

# En-dan-ger-ed Species

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**en-dan-ger:** to expose to danger, harm, or loss; imperil; to threaten with extinction

**threat-en:** a menacing indication of danger, harm, or distress

The southern sea otter is considered a threatened species because the small group located along the California coast is extremely vulnerable to human threat. It is also geographically isolated from other otter populations.

## **But what exactly does that mean?**

All species (a particular animal group) are in some way affected by people. We intrude into animals' lives in a variety of ways by living on and using the land, fishing the oceans or polluting the air and water.

In this way, we threaten a species very existence; we make it hard for them to survive and grow in population.

## **That is what has happened with the southern sea otter.**

When man first discovered the sea otter in the 1700's they ranged from Baja California along the west coast of the United States into Alaska and around the Pacific to the eastern coast of Russia and down into Japanese waters.

In the early 1800's, however, the sea otter was hunted to near extinction because of their incredibly luxuriant fur. But the sea otter is a tenacious animal and small groups managed to hang on in isolated areas of their range.

A raft of about 300 were unexpectedly discovered along the Big Sur coast in 1938. Since that time the population in California has slowly grown to number about 2200, not near the 20,000, however, that at one point flourished along the coast..

In 1977, the California group was designated a subspecies and placed on the Endangered Species list and classified as threatened.

## **The laws that protect marine mammals:**

There are currently many laws in place that help to protect all plants and animals. Friends of the Sea Otter (FSO), of course, is specifically concerned with protecting the sea otter and its habitat.

The safety of the sea otter is covered by the federal government with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The sea otter is also fully protected under California law.

Each law classifies the sea otter a little differently. The MMPA designates the otter as depleted or low in numbers; the ESA considers the otter threatened or at risk of harm or distress. The next classification under the ESA is endangered or threatened with extinction. FSO has spent the last 25 years working to make sure that the sea otter never gets classified as endangered.

When the ESA was passed in 1973 many environmentalists hoped that it would indeed establish a way to guarantee the protection of fragile species. And while it has to some extent, the battle to keep the ESA in place has been unrelenting throughout the past 20 years.

The dilemma will always be balancing the needs of the human population with the needs of animal groups.

For more information, contact [education@seaotters.org](mailto:education@seaotters.org)

Filename: Document1  
Directory:  
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\Deborah\Application  
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dotm  
Title:  
Subject:  
Author: Deborah  
Keywords:  
Comments:  
Creation Date: 3/28/2009 4:47:00 PM  
Change Number: 1  
Last Saved On:  
Last Saved By:  
Total Editing Time: 44 Minutes  
Last Printed On: 3/28/2009 5:32:00 PM  
As of Last Complete Printing  
Number of Pages: 2  
Number of Words: 439 (approx.)  
Number of Characters: 2,504 (approx.)