

## **Natural Resource Conservation Professional**

**Steve Shimek, Executive Director, The Otter Project**



### **What do you do?**

I am the Executive Director of The Otter Project, a nonprofit organization that works to protect California sea otters and the ocean environment. Most of my days are spent organizing. I organize campaigns to fight pollution, improve water quality, and to protect our oceans. I also manage employees, create budgets, and educate our members and the public so they can be advocates for protecting sea otters and our oceans.

I get up in the morning and look at a long list of things to do, and I start planning. There is NEVER too little to do!

### **What education and skills do you need?**

I studied biology and marine ecology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. I have a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Almost every day I use my background in science, math, and writing. Writing and speaking are especially important - I have to be able to convince people to take action.

### **Personal skills needed for your job?**

I have to be a little bit of comic and a little bit of a showman - I need to be entertaining and confident enough that people will pay attention. I wish I was more of a politician - I tend to just blurt out what I want instead of negotiating better.

### **What do you enjoy the most about your job?**

What I really like about my job is that no two days are the same - one day I am at the computer working on budgets, the next day I am on a boat watching sea otters near Santa Barbara, and then the next day I am negotiating to create parks and wildlife reserves in the ocean.

Right now I am working to create a system of parks and wildlife refuges in the ocean - I can't think of anything better than creating safe places for nature to flourish!

Margaret Mead (a famous scientist) said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I actually believe I can help make the world a cleaner, healthier, safer place. Conservation advocates and political activists carry the

information, message, and solutions gathered by the scientists, veterinarians, and trainers to the government and politicians to actually make change happen.

I love to organize campaigns to fight pollution. Several months ago, the oil companies and the government decided they wanted to drill for oil in the ocean, nearly in the middle of the sea otter's range. Oil is the biggest threat to otters. We worked with environmental lawyers to insist that the interests of sea otters be protected - after all, a sea otter can't speak for itself. I spoke at a press conference with California's governor, against offshore oil drilling. The campaign lasted over a year, but in the end we won and were able to protect sea otters from new oil drilling.

**What do you like least about your job?**

Change is sometimes soooooo sloooooowwww. It took 14 years to convince the government we needed an official plan for sea otter recovery. Many people don't like to change: we can offer a great solution to a problem, but if the solution requires that people change what they are doing, they will resist. It is very frustrating sometimes.

And then there are the hours and hours spent in my office. As I've advanced in my career, I spend less time out in the field and more time in the office.

Sometimes change happens fast - the plan to create ocean parks will be completed in the next six months and hopefully be at least partly in place next year.

**Tell us a funny sea otter story.**

A couple of years ago I hosted a group of journalists out on a boat trip to talk about the problems sea otters are facing. There was a photographer for the Los Angeles Times on board. He was trying really hard to get a great shot of a sea otter - he was using a HUGE telephoto lens on his camera. But, the otters weren't cooperating - they were keeping their distance. Then this one otter became curious and started to swim closer and closer. The photographer became more and more excited, clicking his camera furiously. Then the otter came so near he couldn't focus the huge telephoto lens any closer. He ran into the cabin and changed lenses and ran back out as the otter actually touched our boat, curious what WE were doing in his ocean! The picture appeared the next day in the Los Angeles Times with a big story about how pollution is impacting otters.

**How did you decide to work with sea otters?**

When I was a kid, I watched a TV program, Sea Hunt (ask your parents!), which was all about the ocean. I wanted to be a scuba diver and marine biologist. I took a scuba diving class when I was around 12 or 13 and from then on I was hooked - I spent nearly every weekend scuba diving with friends and exploring the kelp forests along the coast. I really became interested in kelp forests and sea otters when I started my studies in college.

I've always been interested in conservation and the environment. Even as a kid, I was a member of the Sierra Club. When I became a little older (I think I waited too long before becoming involved!) I started participating more in conservation, writing letters to Congress and the President, attending rallies, and I even started my own conservation group.

**Why is your job important?**

Sea otters and other ocean wildlife can't speak for themselves - The Otter Project gives them a powerful

voice! And, we organize our members and give them the information and tools to speak for the otters and the environment. The air, ocean, and wildlife need friends and people willing to speak up and take action. We help organize all that!

**What can kids do now if they are interested in your profession? How can kids get involved?**

Government agencies and politicians hear from adults all the time. Kids are a new voice! There isn't a politician on the planet that will totally ignore a kid - they would never get re-elected if they ignored kids! But, kids never speak up! Come on kids - TAKE ACTION, SPEAK UP! Write your US Senator a letter (be a kid, don't try to sound like an adult, just be a kid!) and tell them you care about sea otters and the environment. Ask them what they have done lately to help sea otters. Believe me, you will make a difference; remember, we CAN change the world!

Volunteer for a litter or beach clean up.

Ask you parents to buy organic foods that use less chemicals and pesticides.

Walk or ride your bike instead of asking for a car ride - your family will use less gasoline and there will be less need to drill for oil!

Consider a career as a conservationist. The environment needs smart leaders. Just because I run a nonprofit organization doesn't mean I don't get paid - I am a paid professional just like other adults.

**Do you have any favorite web links that kids can visit to learn more?**

[www.otterproject.org](http://www.otterproject.org)