

# Defenders of Wildlife

## Sea Otters



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## Sea Otter Frequently Asked Questions

### Where do sea otters give birth?

On land or in water, and for the northern sea otter in Alaska, occasionally on ice floes.

### How do sea otters give birth?

Like all mammals, they give birth to live young. Otter babies are called pups.

### When do sea otters give birth and how many pups are born?

Sea otters generally give birth to one pup a year. If they give birth to two, they will abandon one of them, as they can't care for two at a time. This is how pups are orphaned. Orphans rescued by trained wildlife rehabilitators can survive to adulthood and, in fact, all three otters at the Monterey Bay Aquarium were orphans. Otters are full-grown at about 3 years of age and generally they are weaned between 6 months and 1 year of age.

### How big are pups when they are born?

3-5 lbs.

### How do they grow?

Through drinking the very fat, rich milk that the mother provides for the first two months of the pups' life. Solid food is gradually worked into the pups' diet as they mature.

### How do sea otters communicate?

Through body contact, nosing one another, head-jerking and vocalizations. Sea otters, in comparison to sea lions, for example, are not extremely vocal animals. However, adults use a soft, low cooing sound, and grunts to exhibit "contentedness," among other things. Pups use a high-pitch squeal to communicate with their mom. Some other sounds in the vocal repertoire of sea otters include whistles, whimpers, squeaks, whines, growls, snarls and hisses.

### How are sea otters listed under the Endangered Species Act?

The southern sea otter is listed as "threatened." If the population decline continues, this listing could be changed to "endangered." The northern sea otter, which consists of sub-populations in Alaska, Canada and Washington, isn't listed as a whole subspecies. The different sub-populations have different status classifications. Currently there is no federal or state Endangered Species Act listing for Alaska and Washington. The southwest stock of northern sea otters in Alaska, were listed as "threatened" under the ESA in 2005. Washington has listed the sea otter as state endangered. In addition, in Canada, the otter population in British Columbia is classified as "threatened" by the Committee on the Status of

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Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

## **What other protections are afforded to sea otters?**

All sea otters in the United States are classified as "depleted" under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. The California sea otter is also listed under state law as a "fully protected mammal."

## **What do sea otters eat?**

Abalone, squid, snails and other molluscs; clams; mussels; crabs; lobster; urchins; sea stars; sea cucumbers; chitons; marine worms; and about 40 other marine invertebrates; and on occasion, marine birds; and in Alaska, certain fish.

## **How do sea otters forage for food?**

Sea otters generally do not spend more than two or three minutes diving for food. They use their sensitive paws, whiskers and vision to make their way through the water to find food. Sea otters then return to the surface with their prey, lie on their backs, place the food on their chests and break open the prey using a tool of some kind (rock, bottle, etc.).

## **Where are sea otters on the food chain?**

Sea otters are considered to be "opportunistic feeders" – that is, they feed on many prey items. They are carnivores, and, at times, omnivorous, meaning they feed on both animal and plant food. They are the top-end predator in the nearshore marine ecosystem.

## **What are the natural predators of sea otters?**

Great white sharks are the primary predator in California. Ongoing studies in Alaska recently revealed that orcas (killer whales) are eating more and more sea otters in that region, possibly because the usual prey (seals and sea lions) are in decline. Other factors that may be influencing the orcas to eat more sea otters may include natural disturbances to the ecosystem that occur over space and time, as well as overfishing. Other reported predators that feed on sea otters include stellar sea lions, coyotes, bears and eagles.

## **How do sea otters protect themselves?**

Sea otters have three basic ways to escape predators: fleeing; taking refuge in the kelp where they live; and coming up on land. They also have strong teeth they can use in interactions with other sea otters.

## **What is the lifespan of a sea otter?**

Sea otter males generally live up to 10-15 years, while females live 15-20 years.

## **What is the habitat of a sea otter?**

Sea otters live in the nearshore marine ecosystem, which consists of rocky shores and kelp forests. In California, many sea otters spend a considerable amount of time in an estuary called Elkhorn Slough that is located near Moss Landing. A large part of their day is spent in the kelp forest and rocky areas, where much of their prey is found. And, the kelp canopy provides shelter and protection for sea otters from

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storms and predators.

## Do sea otters have personalities, specifically with their interactions with humans?

Sea otters are wild animals, which means their behavior towards humans can be unpredictable. Like people and other animals, they all have individual personalities. Some may be aggressive towards humans and other otters may be friendly. There have been occasional reports of sea otters messing around with divers (e.g., pulling at their dive caps and other things).

## How do sea otters use their forepaws and forelegs?

Sea otter forepaws are quite dexterous and sensitive, allowing sea otters to extract their prey from tight spots and to sense the prey they do handle. The pads of their paws are different from those of dogs -- sea otters have a continuous pad that covers the whole bottom part of the paw, while a dog's paw is not fused.

## What is the size and weight of sea otters?

California sea otters average 4 feet in length and 50-60 pounds in weight. Northern sea otters are slightly larger.

## What information do we know about the sea otter fur trade?

Aboriginal people hunted sea otters for many thousands of years. Coastal North American Indians, northern Aleuts and the Japanese valued otters for their warm fur. In some areas, the Aleuts over-exploited otters and substantially reduced their populations. However, it wasn't until the mid-1700s that widespread commercial hunting of sea otters took place, leading to the near-extinction of the species. The extremely profitable sea otter fur trade began in 1741, when a shipwrecked Russian expedition led by Vitus Bering discovered sea otters on one of the Commander Islands. ("Sea Otters" by Marianne Riedmann, 1997, published by the Monterey Bay Aquarium). You can obtain more information about the fur trade from this book.

## What is the range of the California Sea Otter?

The California sea otter is found from Half Moon Bay in the north to, as of 2009, just beyond Point Conception (in Santa Barbara county) in the south.

## What is the classification for sea otters?

**Kingdom**-Animalia  
**Phylum**-Chordata  
**Subphylum**-Vertebrata  
**Class**-Mammalia  
**Order**-Carnivora  
**Family**-Mustelidae  
**Genus**-*Enhydra*  
**Specific Epithet**-*lutris*  
**Species**-*Enhydra lutris*