

SEA OTTER SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOR

The social structure and behavior of the sea otter is not fully understood. While there have been many studies of tagged otters over long periods of time, how sea otters communicate and interact with one another is not entirely revealed through such studies. However, we do know that sea otters, like many nonhuman animals, have distinct personalities. For example, sea otters differ in their reactions to humans, some otters are **wary**, some brave, and some are very playful in interacting with people.

A common sight along the coast lines sea otters inhabit is sea otters **congregated** in nearshore groups, called rafts. Rafting sea otters are usually in a resting mode. Raft sizes can vary from a dozen to as many as a couple thousand animals, as is often seen in Alaska. While this behavior appears to demonstrate a tendency towards a group social structure, sea otters can also be **solitary** animals. They tend to feed, give birth and mate away from other otters.

Sea otters form specific groups, including mother-pup pairs, juvenile male groups and adult male groups. Male sea otters may exhibit **territoriality**. The establishment and maintenance of territories can occur on a seasonal basis or throughout the year. While male sea otters generally reach sexual maturity at the age of five, they do not begin to establish territories until they are between eight and ten years of age. Territorial males will sometimes be found among female groups.

The mother-pup pair is an extremely important social bond for sea otters because the female is entirely responsible for the care of the pup. The male is not involved in any of the parenting. The female teaches the majority of the behaviors that are essential for the growing pup such as foraging, diving and grooming. By about three and a half months of age, most pups have the ability to swim independently, dive capably and groom themselves without assistance from their mother. At five to six months, sea otter pups can accomplish certain foraging tasks. They are generally weaned at six months to one year.

Unlike whales and other marine mammals, sea otters do not migrate great distances. Territorial males can travel distances 40 to 60 miles on a seasonal basis, but most sea otters stay within a very short distance of their home range.

Communication in sea otters involves both vocalizations and visual behaviors. A common visual behavior is the "head jerk." This motion is generally observed when an individual otter approaches a raft of sea otters. The approaching otter noses and sniffs the other otters while jerking its head from side to side. This behavior may be either a means of greeting or a way of obtaining information

about members of the raft through use of the well-developed **olfactory** sense. When this behavior is performed by an intruding otter, it often will take on a more aggressive nature through pounces and lunges at members of the raft.

Sea otters have a **repertoire** of vocalizations. One of the most frequently heard sounds when visiting nearshore areas inhabited by sea otters is the high pitched squeals of the sea otter pup. This vocalization keeps the pup in contact with its mother. These squeals enable the mother to find her pup when she returns from foraging for food. Other sea otter vocalizations include coos, whistles, whines, screams, squeaks, grunts, growls and hisses. These sounds are used in a variety of ways. Grunting and cooing are typically observed in otters when they are eating. Mother-pup pairs also sometimes coo. Stressed sea otters can whine, hiss and growl.

Although many facets of sea otter behavior and social structure are yet to be explained, through study and observation, scientists are continually learning more and more about these unique marine mammals.

VOCABULARY

wary

on guard, watchful

congregated

to collect into a group or crowd

solitary

being, living, or going alone or without companions

territoriality

the pattern of behavior associated with the defense of a territory

olfactory

of, relating to, or connected with the sense of smell

repertoire

a list or supply of capabilities

Check Your Reading Skills

Sea Otter Social Structure And Behavior

- 1) What are rafts?
- 2) Explain why the mother-pup behavior is an important relationship.
- 3) Explain the significance of the “head jerk” that sea otters make.
- 4) Describe some of the common sounds that sea otters make.
- 5) What sounds do humans make to communicate with each other?

Reading Comprehension Check

Answers

- 1) Rafts are groups of sea otters congregated nearshore. Otters usually raft when they are in resting mode.
- 2) The mother-pup relationship is important because it teaches the pup important survival skills. The mother teaches her pup how to forage for food, dive and groom.
- 3) After a sea otter has entered a group, it will jerk its head from side to side and nose and sniff the other otters. This behavior may be a greeting or a way of obtaining information.
- 4) Answers may include the following:
 - High pitched squeals which allows the pup to keep in contact with its mother.
 - Grunting and cooing sounds are made when otters are eating.
 - Whining, hissing and growling sounds are made when otters are stressed.
- 5) Answers will vary.