

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH SEA OTTERS?

For the past several decades many people have been concerned about the small sea otter population in California and the threats from various potential events that could jeopardize their survival.

In 1986, Congress adopted legislation setting a goal for federal agencies to conserve sea otters and protect potentially impacted fishing industries. Shellfish is a primary food for sea otters and shellfish populations can easily be decimated by otters. As a result of Congressional direction, the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) adopted a plan to start a new colony of sea otters, far removed from the current mainland population, and maintain a sea otter management zone which would let regulated shellfish fishing (including sea urchin) continue.

After implementing only part of the plan, the FWS stopped the program to recover sea otters and protect fishing. It claimed that a few sea otter mortalities were risking all sea otters, even though some mortality was expected from the beginning. The FWS undertook a review of the original plan and in 2005 announced that it favored abandoning a 20 year management program of balancing sea otter recovery and fishing protections. Its new plan is a "no management plan" which allows sea otters to go wherever they want. The FWS' unreasonable action will lead to inevitable conflicts between sea otters and legal fishing activities and sea otters and other protected marine species.

While the FWS focuses on the inconsequential benefits to sea otters to be derived by sacrificing the sea urchin industry and others, the real threat to sea otter is not being addressed. It is widely recognized that the most serious killer of sea otters is pollutant discharges and poor water quality. If the hundreds of sea otter deaths from pollution were prevented, sea otters would reach recovery goals in a few short years.

The California Sea Urchin Commission is taking the lead to ensure the original policy, to balance sea otter recovery and fishing protections, is obeyed. We have formed the Fisheries & Sea Otter Conservation Coalition to protect fishing opportunities while sea otter recovery programs are underway. Early in 2006, the Sea Urchin Commission submitted comments on the new FWS plan. We found that they used outdated information, had inappropriately applied scientific modeling, and was ignoring the significant water quality problem facing sea otters. These comments and other points of concern are posted at the Coalition's website: www.fsocc.org.

KEY SEA OTTER CONCERNS

1. Current Situation

Sea otters are a threatened species under the federal ESA. The current population is over 2,800 and based on the current recovery plan, 3,090 is the number at which the population can be considered for delisting. FWS is now proposing to abandon a 20 year sea otter management program

mandated by Congress, at the request of FWS, in favor of no management which would simply allow sea otters to go wherever they want.

FWS new plan, embraced as the preferred alternative in their DSEIS, is based on data that is several years old and fails to account for current circumstances.

2. Abandonment of Fishery Responsibilities

As a result of its failure to adequately identify and address the inevitable conflicts that will result from sea otter range expansion, FWS proposal will lead to the destruction of the California shellfish industry with potential devastating job and, economic losses. In 1999, when sea otters expanded their range without restriction, the commercial sea urchin harvest was devastated, falling over 95% in only one year in the area of expansion.

3. Conflict with Sea Otters Inevitable

Whenever sea otters have been allowed to go wherever they want, they have changed the ecosystem in surprising and unexpected ways. Unmanaged sea otter range expansion will almost certainly threaten the continued existence of the endangered white abalone and may also cause the black abalone to be added to the list of endangered species. In the case of abalone, FWS proposed action violates the ESA requirement that FWS ensure its actions will not harm ESA protected species.

4. Unbalanced Resource Management

The failure to adequately address the effects of unmanaged sea otter range expansion on shellfish and other species is inconsistent with the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and sets the stage for irresponsible and unbalanced management of important ocean resources.

5. Actual Threats to Sea Otters Not Being Addressed

Unmanaged population expansion of sea otters ignores the real problem. With a current population of 2,800 and a delisting number of 3,090, approximately 200 sea otters are dying annually from strandings likely caused by pollutant discharges and poor water quality. If the strandings related mortality ended for just two years, sea otters would likely reach their recovery goal.

6. FWS Violating its Own Regulations

Its own regulations "require" that if FWS ends the current management program, then the experimental population of sea otters at SNI must be moved back to the mainland. This conclusion was restated in the 2000 biological opinion. FWS now proposes to officially end the management program but leave the experimental population in place. This would presumably be done by rewriting the regulations and continuing to ignore the spirit of the law. It is all now seen as being justified by concluding that translocation itself is a primary threat to the survival of the species.