

First Place

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Who, may I ask, is responsible to maintain a healthy, diverse ocean ecosystem, nurturing the kelp beds and providing a safe sanctuary for so many marine species? And who do we suppose indicates the condition and contamination levels of the ocean off the California coast? And lastly, who will attract sightseers to your coastal communities? Well, with all do modesty, I, being one sociable Southern Sea Otter (more commonly known as the California Sea Otter) here in the Monterey Bay, believe that I am quite suitable for these tasks. Actually, my family, ancestors and I have been sustaining this marine habitat for many years. We all are very important to the well-being of California and its coast. I help maintain my (and your) underwater environment by keeping the sea urchin population under control. My behavior and health may help to determine the condition of the ocean's health, and I attract all of those free-spending tourists who support local economies.

Sea otters' most common prey is shellfish, including abalone, urchins, crab and lobster. There is much ongoing conflict between California shellfish industries (fishermen) and conservation groups about the protection of us furry carnivores. Fishermen see us otters as competition and a threat to their businesses and livelihood, because of our immense appetite for shellfish. While feeding, we keep the shellfish population at a stable, healthy number, and therefore, keep the ecosystem balanced. When my species was nearly hunted to extinction, the kelp forests were consumed and depleted by sea urchins. Because otters were not present to control these destructive invertebrates, their population increased to unhealthy numbers, and the kelp forests rapidly diminished. Kelp forests are important for many reasons. They serve as fish nurseries and provide shelter for sea otter mothers and pups. They lessen the impact of severe storms on underwater habitats and they supply areas for various marine species to forage. Kelp forests are frequently harvested to manufacture human products like toothpaste, ice cream, and cosmetics. Even though we otters may compete with fishermen for shellfish, our

presence is more helpful than harmful. Rockfish, white sea bass, lingcod, and various perch species (which are commonly caught by fishermen) find shelter in kelp forests and would become scarce if otters weren't present. By helping to maintain these forests, we directly contribute to this diverse and healthy habitat.

Just like the "canary in the coal mine," we are bio-indicators of the condition of our environment. Decline in otter populations due to disease could be an indication that the prey we consume is contaminated. Since such a large portion of the human diet consists of seafood, your health is at risk also, and I, the fantastically helpful otter, am a useful forewarning of problems in the food supply. This can protect human health! Since sea otters don't migrate and remain in one general area, we can be studied to find the levels of environmental contaminants (which weaken the immune system) our bodies contain. Those levels will determine the quantity of environmental contaminants in the water. When the environment becomes polluted and congested, otters are among the first to be affected (which is common among animals at the top of the food chain).

"A world without otters is a world without pristine streams, without unsilted rainforest rivers...without uncontaminated fish, crabs and aquatic life." IUCN Otter

Action Plan

Our playful behavior and attractiveness is what calls the attention of tourists from around the world, to come and view us, bringing money to local businesses. We, again with all due modesty, are often among the most popular exhibits at zoos and aquariums attracting many inquisitive faces flattened against the glass, viewing us with intense fascination. When people visit zoos and aquariums, they are commonly required to pay an entrance fee, and will often spend money buying souvenirs at gift shops. Some of these tourist attractions will even donate a certain percentage of their profit to services protecting otters and other threatened species. Tourists are also attracted to us thriving in our natural habitat. Over 64,000 scuba divers visit the 60 dive sites in the Monterey Bay yearly to explore the lush kelp forests. The Monterey Bay is one of the most diverse marine habitats in the world partly because of sea otters and our actions to maintain the habitat. Seals, sea lions, and otters are the most commonly seen marine mammals while diving, and yet one more reason why so many scuba divers choose this sanctuary to

explore. The ecosystem that we assist in sustaining allows other marine species (whales, dolphins, seals, etc...) to thrive and attract tourists also. Whale watching, kayaking, scuba diving, and snorkeling are some activities tourists participate in to view these amazing animals.

Some of you see only the negative aspects of the otter's existence. Many of you only see a cute, furry face when you look at the otter. It is clear that sea otters are incredibly important to the economy, ecosystem, and the health of the Pacific Ocean in California. If you beings treat us with understanding and do your part to maintain the environment, we can work together as a superb team!