

# Sea Otter

*Enhydra lutris*



## Physical Description:

Sea otters are the smallest marine mammal and the largest members of the mustelid, or weasel, family. They have round heads, small eyes and visible ears. They have long flat tails, webbed hind feet and retractable front claws that allow them to grab food. Their fur ranges from brown to black, often with lighter colored guard hairs. The fur color around the front feet and neck continues to lighten as the animal ages. Females reach up to 4 feet in length and can weigh 50 to 60 pounds. Males reach up to 5 feet and can weigh 80-90 pounds.

## Photo Identification Methods:

Sea otters can be difficult to identify individually but some can be identified scientifically by comparing nose scars.

## Natural History:

### Species Subtypes:

There are 3 subspecies of sea otters: Russian, Northern (Alaska) and Southern (California).

### Reproduction:

Sea otters become sexually mature at 3 to 6 years. Gestation is 4 to 4 ½ months with a delayed implantation of 2 ½ months. They can give birth any time of year. Newborn pups are about 2 pounds at birth. They nurse for about 6 months. There is some evidence of twins but it is not common. In most instances of twinning, one will not survive because the metabolic cost is too high for the female.

### Life Cycle:

Average life span in the wild is mid-teens, but they can live into their twenties in captivity. Sea otters spend their entire lives in the ocean and rarely come on shore. They are very social and are often found in large groups called rafts which can consist of up to 1000 sea otters. Within their home ranges they are segregated sexually with

females and pups in the center of the range and males on the periphery.

**Range:**

Sea otters were historically found in shallow coastal waters in the North Pacific from Japan along the Aleutian chain and down the North America coast to Baja California. Currently they are found in Canada, Russia, Japan, Washington and California waters. The Salish Sea has never had an established population of sea otters as the type of habitat they need is not found here. However a few wanderers, mostly males, can occasionally be found in inland waters.

**Diet:**

Sea otters eat mainly invertebrates such as clams, mussels, urchins and crabs. There are at least 19 different invertebrate species that they prey on, but most individuals specialize on 1 – 4 prey types. They are not deep divers, only to about 120 feet, so they need habitat that is shallow and rocky. They often use ‘tools’ such as rocks to break open shellfish. They have a very high metabolic rate and need to eat 25% of their body weight each day.

**Threats:****Historical:**

Between 1740 and 1910 sea otters were hunted almost to extinction throughout their range. When the fur trade ended there were only 1000 animals left in isolated remnant groups. They were extirpated in Washington and were thought to be extirpated in California until a small group of 10 to 12 animals was found off Big Sur in the 1930s. That population now ranges from Santa Cruz to Santa Barbara.

**Current:**

Oils spills: food limitation: predation by orcas, sharks and eagles; contaminants: genetic diversity.

**Current Status:**

The southern population is listed as threatened. The western stock of the northern population had recovered to 60,000 animals but the population dipped in the 1990s and is also listed as threatened. This may have been caused by predation by orcas when their usual prey became depleted.

In the 1960s and 1970s several hundred sea otters were translocated from the northern population to Southeast Alaska, Vancouver Island, Washington and Oregon. All of those populations are doing well except the Oregon population which did not remain there. It is unknown whether the individuals died or moved to a different location. There are approximately 500 to 700 animals in Washington, 2000 on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and 500 on the central BC coast.

Research shows that the genetic bottleneck caused by hunting is now improving.

## Fun Facts:

- Sea otters spend about 10% of their time foraging and over 60% of their time resting.
- Sea otters have the densest fur in the animal kingdom at up to 1 million hairs per square inch.
- Sea otters do not have a blubber layer. Instead they blow a layer of air beneath their pelt which makes it essentially like wearing a dry suit.
- The largest known sea otter, caught in Washington, weighed 110 pounds.
- Sea otters are an important keystone species for the environment. In areas where sea otters were extirpated, one of their favorite prey items, urchins, increased exponentially. The increase in urchins wiped out the kelp beds. In areas where sea otters were translocated the kelp forests are healthy once again.

## Sources:

Presentations by Shawn Larson, Curator of Conservation Research, Seattle Aquarium

Presentation by Joe Gaydos, Sea Doc Society

The Alaska Sea Otter and Steller Sea Lion Commission

Defenders of Wildlife



Sea otter at Lime Kiln Point State Park  
Photos by Jill Berger

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