

Oil - The #1 Threat to the Sea Otter

The most serious problem facing the well-being of sea otters is the threat of an oil spill. The reason this threat is so serious is because of how otters exist. Unlike other marine mammals, otters do not have a thick layer of blubber for insulation; instead they depend on their thick fur to protect themselves from the coldwater. They spend a large portion of each day grooming, or rubbing their bodies, which forces air bubbles into the fur closest to their skin, acting as insulation to keep them warm.

Oil Hazards:

When otters come into contact with an oil spill, the oil coats and mats their fur, making grooming extremely difficult. Some otters can survive a light encounter with oil, but a heavy dose can cause hypothermia and death because they are unable to clean their fur.

Additionally, if oil is in their fur as they groom they will swallow it. Since oil is toxic, or poisonous, it can cause liver and kidney failure, and severe damage to their lungs and eyes all of which can result in death.

The threat of an oil spill can come from a number of sources including offshore tanker traffic, offshore drilling, onshore pipelines and oil transfer facilities. Since the Monterey Bay in California is a National Marine Sanctuary, offshore drilling is banned.

Oil pollution comes from other sources, too. The sea otter environment along California's coast is still at risk from oil tanker transportation close to shore because not only do tankers leak oil but many times seawater is used to wash out the ships, then the waste is dumped into the ocean causing damage to the otters' habitat.

Friends of the Sea Otter (FSO) is part of an oil spill response plan that uses pre-trained volunteers who can come and help wildlife in the event of an oil spill.

The best response, however, is to prevent an oil spill from every taking place and the simplest method to accomplish that is through conservation. Something you can do, and get your parents, friends, and neighbors to do, is to not use as much oil or buy as many oil-based products.

Make a pledge to:

- Recycle everything that can be recycled at home and school.
- Stop using plastic bags - take reusable bags to the store or request paper bags.
- Use waxed paper, aluminum foil, or cellulose bags instead of plastic at home

and school.

- Choose paper and glass packaging over plastic when shopping
- Avoid styrofoam and plastic containers at fast food restaurants
- Refill and reuse containers when appropriate.

Conserve electricity at home by:

Turning off lights and appliances when not in use, keeping the thermostat turned down to minimize the use of heat, using energy-efficient light bulbs, walking, biking, carpooling, or taking public transportation instead of getting in the car at least one day a week.

With everyone's help, the horrible devastation caused by an oil spill, similar to what happened in Alaska as a result of the Exxon Valdez spill when thousands of otters were killed, can be prevented. Most importantly we will all benefit from a cleaner environment - especially the otters.

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