wildlife, sea otters were first listed as a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act in 1977, when they occupied an area from Pismo Beach to just below Año Nuevo.

An attempt was made in the 1980s to relocate Southern California otters to San Nicolas Island. The idea was to build a core population to ensure survival in an environmental catastrophe. That effort fizzled when the new San Nicolas inhabitants disappeared or were found dead, while many young males apparently tried to return to more familiar territory.

Curland says that today, the sea otter range extends from Point Conception near Santa Barbara to Half Moon Bay. He says that threats to sea otters come "from potential oil spills, disease, pollution, food limitations and the potential for entrapment or entanglement in fishing gear and shark predation."

Shimek says that disease is a major factor: immune system-suppressed sea otters are swimming in a soup of chemicals and disease washing from land through storm water, rivers and streams.

"Sea otters tend to concentrate many of the contaminants found in their environment." says Shimek. "They are exposed to the diseases washed from land. So sea otters are the high metabolism canary in the coal mine -- they are an early warning of what will happen to other animals and man. And sea otters are dying of disease."

Since her death in 1999, Margaret Owing's legacy includes today's efforts to protect the ocean environment. As Shimek says: "To save the sea otter we will need to clean our water and ocean. We will need to concentrate on cleaning up our discharges into the ocean."

The sea otter's fate is closely tied our own, depending in part on how well we take care of our own watersheds.

Learn more about this week's Sea Otter Awareness Week -- including a local Otter Day today at the Monterey Bay Aquarium -- at www.defenders.org/seaotter/awareness. You can also learn about the Otter Project at www.otterproject.org.

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