

SUMMARY MINUTES OF MEETING ON
CALIFORNIA SEA OTTERS, 13 DECEMBER 1979

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 a.m. on 13 December 1979 at the Burlingame Hotel, Burlingame, California by Dr. Donald Siniff who briefly summarized the background of the California sea otter issue and noted that the Marine Mammal Commission was anxious to discuss the process by which the issues were going to be addressed by the federal and state agencies involved. Dr. Siniff explained that although it was certain that all of the issues would not be resolved at this meeting, the Commission had invited representatives of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the State's Sea Otter Scientific Advisory Committee to join representatives of the Commission at this meeting in the hope that a consensus might be reached on the process by which to resolve them and that a mechanism might be established to continue cooperative efforts and provide for regular consultation. A list of persons attending the meeting is attached as Appendix A.

It was agreed that the outline of discussions for the meeting which had been transmitted to the participants by letter of 16 November 1979 (attached as Appendix B) would be used as an informal agenda. The results of the discussions of the topics in the outline are summarized below.

Topic 1

It was agreed that the goal of management is to obtain and maintain the optimum sustainable population of sea otters under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and that this goal includes getting the sea otter population in California off the "threatened list" of the Endangered Species Act.

Topic 2

It was agreed that the determination of the optimum sustainable population of sea otters would require the resolution of questions about the desired distribution of sea otters within their former range. It was noted that the approach to the definition of optimum sustainable population that had been applied to other species under the Marine Mammal Protection Act was not entirely adequate for this purpose and that further consideration should be given to the question of whether these efforts should be limited to an evaluation of the desired distribution and abundance of sea otters in California or in all parts of their former range.

It was generally agreed that the differences between the current and historic ecosystems and the need to determine the desired geographical range as well as the desired abundance of sea otters make this situation considerably different from other determinations of the optimum sustainable population and that the sea otter problem offers a unique opportunity to further refine functional definitions of such concepts as the health and stability of the marine ecosystem, with reference to existing conditions. It was further noted that such refinements could be best accomplished by coordinated and directed efforts of the scientists, resource managers, and other interested parties involved.

With respect to Topic 2(a), it was felt that although historic data on the abundance, distribution, and population stability of the sea otter in California are not as complete as those for some whales, for example, they are likely to be useful and it would be desirable to gather and present the data so that they can be evaluated. It was agreed that the utility of these historic data is difficult to assess at this time and can best be determined after they have been gathered and preliminarily evaluated.

With respect to Topics 2(b)-(k), it was agreed that these factors should also be considered in the course of efforts to identify, obtain, and maintain the optimum sustainable population of sea otters, while noting that information needed for 2(d), concerning the effects of sea otters on sport and commercial fisheries, may be already available.

Topic 4(a)

It was agreed that it would be desirable to compile, map, and evaluate available information on the six subjects listed. With respect to Item 4(a)(ii), it was noted that periodic aerial censuses may not be the best way to determine the present abundance of sea otters in California and that the State's Sea Otter Scientific Advisory Committee is considering this matter. With respect to Item 4(a)(iii), it was agreed that efforts should be undertaken to establish the criteria that would allow for determining the "suitability" of habitat for sea otters so that problems resulting from limited information and differing subjective judgments might be minimized.

Topic 4(b)

It was agreed that efforts to develop an overall ecosystem model that would provide useful quantitative results were not likely to be successful in the near future but that efforts could and should be devoted to utilizing "process models" which could assist in refining available data and contribute to the understanding of the interactions between sea otters and other components of the near shore community. It was noted that it would be desirable to begin these efforts by convening a small group of appropriate experts to review the available information and theory as well as what modeling work has been done and to make recommendations concerning the type of efforts that should be undertaken in the future.

Topic 4(e)

It was generally felt that decisions on translocation sites and the timing for translocation are needed and that most of the information needed for these actions would be provided by completion of Topics 4(a) and (b). It was noted that a variety of proposed human activities may have adverse impacts upon sea otters and may influence the selection of optimal translocation sites and that it is important to proceed with these actions as quickly as possible.

Topic 3

It was agreed to defer discussion of Topics 3(a)-(c) and (e)-(g) and to focus discussion on Topic 3(d), the Fish and Wildlife Service's Recovery Plan, because of its potentially important role in providing a means for coordinated actions and decisions. It was noted that: efforts to develop a recovery plan had been delayed because funds were not made available for this purpose until FY 1980; Fish and Wildlife Service personnel hope to have a draft plan available for "technical review" in March 1980 to be distributed for comment to all interested governmental and non-governmental agencies, groups, and individuals; Fish and Wildlife Service personnel will review those comments and then modify the draft plan and distribute it again to the same governmental agencies and non-governmental groups and individuals for "agency review" with reference to policy and administrative considerations; and Fish and Wildlife Service personnel intend to review those comments and develop a final plan for approval by the Director. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel indicated that: they hope to be able to complete this process and have a final plan approved by the Director by the end of calendar year 1980; the plan will identify needed information and action to resolve issues but will not include any conclusions with respect to those issues; and the plan will consider many of the factors that are relevant to obtaining and maintaining OSP of sea otters, to the extent that they are relevant to getting sea otters off the "threatened list", but the focus of the plan will be to get them off the threatened list and not to get them to OSP.

The meeting adjourned for lunch at 12:15 p.m. and reconvened at 1:15 p.m.

Topic 5

It was agreed that it is important to proceed with actions to resolve the sea otter problem as quickly as possible and that such actions should not be delayed until the recovery plan is completed. It was noted that most of the items identified under 4(a) and (b) have been or are being done by a variety of agencies, groups, and individuals but that the efforts and results have not been pulled together as part of an agreed process to resolve the sea otter problem.

With respect to Topic 5(a), it was agreed that designation of principal contact persons would be desirable and that, although representatives of the agencies present were not in a position to indicate whether or not such a principal contact could be designated, they would raise this question with the appropriate person(s) in their respective agencies.

With respect to Topic 5(b), it was agreed that it would be desirable if the Fish and Wildlife Service could assume the lead in developing a more detailed outline of how the actions identified under Topics 4(a) and (b) might best be accomplished and that the representatives of the Fish and Wildlife Service at the meeting would raise the question with the appropriate persons in the Service.

Discussion of Topics 5(c) and (d) was deferred, pending a decision about subsequent meetings.

With respect to Topic 5(e), it was agreed that future meetings should be scheduled in conjunction with or immediately preceding or following the meetings of the State's Sea Otter Scientific Advisory Committee whenever feasible, in order to minimize the number of meetings, expense, and time required.

It was also agreed that representatives of the Marine Mammal Commission would prepare and transmit summary minutes of the meeting to participants and that representatives of the Commission would assume responsibility for contacting representatives of the other agencies concerning designation of principal contacts and other matters in order to arrange for the next meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:45 p.m.

APPENDIX A

California Department of Fish and Game

J. A. Ames
Earl E. Ebert
Timothy C. Farley
Robert A. Hardy
Bill Maxwell
Fred Wendell

Sea Otter Scientific Advisory Committee

Betty S. Davis
Paul K. Dayton
John D. De Martini
Charles D. Woodhouse

Fish and Wildlife Service

John Bardwell
Carl Benz
Robert L. Brownell, Jr.
James A. Estes
Emmet T. Hooper
Clyde Jones
Marshall P. Jones
Gail C. Kobetich
Jack Lewis
David J. Wesley

Marine Mammal Commission

Robert Eisenbud
Robert J. Hofman
Donald B. Siniff

(APPENDIX B (

Outline for meeting on California Sea Otters

Purpose

To review the process, including administrative considerations and responsibilities, by which the California sea otter issue(s) may be resolved and to establish a steering committee composed of representatives of the appropriate governmental agencies to coordinate and facilitate that process.

Place

A meeting room in a conveniently located hotel in San Francisco will be arranged by the Marine Mammal Commission.

Date

13 December and, if necessary, 14 December 1979.

Participants

Representatives of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Marine Mammal Commission, and the California Department of Fish and Game and its Sea Otter Scientific Advisory Committee.

Discussion Topics and Proposed Actions

1. What is the statutory goal of management? -- Optimum sustainable population under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. This goal includes getting the population off the "threatened" list of the Endangered Species Act.
2. What factors must be considered in the course of identifying, obtaining, and maintaining the optimum sustainable population of California sea otters?
 - a. Historic sea otter abundance and range in California;
 - b. Suitable but unoccupied range in California;
 - c. The sea otter's role in structuring (maintaining the health and stability of) the nearshore benthic communities;

- d. The effects of sea otters on sport and commercial fisheries;
 - e. The effects of sea otters on the California kelp and tourist industries;
 - f. The status and distribution of kelp resources in nearshore California waters;
 - g. Past and present management practices and trends of sea otters and shellfish/kelp resources in California;
 - h. Effects of human activities (e.g., OCS activities) on sea otters and their habitat;
 - i. Methods, sites, and timing of potential translocations of sea otters and the numbers, age, and sex of animals to be translocated;
 - j. Possible methods for limiting sea otter distribution and/or abundance, should it be determined, in the future, that zonal management is desirable;
 - k. Time that will be required to meet immediate and long-range management objectives with respect to sea otters, shellfish resources, and kelp resources; and
 - l. Other.
3. What administrative, personnel, and financial resources and mechanisms are available and how are they being utilized to address these factors?
- a. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel and funds under MMPA and ESA;
 - b. Cooperative agreement with California under ESA and return of management under MMPA;
 - c. California Department of Fish and Game's scientific research permit;
 - d. Fish and Wildlife Service's Recovery Plan;
 - e. Section 7 and other consultations with BLM and other agencies;
 - f. Fish and Wildlife Service research efforts and plans; and
 - g. Other.

4. What actions can be undertaken immediately to facilitate resolution of the sea otter issue(s)?

- a. Compilation, mapping, and evaluation of available information on:
 - i. historic sea otter distribution and abundance in California and elsewhere;
 - ii. present sea otter distribution and abundance in California and elsewhere;
 - iii. suitable but unoccupied sea otter range in California;
 - iv. distribution, status, and relative importance of present and foreseeable shellfish and kelp resources in California;
 - v. present or proposed human activities such as offshore oil and gas development and coastal zone development, tanker traffic, LNG terminals, oceanographic currents, wind and other dispersion factors in relation to sea otters and shellfish or the nearshore communities of which they are a part; and
 - vi. jurisdictional boundaries and such other data as may be relative to decisions concerning the optimum sustainable sea otter population in California.
 - b. Development of a sea otter population model and/or a nearshore community model to assist in making decisions concerning the possible effects of proposed management actions on sea otters or other components of nearshore coastal communities, e.g., sea otter translocations; and
 - c. Identification of optimal translocation sites and timing.
5. How can these actions best be accomplished?
- a. Agree to designate principal contact persons from each group to be responsible for sea otter matters. Such persons should have ready access to both the ultimate decision-makers in each agency and those persons responsible for administrative and program activities of the agency;

- b. Ask Fish and Wildlife Service to prepare and circulate a proposed scope of work, proposed budget, proposed timing, and proposed RFP or indication of potential contractors, in-house personnel, or other methods for accomplishing the work set forth in 4(a) above;
- c. Identification of and schedule for any other action to be undertaken by members;
- d. Identification of other agencies (e.g., BLM) with which liaison should be established; and
- e. Scheduling of future meetings.