

Stay otter there: California sea otters cross over to the forbidden zone

By [John Platt](#)



Few things in my life have brought me as much joy as watching sea otters play in the waters near Monterey, Calif. So when I heard this week that the frisky yet endangered critters may be slightly expanding their habitat, I figured everyone would think that was good news.

Silly me.

Once hunted into near-extinction for their fur, the [southern, or California, sea otter](#) (*Enhydra*

lutris nereis) now numbers around 2,600 to 2,700 animals, all of which live in a fairly small habitat range off the central California coast. The problem is that their extant habitat is the only place the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) grants them protected status. (Although they are also protected under California state law and the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act, those laws do not govern habitat.) Everything south of their current habitat is designated a "no-otter zone".

The origins of this restriction shouldn't surprise anyone. When otters were first listed as a threatened species under the ESA, they were protected everywhere, according to Allison Ford, executive director of [The Otter Project](#) in Monterey, Calif. But in order to protect species, the ESA requires the creation of a recovery plan. In this case the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wanted to try to move some otters to a new habitat. This "experimental population" would protect the southern otter from extinction in a catastrophic event, such as a major [oil spill](#). But in order to create a new habitat for the otters, the government also created a no-otter zone, an area where the animals would not be able to impact the fishing or oil industries.

Unfortunately, "the experimental population never thrived," Ford says. But the otter-free zone remains.

And now some otters are swimming past that imaginary line in the surf in search of sea urchins and other tasty marine life in the forbidden zone. Fishermen are not happy with the encroachment. "Based on historic action, we think eventually they'll wipe out the shellfish industry in California," Vern Goehring, executive director of the California Sea Urchin Commission, told [the Associated Press](#).

So why are sea otters swimming into verboten territory? "Food supply is always an impediment to otter survival and expansion," Ford says. "Scientists believe that food limitation is an issue in certain parts of the otter's range."

Ford says that large, bachelor otters "tend to go back and forth over the no-otter line. Certainly, abundant prey that otters like to eat exists in the no-otter zone," and because humans tend to like the same foods, that creates conflict.

"Otters eat voraciously," Ford says. "They have a strong appetite, and eat 25 percent of their body weight every day." Otters do not have blubber, and use their fur and their high metabolisms to keep warm.

Otters can impact fisheries and the industry's ability to operate at the same productivity levels it is used to, Ford says, adding: "Sea urchin is where the big conflict is." But she points out that the very reason there is a sea urchin industry is because otters no longer exist in their historic habitats. "Otters are a keystone species, and they maintain sea urchins, which in turn eat kelp. When otters were removed from the ecosystem, you lost [the kelp](#), which hurt total biodiversity." Restoring sea otters in other areas of California, Ford says, could actually increase biodiversity and create additional fishing markets.

No matter what happens, the sea otter expansion won't be anything that happens overnight. Populations have [dipped slightly the past two years](#), and only a few dozen otters make their way regularly into the sans otter zone. But for now, that's enough to get some people worried—and angry.

9 Comments

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- [garlicbutter](#) at 02:41 PM on 02/03/10
- "Based on historic action, we think eventually they'll wipe out the shellfish industry in California"

Wait. You mean like they did before we arrived on the California coast? WTF is this person talking about? Is that sort of nonsense even worth quoting?

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- [garlicbutter](#) at 03:38 PM on 02/03/10

The following is a direct response to this [comment](#).

I think I misunderstood Vern's quote. He's talking about the industry, not the shellfish themselves. My bad.

In that case, I vote for total otter eradication. They are a pestilence. God forbid some hipster be deprived urchin gonads on his sushi.

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• **Navy66** at 04:44 PM on 02/03/10

I've seen, first-hand, an excellent "new habitat" for a 2nd colony right around St. Barbara Island ---and I believe the surrounding zone is already a sanctuary...someone should look into bringing a population down here

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• **oldtroll57** at 06:53 PM on 02/03/10

- The otters are just like us, " hey guys I found a bunch over here". Then here come the crowds.
- Except they take only what they NEED. They also, (unlike us), give something back. They leave the shells and spines and other inedible parts that contribute to the ecosystem.
- We take everything and move on. Kinda like a VIRUS.
- Then when it is screwed up , we say "OH MY! how did this happen, and who is going to fix it".
-
- When will people learn, we need to live WITH nature, not OFF OF nature.

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• **live one** at 09:48 PM on 02/03/10

- "Otters are a keystone species, and they maintain sea urchins, which in turn eat kelp. When otters were removed from the ecosystem, you lost the kelp, which hurt total biodiversity." Restoring sea otters in other areas of California, Ford says, could actually increase biodiversity and create additional fishing markets.
-

This is the point usually overlooked. Increasing the vegetation by holding the herbivores in check via carnivores results in more productivity. There might be fewer urchins to pick, but there could be otter steaks before long.

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• **Tahoe** at 10:25 PM on 02/03/10

this reminds me of the story about the Grizzly Bears in Canmore that seemingly didn't respect the boundaries of the travel corridor the development proposal had laid out and were walking straight down the fairway, how dare them?! I hope we can continue to educate people on the need for integrating the natural perspective. As William Wordsworth said: Let Nature Be Your Teacher.

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• **Morpork Mud** at 10:52 PM on 02/03/10

About 20 years ago I heard someone saying how the otters had taken all the crabs and shellfish from Monterey Bay. I asked him if he know how many otters were around 150 years ago. "There were lots everywhere I guess." "Wasn't there a massive shellfish and fishing industry here in Monterey then?" "Yeh." "So who destroyed the shellfish, the otters or us?"

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• **Morpork Mud** at 10:58 PM on 02/03/10

About 20 years ago, I heard a person say that the otters had destroyed all the shellfish in the Monterey Bay. "Do you know how many otters there were around here 150 years ago?" "Lots I guess." "Didn't Monterey have a massive fish and shellfish industry?" "Yeh." "So who destroyed the shellfish, the otters or us?" "Well..." Yes, well. Never blame ourselves.

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• **oldtroll57** at 05:11 AM on 02/04/10

Like I said," a virus ". We go in somewhere multiply, consume all there is then spread out looking for more.