

# SEA OTTER FORAGING BEHAVIOR

Sea otters are opportunistic hunters, meaning they take **prey** as it becomes available. Although individual sea otters do have food preferences, prey availability and abundance determines what they eat. Sea otters are adept at switching prey when a particular food source becomes scarce. They feed on approximately 40 different types of marine **invertebrates** including turban snails, sea urchins, mussels, crabs, sea stars, abalone and octopus. However, they also occasionally feed on fish (especially in Alaska) and upon the kelp in their resting area. On rare occasions, they eat marine birds.

Sea otters forage in kelp forests and rocky nearshore areas. They also forage on muddy bottoms like those found in Elkhorn Slough, an **estuary** near Moss Landing, California. Sea otters use their incredible **tactile** senses to seek out prey hidden in rock **crevices** and beneath the **substrate**. They also use their highly sensitive vibrissae, or whiskers, to seek out and identify their prey.

When observing sea otters, it is common to witness the unique manner in which they eat their prey. Sea otters bring their prey to the surface along with a tool, usually a hard object. They proceed to crack open the hard-shelled prey with the tool using their chest as a table. As the sea otter ascends to the surface with the prey item in hand, they tuck the tool in an area near their armpit. This area has loose pouches of skin that are used for storage. Tool-use preference in sea otters is a behavior that is passed down from mother to pup. Usually if a mother sea otter prefers a particular tool, the pup will share that same preference. Tool-use in foraging is only practiced by a small number of species in the animal kingdom, including primates, birds, polar bears and some insects.

Food stealing is another common practice among sea otters. This act occurs between pups and their mothers and mothers and male sea otters. In the latter case, the male otter has been known take a pup “hostage” in exchange for food. Only when the mother offers food to the male is the pup released.

# VOCABULARY

**prey**

an animal that is hunted and killed for food by another animal

**invertebrates**

an animal that lacks a spinal column

**estuary**

a water passage where the tide meets a river current

**tactile**

of or relating to the sense of touch

**crevices**

a narrow opening resulting from a split or crack

**substrate**

the base on which an organism lives

# Check Your Reading Skills

## Sea Otter Foraging Behavior

- 1) What does it mean when sea otters are called opportunistic hunters?
- 2) Where do sea otters keep the tools they use to crack open their prey?
- 3) What do sea otters use to seek out their prey?
- 4) Why do you think that tool preference is passed down from mother to pup?
- 5) How do humans get their food? What tools do humans use to eat their food?

# Reading Comprehension Check

## Answers

- 1) Sea otters are opportunistic hunters because they take prey as it becomes available.
- 2) Sea otters keep their tools tucked in an area near their armpit.
- 3) Sea otters use their tactile senses and whiskers to seek out prey.
- 4) Possible answers:
  - Pups observe their mothers using the tool.
  - That tool is readily available in that area.
- 5) Answers will vary.