



Current Threats to Sea Otters

Since 1995, the California sea otter population has exhibited a decline, but with a promising upward trend from this year's count. However, this small population is still very vulnerable and is not growing at the rate expected, due to many environmental threats and infectious diseases. Sea otter researchers have discovered that an increase in mortality of prime age animals (3–10 yr) has been the primary cause of the sea otter population decline. The following is a list of threats that have been linked to high sea otter mortality.

1) INFECTIOUS DISEASES:

Fecal pathogens from terrestrial sources (domestic cats and opossums) are threatening sea otters. Both cause encephalitis in sea otters, and many otters that have died from other primary causes were also carriers of these diseases.

2) CONTAMINANTS:

PCBs and tributyltin may accumulate in sea otter prey species that filter water through their tissues. An accumulation of such contaminants in their tissues may make sea otters more susceptible to other potential threats, such as infectious disease.

3) OIL SPILLS:

When otters come into contact with an oil spill, the oil coats and mats their fur, making grooming extremely difficult. A heavy dose of oil can subsequently cause hypothermia. If oil is in their fur while 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.

4) FISHERIES INTERACTIONS:

Gill and trammel nets have been known to be very deadly to sea otters that get tangled in the thin monofilament lines and drown. Live fish traps and purse seines may also pose a threat of incidental drownings for sea otters.

5) PREDATORS:

Predators, like great white sharks have been known to kill sea otters and in Alaska entire populations of sea otters have suffered from attacks of killer whales. We do have killer whales that visit Monterey Bay often during gray whale migrations, but there has been no documentation of them attacking a sea otter.

6) "NATURAL" PHENOMENON:

Other more perplexing "natural" phenomenon in the Monterey Bay have been outbreaks of domoic acid and/or red tides that biomagnify in the food web and can reach very toxic levels that can kill sea otter, as well as humans.

7) BOAT STRIKES & ECOTOURISM:

Boat strikes have occurred during busy fishing times, like the opening day of salmon fishing in Monterey Bay. Ecotourism has become more of concern with the increase of people inhabiting our coast. Studies are presently being conducted to look at the potential impacts (both short and long-term) on sea otters.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP SEA OTTERS AND MARINE LIFE?

Here a few ways that you and your family can make a difference:



Do not pollute storm drain.



Do not flush kitty litter down toilets.



Be careful what you put down your drains at home.



Help keep our beaches clean - every little bit of trash collected helps!



Buy environmentally friendly products - use paper bags, not plastic.



Use public transportation, carpool, walk or ride your bike.



Do the 4 "R's" = Refill, Reduce, Reuse & Recycle.



Can you think of some others?

If so, write to us at:

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