

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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A Slow Sea Otter Comeback



Otters Feeding

Photos by Kim Steinhardt

I try to get out paddling at least several times a week, usually along West Cliff or between Steamer Lane and the harbor. While I may occasionally see a small pod of dolphins or a few whales, in addition to the multitude of barking sea lions under the wharf, I almost always see several sea otters as well.

On both Saturday and Sunday of last weekend, I was surprised to see a large group, or “raft”, of about 20 otters hanging out together wrapped up in kelp, about 400 yards east of Lighthouse Point. From my own frequent offshore paddling or walking along West Cliff I have never seen more than a few of those furry little rascals together at one time. So this was good news.

Every year since the mid-1980s, the federal government through the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed population counts to check on the status of this species, which is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

It was believed that the southern sea otter population was completely eliminated by the fur trade during the 1700 and 1800s. In 1938, however, one year after the Big

Sur Highway was completed, a group of about 50 animals were discovered near Bixby Creek. And they have been very slowly increasing their numbers ever since.

The earliest official counts in the mid-1980s showed the population had expanded to about 1300 animals. They were staging a comeback. Over the next 30 years, while the overall population has grown, it has been an uneven trajectory, some good years with an increase in numbers, and then years of decline.

A very encouraging sign is that this year's numbers climbed to 3,272, up from 3,054 in 2014, and this is the first time since counts began 30 years ago that the sea otters' numbers have exceeded 3,090. This is the threshold that must be exceeded three years in a row for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to consider whether or not to remove the southern sea otter from the endangered species list.

One challenge every year is how do you count 3,090 sea otters, anyway? Well, to begin with, you need some good weather to be able to see them. The surveys are done by a combination of telescope sightings from the coast, and low flying aircraft on clear days.

This year's survey extended from Rincon Point, at the southern end of Santa Barbara County, to Pillar Point near Half Moon Bay, but also included a growing colony that was established by wildlife biologists at San Nicholas Island in the late 1980s.

Several factors appear to have led to the high numbers of otters this year. Importantly, the visibility was excellent, allowing for otters to be more easily recognized.

Because sea otters require such high food intakes to stay warm in the cold offshore water, their population is at least in part limited by food availability. Last year saw a massive sea star die off (sea star wasting disease), which extended from British Columbia to Baja California. One of sea stars' preferred foods is sea urchin, which also happens to be a favorite of otters. With the massive decline in sea stars, the otters had the urchins to themselves, which is believed to have allowed more pups to survive to adulthood.

There are still challenges for these furry mammals, however, with attempts to expand their range to the south and the north being of limited success. While numbers are growing in the middle of their range, this is not the case at the peripheries. Large numbers of stranded otters were recovered at both north and

south ends of their range, and a significant number of these showed evidence of lethal shark bites.

The southern sea otters are part of a complex ecosystem with changes in ocean conditions affecting food supply, combined with threats from shark bites, toxins, parasites, and even human encounters.

These 50-70 pound creatures have to eat about 15 to 20 pounds of food every day to survive, and if you are a mom with a pup, it's even more challenging. Think about having to find 35-50 pounds of something to eat every day in your backyard in order to stay alive.