

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

FEATURE MATERIAL

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SEA OTTER POPULATION EXPANDS

The sea otter, within its present range, is probably more abundant now than it has been for centuries, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service said today.

Because of its fur, one of the finest in the world, the sea otter played a major role in the history of Alaska, and from the 1740's until the beginning of this century was hunted to the point of extinction. The early Russian settlement of Alaska was largely a result of the sea otter industry. When the United States bought Alaska in 1867, the sea otter was diminished in numbers, but hunting continued.

Finally, in 1911, the animals were given full protection under the Fur Seal Treaty signed by the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and Japan. In the years since, the sea otter has increased its numbers in some parts of its range to the point that it has created serious conflicts with commercial and sport fishing interests.

An annual report summarizing developments concerning marine mammals has been published in the Federal Register as required by the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972. The report describes the current status of sea otters.

The sea otter's range is limited to the northern waters of the Pacific Ocean. Its populations are resident, showing no migratory behavior. Sea otters seldom range offshore beyond the 180 foot depth curve. In North

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American waters, these mammals are found from central California north to Alaska's Prince William Sound and west along the chain of the Aleutian Islands. On the other side of the Pacific, sea otters are found among the Soviet Union's Commander Islands, along the southern edge of the Kamchatka Peninsula, and among the Kurile Islands north of Japan.

In 1956 the world population of sea otters was estimated to be about 23,000 to 35,000. No current figures are available for populations in waters off the Soviet Union, but surveys in American waters reveal sizable increases. A 1973 census of Alaskan waters estimated sea otter numbers there to range from 100,000 to 120,000. This contrasts with a 1956 estimate of 25,000 sea otters in Alaskan waters. Off the coast of California sea otters numbered about 150 in 1938, and in mid-1973 the population was estimated to be about 1,600 to 1,800 animals.

Sea otters are actually members of the weasel family and are related to mink and land otters rather than to seals, sea lions, and walruses. They have webbed hind feet for swimming and deft toes on the forefeet for handling food which includes fish, sea urchins, rock oysters, crabs, mussels, other mollusks, and octopus. Unlike seals, which rely on a heavy layer of blubber for insulation in the cold waters of the northern Pacific Ocean, the sea otter must depend upon air trapped in its fine dense fur to maintain its body temperature. Hence these animals are extremely vulnerable to oil spills.

Sea otters are raising problems since their comeback in recent years. In several Aleutian Island areas the over-population has depleted the otter's food resources to the danger point. Off the coast of California the sea otter continues to expand its range both north and south and preys on commercially valuable abalone and clams. Pressure from commercial and sport fishing interests is mounting for population control of sea otters and the establishment of refuge areas away from fishing areas.

The sea otter is protected by the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972 and in California is listed as a completely protected species. The States of California and Alaska employ biologists full time to study the sea otter, and in 1974 the Fish and Wildlife Service assigned one additional biologist in Alaska to study the animal, making a total of two Federal scientists investigating the life history of this creature.

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