

SEA OTTER HISTORY

Sea otters once ranged from northern Japan to the Alaskan **peninsula** and along the west coast of North America to Baja California in Mexico. Until the 1700s, sea otters were **abundant** throughout the waters of the north Pacific and for centuries native groups, such as the Aleuts, hunted them. During this time, the worldwide sea otter population numbered between 150,000 to 300,000. By the mid-1700s, Russian hunters had **coerced** the Aleuts to exploit sea otters for the fur trade, and the once abundant sea otter population plummeted. The otters that remained were chased down by English, French, Japanese and American traders. By the 1900s, the sea otter was nearly **extinct** with only 1,000 to 2,000 otters left. Only 13 **remnant** sea otter colonies existed from Russia to Mexico when the **International Fur Seal Treaty**, which banned the hunting of sea otters and fur seals was established in 1911.

CALIFORNIA

By the 1930s, a small group of 50 to 300 sea otters, a population now known as southern or California sea otters, remained near Big Sur, California. Under the protection of the International Fur Seal Treaty, this small population began a slow and steady climb from nearly extinct to a fairly stable population. From the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, the southern sea otter population began to decline once again. About 1,000 sea otters died over a 10 year period due to entrapment in gill nets. When gill net legislation was passed in the late 1980s requiring gill nets to move farther off shore, the sea otter population began to grow again until the mid-1990s. In 1977, the southern sea otter was listed as “**threatened**” under the **Endangered Species Act**.

From 1995 until the present, southern sea otter numbers have declined in five out of the last six years. Some of the possible causes include entrapment in fisheries gear, disease, food limitations, and habitat loss and **degradation** due to **contaminants**.

Sea otter protection is a source of ongoing conflict between the California shellfish (abalone, sea urchins, crab, lobster) industries and conservation groups. While fishermen view the shellfish eating sea otter as a threat to their livelihood, conservation groups and scientists see the sea otter as a **keystone species** because their activity is central to the nature of their **ecosystem**. A sea otter’s effect on the ecosystem is disproportionate to how many sea otters there are. Very few sea otters can have a large effect.

ALASKA

In the early 1900s, following the near extinction of the sea otter, remnant sea otter colonies held on in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, other portions of southwest Alaska, the Alaska peninsula and the northern Gulf of Alaska. Perhaps the most dramatic recovery of the sea otter now known as the northern sea otter occurred in the Aleutian archipelago. By the mid-1980s, biologists believed that perhaps as much as half of the world’s population of sea otters lived in the Aleutian Islands. Indeed, the entire Alaska sea otter population seemed to be quite abundant until the late 1990s, when sea otters in southwestern Alaska began to suffer dramatic declines.

OREGON AND WASHINGTON

Northern sea otters from Alaska were transplanted to Oregon and Washington state with the goal of repopulating the sea otters' former range. In 1970 and 1971, 93 sea otters from Amchitka Island in Alaska were reintroduced to Oregon. However, sea otters are not presently found in Oregon. From 1969 to 1970, 59 sea otters were relocated from Amchitka Island to Washington. This population grew at an average annual rate of about 11 percent from 1989 to 1999 and scientists estimate that 500 sea otters currently live in Washington. However, this small population is vulnerable to fisheries conflicts, the continuing threat of oil spills and environmental contaminants.

VOCABULARY

peninsula

a piece of land jutting out into the water whether with or without a well-defined narrow strip of land connecting the two land masses

abundant

plentiful

coerced

to bring about by force or threat

extinct

no longer existing or living

remnant

a small surviving group

International Fur Seal Treaty

a treaty established in 1911 banning the hunting of sea otters and fur seals

threatened

a species present in its home range but in declining numbers and in danger of becoming endangered

Endangered Species Act

Federal act that was established in 1973 that seeks to “provide for the conservation of endangered and threatened species of birds, mammals, fish, invertebrates and plants and their habitat”

degradation

decline to a low, destitute, or demoralized state

contaminants

something that pollutes by contact or mixture

keystone species

an organism whose abundance or activity is central to maintaining the nature of the habitat; they may be important habitat modifiers, pollinators, seed dispersers

ecosystem

the complex of a community of organisms and its environment functioning as an ecological unit

Check Your Reading Skills

Sea Otter History

1. Why are sea otters a keystone species?
2. What or who caused the near extinction of the sea otter in the mid 1700s?
3. How did the International Fur Treaty help sea otters?
4. Put yourself in the fishermen's place. Why do you not want the sea otter population to rebound?
5. Do you agree/disagree with the fishermen's viewpoint? Why or why not?

Reading Comprehension Check

Answers

- 1) Sea otters are keystone species because their activity is central to maintaining the nature of the ecosystem. They are beneficial habitat modifiers.
- 2) Russian, American and English hunters caused the near extinction of the sea otter.
- 3) The International Fur Treaty helped sea otters by providing sea otters with protection by banning hunting of their fur.
- 4) Answers will vary.
- 5) Answers will vary.