

Frequently Asked Questions about Sea Otters

Whom are sea otters related to?

Sea otters are part of the Mustelid or “weasel” family, which includes other freshwater otters as well as weasels, minks, badgers, ferrets, and skunks.

Sea otters are classified as follows:

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Mustelidae
Genus: *Enhydra*
Species: *lutris*
Sub-species: *nereis* (California or southern sea otter)
 gracilis (Asian)
 lutris (Alaskan/Russian)

How old do sea otters get?

Male sea otters live between ten and 15 years, while females live slightly longer, to 15-20 years. A sea otter is considered an adult at three years and older. Sub-adults are one–three years, juveniles are six months–one year, and pups are younger than six months.

Where can I view sea otters?

The southern sea otter can only be found off the coast of California between Half Moon Bay (south of San Francisco) and Santa Barbara. There are also sea otters farther north in Alaska, but they are a different species from the southern sea otter. One of the best places to view sea otters is in the Monterey area, where they can easily be seen from the cliffs above the water. Elkhorn Slough in Moss Landing is another good area to view sea otters. FSO also publishes an *Otter Spotter* guide that lists good viewing locations around the Monterey Peninsula.

There are also many aquariums that now have rehabilitated sea otters on display. You may visit sea otters at the following aquariums: SeaWorld San Diego, Colorado's Ocean Journey, Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific, New York Aquarium, Oregon Zoo, Aquarium of the Americas, Monterey Bay Aquarium, and the New England Aquarium.

Where can I find photos of sea otters?

<http://www.seaotters.org/Otters/index.cfm?FuseAction=Photos>
<http://www.goldenstateimages.com/otter.htm>

What preys on the sea otter?

Natural predators on Alaskan/Russian otters include sharks, killer whales, bald eagles, bear, and coyotes. Bald eagles sometimes target pups left at the surface while the mother forages for food. Natural predators of the southern sea otters are great white sharks and occasionally killer whales. Humans have had the biggest impact on sea otters and nearly brought them to extinction during fur trade of the 18th and 19th centuries.

How do sea otters spend their day?

When not diving for food, sea otters spend most of their time at the surface eating, grooming, resting, or traveling from one preferred area to another. In an average day a sea otter spends about eight hours feeding, five to six hours grooming, and about 11 hours resting/sleeping. Surface swimming, with the animal on its back, is accomplished by alternate paddling of the hind limbs. They swim underwater by vertical undulations of the rear body, hind limbs, and tail. Sea otters sleep at sea, sometimes joining hundreds of others in favored resting areas called “rafts.”

What is the current population of sea otters and why aren't there more?

As of the spring of 2001, there are 2,161 (total pups and adults), down from the previous year's count of 2,317. Historically, there were between 16,000 to 20,000 sea otters along the coast of California, but the fur trade of the 18th and 19th centuries nearly led them to extinction. The current population of southern sea otters all descended from a single group of sea otters that survived off the coast of Big Sur at Bixby Creek Bridge. The otter population had steadily increased by five percent until 1995, when the numbers started to decrease and are now considered stable. Biologists had expected the otters to continue to re-colonize near the southern end of their historic range, into the Santa Barbara Channel, but this hasn't happened. Biologists are not sure why, but they suspect pollution may be sickening the otters, fishing gear is drowning them, and habitat loss is starving them.

What do sea otters eat?

Sea otters must eat at least 25% of their body weight each day in order to maintain a high metabolic rate, which keeps their internal body temperature at 100°F. Sea otters eat bottom-dwelling nearshore animals, which they often forage for in kelp forests. Sea otters eat more than 40 different prey items, but often have certain favorites that they specialize in such as abalone, sea urchins, crabs, clams, and octopus. In Alaska, sea otters also eat fish. Sea otters swim on their backs and use their bellies like dinner tables. Sea otters are one of the few animals to use tools. They often use rocks to break open the shells of prey items by either smashing the shell with a rock or by smashing the prey against a rock on their belly. Sometimes, favorite rocks or food items are kept in pouches of skin under the forelegs. An average sea otter dive is about a minutes in water less than 60 feet deep; however, sea otters can hold their breath up to five minutes and have been known to dive up to 330 feet.

Why should I care about the sea otters?

Sea otters are considered a keystone species, which means they directly affect the ecosystem in which they live--the kelp forest. Sea otters eat sea urchins and other animals that graze on kelp. Sea urchins are considered the most efficient and destructive consumer of kelp in the state. Sea otters, by eliminating sea urchins, help the kelp forest grow. There are documented studies that show that the removal of sea urchins by sea otters fosters the proliferation of kelps and profoundly alters the composition and dynamics of the kelp forest ecosystem. Enhancement of kelp beds by otters produces substantial enlargement of fish stocks which associate with kelp. The bottom line is that the sea otter is an indicator of a healthy ecosystem. Without the sea otter we will lose our kelp forests and all the biodiversity associated with them.

What is so special about a sea otter's fur?

Sea otters, unlike other marine mammals, lack blubber to keep them warm. Instead, sea otters have incredibly dense fur that traps air in between the hairs, which means a sea otter never actually gets wet. Sea otters have up to one million hairs per square inch! A human has only about 20,000 hairs on his or her entire head. Otters' fur is made up of long, coarse strands (called guard hairs) and shorter, finer hairs (called underfur). Their fur is so thick, that if you tried to part it, you would not be able to see the skin below. They also secrete natural oils that help their fur repel water. It is extremely important for a sea otter to keep its fur clean by constantly grooming itself. If their fur is not kept immaculate, they risk the chance of getting cold and dying of hypothermia.

What time of year can you see sea otter pups?

Female sea otters reach sexual maturity at three to four years and males at five to six years, although neither may breed successfully until they are older. Pupping occurs throughout the year, with a peak from January to March in California and later in spring in Alaska. The pregnancy period, including a phase of delayed implantation, is about six to seven months, perhaps varying

with environmental conditions. The pup is born in the water alive with eyes open and weighs between three to five pounds. Young pups have very light-brownish or yellowish fur called "natal pelage" that helps the pup float. Pups are dependent on their mothers for five to eight months, and the interval between births is about one year. Occasionally twins are born, but a mother otter is not able to care for both, so one is abandoned. Male and female sea otters often live apart. Along the California coast, females predominate in the central, more established portions of the range. Breeding males defend territories within the female areas, while other males—juveniles and non-breeding adults—occupy the periphery. These males are typically the first to colonize new areas. Although most otters travel less than a few kilometers daily, juveniles and adults males can cover hundreds of kilometers in a matter of days.

I don't live near the ocean, but could I have seen a sea otter?

Most likely what you saw was a river otter, which is often confused with sea otters. River otters are smaller than sea otters. Sea otters rarely leave the water, because they are clumsy on land—unlike the river otter, which can travel short distances on land. River otters eat fish, frogs, crayfish, snails, and even rodents and birds, while sea otters only eat bottom-dwelling nearshore invertebrates that they forage for in the ocean, such as abalone, sea-urchins, and crabs. River otters swim on their stomachs, while sea otters swim mostly on their backs.

For more information about the river otter, visit <http://otternet.com/species/srotter.htm>

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Title:
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Creation Date: 3/28/2009 4:47:00 PM
Change Number: 1
Last Saved On:
Last Saved By:
Total Editing Time: 46 Minutes
Last Printed On: 3/28/2009 5:34:00 PM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 4
Number of Words: 1,356 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 7,731 (approx.)