# FRIENDS OF THE SEA OTTER

P.O. BOX FF, CARMEL, CALIFORNIA 93921

July 9, 1980

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Sacramento Endangered Species Office 2800 Cottage Way, Room E-2740 Sacramento, CA 95825

Re: Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan Technical Review Draft

Gentlemen:

Friends of the Sea Otter commends the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for the preparation of an aggressive, pragmatic, and achievable Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan. When implemented, the Plan will protect and enhance both the population status and the natural habitat of this threatened species, as mandated by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA) and the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), as amended.

We further commend the Service for acknowledging that,

"If the spirit of the legislation is to be upheld, it is important to recognize this remnant isolated population as a unique member and integral component of the nearshore community."

We fully support the Plan's Primary Objective and Rationale:

"To restore the southern sea otter to non-threatened status, and eventually to re-establish and maintain optimum sustainable populations in natural habitats throughout their historical range in United States coastal waters."

We urge the Service to begin implementation of the more urgent programs now, prior to final approval of the Plan. Crucial issues such as Outer Continental Shelf Lease Sale #53 allow no time for delay.

The project objectives of the Recovery Plan are excellent. However, we strongly advocate the following change in priorities.

#### SOUTHERN SEA OTTER RECOVERY PLAN

# PROGRAM PRIORITIES

- 1) Translocating southern sea otters from the present population to other portions of their former range within the contiguous United States so that the survival of the southern sea otter will not depend on one population.
- 2) Developing a contingency plan to capture, clean and move as many southern sea otters as possible from the area of an <u>oil spill</u>, with primary emphasis on unoiled otters.
- 3) Continuous monitoring of all populations of southern sea otters.
- 4) Developing a habitat protection plan throughout the southern sea otter's former range within the United States, concentrating efforts in areas containing sea otters now and most likely to contain them in the future.
- 5) Developing an effective <u>law enforcement</u> strategy plan and program that will prevent the illegal take and/or harassment of southern sea otters.
- 6) Conducting a continuing <u>research</u> program to learn more about the ecological role of the southern sea otter in the nearshore community.

Our priorities are directed towards reducing the greatest number of threats to the greatest number of otters in the shortest possible time. Priority ranking does not reflect time sequence as these programs must go forward simultaneously and there is considerable overlap in tasks required to meet the objectives of the various programs. (Our rationale for this ranking and priority assignments for each task are attached.)

Implementation of the Recovery Plan will be expensive. Needed funding and manpower should not be deflected to projects which are directed to the resolution of management issues. All resources allocated under the Plan should be directly related to removing the southern sea otter from threatened status through the establishment of additional breeding populations and protection of the otters and their habitat.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service should be the lead agency for all aspects of the Plan, working closely with the California Department of Fish & Game (CDFG) which will have a key role in the Plan's implementation. This is imperative because of budgetary constraints on CDFG and because the Service has no conflicting interests in managing marine resources. The CDFG appears to place a higher priority on protecting man's shellfisheries than it does on protecting the sea otters, as evidenced by the Department's continued refusal to acknowledge that the sea otter population in California is threatened; the Department's frequentlystated wish to restrict the otters to their current 200-mile range (interrupted by oil tanker ports and bracketed by potential offshore oil development) to protect shellfisheries already heavily impacted by man; and the Department's hesitation to translocate otters anywhere in California where they could conflict with existing or potential shellfisheries.

Friends of the Sea Otter advocates the development of a strong volunteer force in the implementation of the Recovery Plan. Increased public involvement will greatly enhance the Plan's chances of success. Too often in the past, budget and manpower restrictions have hampered efforts to protect and enhance the southern sea otter population. Trained volunteers can supplement federal and state personnel in censusing, patrolling, responding to oil spills and educating the public. Friends of the Sea Otter offers the Service and the California Department of Fish & Game its assistance and cooperation in helping to recruit and train volunteers, and in helping to develop and distribute educational materials.

We thank the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for its conscientious examination of the threats to the continued existence of the southern sea otter population and appreciate the comprehensive scope of the Recovery Plan. We welcome the opportunity to actively participate in the swift implementation of these critically important programs. It is an excellent beginning.

Sincerely,

Carol Fulton

Submitted on behalf of Betty S. Davis, Ph.D. Executive Secretary Friends of the Sea Otter

Carol Fulton

Attachments

## PROJECT OBJECTIVE #1 \_-- TRANSLOCATION

We strongly advocate #1 Priority to:

Translocating southern sea otters from the present population to other portions of their former range within the contiguous United States so that the survival of the southern sea otter will not depend on one population.

# Rationale:



The goal of the Recovery Plan is to restore the southern sea otter to non-threatened status

- \* the primary reason for its threatened status is its extreme vulnerability to a major oil spill
- \* threats of a major oil spill continue to increase within the otters' current range and a major spill could occur at any time
- \* the establishment of reserve breeding colonies in areas well-removed from current or potential oil spill hazards provides the greatest chance to prevent the extinction of the southern sea otter population

# Implementation

1.1	Deten	mine parameters needed for acceptable otter habitat	1
	1.10	Examine oil spill potential	1
	1.11	Examine food supply	1
	1.12	Examine shelter	1
	1.13	Examine reproductive needs	1
	1.14	<pre>Examine level of human activity (fisheries, recreation kelp-cutting)</pre>	1
	1.15	Examine ability to protect from human harassment	1
	1.16	Examine abundance of natural predators (sharks)	1
	1.17	Examine predator avoidance behavior	2
	1.18	Examine contaminants other than oil	1
	1.19	Examine likelihood of emigration	1
1.2		ne suitable areas within the former range in the guous USA using the data gathered in 1.1.	1
	1.20	Examine Channel Islands	: 1
	1.21	Examine northern California coastline	Ĵ
	1.22	Examine Oregon coastline	2
	1.23	Examine Washington coastline	J
	1.24	Examine southern California coastline	3

1.3	Prote	ect areas determined to be promising translocation sites	1
1.4	Study	translocation parameters.	1
	1.40	Proper sex and age ratios for successful transplant	1
	1.41	Critical numbers for successful transplant	1
	1.42	Behavioral aberration induced by translocation	1
	1.43	Movement of adult and juvenile females at all seasons in relation to age of first mating, pup-rearing territories, front group, and male-female interactions during pup rearing	2
	1.44	Dispersal movements of adult males	2
	1.45	Dispersal movements of juvenile males	2
	1.46	Male-female interactions including pair bonding, mating strategies, territoriality, and dominance relationships	2
	1.47	Mother-young interactions	2
	1.48	Activities, composition and dispersal of front groups	2
	1.49	Capturing techniques	SI
	1.4	Tagging techniques	31
	1.4	Transporting techniques	SI
	1.4	Holding techniques	SI
	1.4	Monitoring techniques	SI
1.5	and p	plant southern sea otters to location(s) ecologically ragmatically most promising for success of the transplanted ation(s) the first transplant within California	1
1.6	Prote	ct population and habitat	1
1.7	Monit	or and evaluate success of transplant(s)	1
1.8	Condu	ct additional transplant(s) if necessary	1
1.9	Conti	nue monitoring and protecting population and habitat	ī

(Preparation of background paper reviewing literature and reports on capturing, holding, moving, tagging, use of radio transmitters, and release of sea otters would be helpful, but should not delay implementation of tasks outlined above)

# Discussion: Translocation

The threat of a major oil spill brings a sense of urgency to the implemenation of this Recovery Plan. <u>Immediate attention must be focused on preparation for the initial transplant of reserve breeding colonies</u>.

We advocate establishment of two or more breeding populations within the former range of the southern sea ofter in the contiguous United States. The first translocation should be within California's coastal waters. We favor San Nicolas Island (see Attachment I, Friends of the Sea Ofter Position Paper). We oppose long-distance moves to Alaska, as well as to Canada or Mexico where the ofters would be removed from U.S. jurisdiction and protective legislation. While Oregon and Washington should be considered for future translocations, the initial transplant should be as close as possible to the existing southern sea ofter population.

Although some additional research is needed to insure the success of a translocation (population composition, critical numbers, etc.) we must remember that a major spill could trigger a translocation at any time, and if we are not prepared with a preselected translocation site (away from oil spill hazards, with suitable habitat where man's presence can be restricted), holding areas, personnel and equipment, a large number of otters that might have been saved could be lost.

We agree that capturing, moving, holding, tagging, releasing and monitoring procedures are fairly well established, but are still concerned that significant mortalities may occur during translocation (in each of the two CDFG simulated transplants in 1979 an otter died). Further refinement of these procedures is needed. All animals must be tagged and closely monitored before and after release.

A key factor in the success of translocations will be the protection of future habitats from further human degradation. OCS Lease Sale #53 threatens future possible transplant sites on the north coast and Channel Islands, as well as the entire current range of the southern sea otter. San Nicolas Island must be carefully monitored to prevent "last ditch" efforts by commercial and sport shellfish interests to take all they can before the anticipated arrival of the otters.

Future translocations to areas along the mainland coast will require major educational efforts in the local areas prior to transplant. Residents must take an interest and participate in protecting the otters if the transplants are to have any chance of success.

#### Priority Ranking

Many of the items listed under 1.1, Determine parameters needed for acceptable ofter habitat, should be readily apparent in most areas and not require further lengthy study before site selection. (SI ranking may be more appropriate for some of these items than 1). The northern California coastline is ranked below the Channel Islands primarily because of the difficulty of adequately protecting the ofters from local hostility in that area.

#### PROJECT OBJECTIVE #2 -- OIL SPILL CONTINGENCY PLAN

We advocate for #2 Priority:

Developing a contingency plan to capture, clean and move as many southern sea otters as possible from the area of an oil spill, with primary emphasis on unoiled otters

#### Rationale:

- \* the threats of a major oil spill continue to increase within the southern sea otters' current range and a major spill could occur at any time
- \* a major spill could force the translocation of a large number of otters if their habitat was destroyed
- \* techniques for capturing, holding, moving and releasing otters are required for both translocation and rescuing otters in an oil spill
- \* every effort must be made to save as many animals of this threatened population as possible
- \* as it is difficult to find, capture and rehabilitate otters once they have been oiled, priority should be Keeping unoiled otters out of the spill area

#### Implementation:

2.1	Determ	nine methods to keep unoiled otters out of spill area	1
	2.10	Study feasibility of herding or attracting otters	1
	2.11	Select natural areas (coves, bays, inlets) for containing otters	1
	2.12	Identify type and location of equipment which can keep otters in and oil out	1
2.2	Study	deoiling procedures	1
	2.20	Study otter physiology	2
	2.21	Study metabolic rates & energy requirements	SI
	2.22	Study response to oil and other pollutants causing acute distress	SI
	2.23	Study methods of restoring natural oils to fur after cleaning	-1
	2.24	Determine adequate diet to maintain otters in extreme stress conditions	1
	2.25	Study energy requirements in relation to water temperatura	3

5.4	Estab publi	lish an information education program to inform c of southern sea otters and their problems	1
	5.40	Replace missing signs, install needed new signs declaring prohibition on firearms throughout State Sea Otter Game Refuge	1
	5.41	Install new signs throughout southern sca otter range outside Refuge declaring threatened status of otters and penalties for killing and/or harassing	1
	5.42	Utilize existing interpretive facilities at key locations (state and federal parks, museums, libraries, schools, public service organizations, conservation organizations, government agencies)	1
	5.43	Supplement existing interpretive facilities where necessary along coast within otters' range	3
	5.44	Direct a special educational effort to the diving community	<u>:</u>
	5.45	Develop and distribute informational leaflets and brochures	· -
	5.46	Public meetings and symposia	2
5.5	Involve public in law enforcement effort		1
	5.50	Recruit and train volunteer otter patrols to supplement state and federal law enforcement personnel	1
	5.51	Establish and widely-publicize a central, 24-hour telephone number for reporting dead or injured otters and threats to otters	1
5.6	<u>Exten</u> likel	d or increase law enforcement efforts in areas of y future transplants	1
	5.60	Increase surveillance to preclude attempts to overharvest areas prior to anticipated arrival of otters	1
5.7	Evalu if ne	ate enforcement and education program annually and increase	. 1

(While international regulations protecting populations and habitats of southern sea otters would be helpful, it is unlikely they would be necessary in the near future. Nanpower and funding should not be deflected from the Recovery Plan to pursue these regulations at this time.)

Discussion: Law Enforcement

This program is urgently needed. State and federal law enforcement coverage is inadequate at this time. Effective enforcement will require both land and <u>sea</u> based efforts. <u>Boats</u> should be available at all times for emergencies, as well as used on <u>routine patrols</u> in the otters' range. Extension of the <u>prohibition on loaded firearms</u> within the <u>Sea</u> Otter Refuge must be extended through the offshore waters to the 3-mile limit.

Signs stating the penalties for harassing or killing otters should be installed throughout the otters' actual range, not just in the Refuge (where many signs are missing and need to be replaced).

Public participation and education are important elements in protecting the sea otters. Volunteer otter patrols should be organized within the otters' existing range to supplement state and federal enforcement personnel without requiring additional funding.

Existing facilities should be utilized for disseminating information wherever possible. State and federal parks, museums, public service organizations, libraries, schools, conservation groups, ctc. would distribute the information without charge if it were available to them. A special educational effort should be directed to the sport diving community.

A central 24-hour local phone number for reporting any instances or rumors of killing or harassing sea otters should be established and well publicized.

Monthly reports should be issued by the lead law enforcement agency to all concerned agencies, including state and federal park rangers, highway patrol, city and county law enforcement personnel, as well as state wardens and federal agents. Reports should detail all actual incidents as well as undocumented but plausible reports of threats to otters.

A <u>workshop</u> to review and evaluate human-caused mortality is a good idea and should receive high priority. This issue is of growing concern as the otters expand their range.

Law enforcement will be of crucial importance in areas of translocations, and the ability to provide adequate protection at transplant sites should be a major factor in determining the suitability of the site.

Law enforcement efforts are also needed in areas of <u>future transplants</u> to <u>preclude habitat destruction or "last ditch" efforts of sport or commercial divers to take as much shellfish as possible from an area before the arrival of sea otters.</u>

## PROJECT OBJECTIVE #6 -- RESEARCH

We assign #6 Priority to:

Conducting a continuing research program to learn more about the ecological role of the southern sea otter in the nearshore community.

# Rationale:

\* Research into the ecology of the southern sea otter will be necessary for formulating future management decisions, but additional data in this area is not needed for implementation of the Recovery Plan.

## Implementation:

6.1	Study	role of sea otters in nearshore community structure	3
	6.10	Foraging strategies	SI
	6.11	Food and feeding habits	SI
	6.12	Direct effects on benthic invertebrates	SI
	6.13	Direct effects on algal community	SI
	6.14	Indirect effects on benthic invertebrates	3
	6.15	Indirect effects on algal communities	3
	6.16	Change in composition of other components of nearshore community (i.e., fishes, birds) in relation to population densities of sea otters	3
	6.17	Specific interaction with man in relation to commercially valuable shellfisheries	SI

## Discussion:

This objective was assigned Priority #1 in the Technical Review Draft and was a combination of studies on:

- 1) Population dynamics
- 2) Ecological role
- 3) Translocation parameters
- 4) Physiology

We have incorporated the studies into the other specific project objectives to which they apply. Those not immediately relevant to the Recovery Plan have been left in this lowest priority Research objective.

We would like to see further investigation into the otter's role in the nearshore community, but do not want to divert funds or manpower from the Recovery effort to do so at this time.

## General Recommendations

#### Research

p.48 (1) The historical range of the southern sea otter in relation to the northern populations of sea otters, including discussion on northern limits of southern sea otter range and taxonomy

<u>Drop this entirely</u>. Has no relevance to the Recovery Plan

(2) The historic expoloitation of southern sea otters along the Pacific Coast by man

and

(3) The abundance and trends of the southern sea otter population along the California Coast

Incorporate into "Monitoring" (low priority)

## Management

p.49 (1) Review of literature on oil spills and their particular threats to southern sea otters and their habitat

Incorporate into "Oil Spill Contingency Planning"
(low priority)

(2) Review of the literature on contaminants other than oil that might adversely affect the southern sea otter

Incorporate into 'Habitat Protection" (high priority)

(3) Review of literature and reports on capturing, holding, moving, release and subsequent monitoring of sea otters

Incorporate into 'Translocation' (low priority)

Southern sea otter mortality workshop

lncorporate into 'Law Enforcement" (high priority)

International agreements

Incorporate into "Law Enforcement or Habitat Protection"
(low priority)