



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE BEGINS OPERATIONS TO ESTABLISH NEW POPULATION OF CALIFORNIA SEA OTTERS

Interior Secretary Don Hodel announced today that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has begun the capture of California sea otters for reintroduction to another part of their historical range on the Pacific coast in an effort to improve the chances for recovery of this threatened species.

"Our goal is to bring this threatened species back to greater abundance," Hodel said. "The establishment of a new population is an important recovery objective for the sea otter and will provide excellent opportunities to study the animals' relationship to the marine ecosystem. This project, which was authorized by Congress last year, will also allow greater flexibility in managing the needs of the sea otter and other marine resource uses."

During the next month, up to 70 sea otters will be taken from the existing central California range and released at San Nicolas Island off the southern California coast. The Service expects that these otters will take up residence at the island and become the founding members of a new reserve breeding colony.

In developing the reintroduction plan, the Fish and Wildlife Service evaluated the Pacific coast from Washington to California for possible new colony sites. Located about 70 miles from Los Angeles, San Nicolas Island has 22 miles of coastline and about 35 square miles of excellent nearshore otter habitat. It is expected to support at least 280 sea otters. The nearshore area is relatively free of pollution and contains an abundance of sea otter food species. The island is managed by the U.S. Navy, providing an additional

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measure of protection for the new colony. San Nicolas is separated from other islands and the mainland by wide, deep ocean channels, thereby providing the best potential for keeping the otters in the area.

Federal and state biologists will capture sea otters from the southern third of the current sea otter range around Morro Bay. Capture methods may include dip-nets, diver-operated capture devices, and floating entangling nets.

During the capture operation, the sea otters will be shuttled to temporary holding facilities. At that site, each otter will be examined by a veterinarian. Only healthy animals will be moved to San Nicolas Island. Male and female otters will be held in separate pens and will be isolated from public view and disturbance.

When about 25 sea otters have been captured, they will be flown to San Nicolas Island and taken immediately to the release area. The otters will then be transported to floating pens a few hundred meters offshore where they will be held for 2 to 5 days. This period in the pens will allow the otters time to recover from the stress of transit and to become accustomed to the area.

The otters will be released by opening the floating pens and allowing them to exit at will. This will take place shortly after dawn to allow maximum daylight for the animals to orient themselves visually to their new environment. Trained observers will also be able to follow their movements for as long as possible immediately after the release.

In addition to external tags attached to the otters' rear flippers as identification markers, miniature transponders are also being used. The transponder, about one-half inch long and the thickness of a grain of rice, is inserted under the loose skin inside the hind leg of the otter. They are programmed with a unique code that is read when a hand-held scanner is passed over them. The otters are not aware of the transponder after it is inserted.

Up to 15 of the captured otters will also carry surgically implanted radio transmitters. The transmitters emit a radio frequency that researchers can locate and monitor 24 hours a day. Monitoring the activities of these otters around the clock will provide useful information on feeding behavior, social organization, and movement patterns in their new environment.

The California sea otter was listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act in 1977 and is therefore classified as "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Historically, some 16,000-20,000 sea otters existed along the California coast. Brought to near extinction in the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of commercial fur hunting, a small remnant population survived in the rugged Big Sur area of the California coast. Since hunting ended in the early 20th century, the animal has slowly repopulated about one-tenth of its former range in California. Approximately 1,650 otters were counted this spring along a 220-mile stretch of the California coast from Santa Cruz County to San Luis Obispo County.

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Its small population size and reduced range make the California sea otter population susceptible to events such as a possible large oil spill from a tanker accident. Otters are particularly vulnerable to this type of contamination because they have no insulating layer of blubber and must rely on clean, dense underfur for protection from cold. If that fur is fouled beyond the animal's capacity to clean it, the insulating effect is diminished and the animal could die from hypothermia. The 1982 recovery plan for the sea otter calls for establishment of at least one additional colony to reduce the possibility of the entire population being damaged beyond its capacity to recover.

Biologists estimate that establishment of the new colony will take at least 5 to 6 years. Establishment of a new population will trigger consideration of the California sea otter for "delisting," or removal from the Federal list of endangered and threatened species. Before any decision on delisting can be made, other recovery criteria and the status of the parent population will be evaluated to determine if delisting is appropriate. The Service will begin preliminary work on the status review in about 3 years.

This project features a unique form of "zonal management" to mitigate impacts on shellfish resources. Because of their lack of blubber, sea otters must produce a high level of internal heat to stay warm. As a result, each animal consumes about 25 percent of its body weight in food daily, feeding primarily on large invertebrates such as sea urchins, abalone, rock crabs, mussels, kelp crabs, and turban snails. An active "containment" program will be undertaken by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game to keep sea otters in the vicinity of San Nicolas Island and out of conflict with activities at other islands or in mainland coastal waters. Any otter found in a no-otter management zone outside the new colony will be captured and returned to the mainland population or the new island colony. These containment efforts will also prevent reestablishment of the existing sea otter population in southern California south of Point Conception, a major mitigation feature that will reduce the long-term impact on shellfish that could be expected as the existing otter population grows and expands southward. The zonal management concept was specifically mandated by Congress for this relocation project.

The plan to reintroduce otters at San Nicolas Island is the result of many years of expert analysis and public review. Studies of site alternatives began in 1981. In 1984, public comment was invited to identify issues and options. In 1986, a draft environmental impact statement examining various alternatives was distributed for public review. Additional public hearings were held and nearly 1,100 agencies, organizations, and individuals submitted comments. A final impact statement was issued in May 1987. The record-of-decision and final regulations governing this project were published in the Federal Register on August 11, 1987.

The project has also received state approvals. On July 7, 1987, the California Coastal Commission found the project consistent with the state's coastal zone management program, and on August 18, the California Fish and Game Commission granted a scientific research permit for the project.