

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release January 10, 1977

McGarvey 202/343-5634

SEA OTTER LISTED AS A THREATENED SPECIES OFF THE CALIFORNIA COAST

The southern sea otter of the central California coast has been listed as a threatened species by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The rulemaking was published in the January 10, 1977, Federal Register.

The animal was protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 which contains a moratorium on killing. None may be killed without a scientific research permit issued under that Act. These regulations will remain in force. The listing as threatened provides the additional protection of the Endangered Species Act's "critical habitat" provisions. These will enable the Service to determine the living space requirements for the otter and thereby oblige all Federal agencies to insure that their actions do not impinge on the needs of the otter.

The sea otter, a playful creature familiar to many because of its habit of swimming on its back eating clams from its forepaws, is a marine mammal that nurses its young for 10 to 12 months after birth. The mother is very attentive to her young. This warmblooded mammal has a dense underfur about 1 inch long that is the secret of its ability to survive in cool marine waters of 35 to 40 degrees. Unlike other marine mammals which depend upon a layer of blubber for body warmth, the sea otter retains an air blanket among the dense underfur fibers. Sea otters are especially susceptible to oil spills which would mat their fur and disturb the natural body heating process.

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The historical range of the southern sea otter has shrunken by 90 percent. The original range extended at least 1,500 miles from Morro Hermoso on the Pacific Coast of Baja California, to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, separating the Olympic Peninsula of Washington from Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The present range covers only about 10 percent of this area.

The original stock that once occupied the region from southeastern Alaska to Baja California now is represented only by the group off the central California coast, although small groups of sea otters from Alaska waters have been introduced at several points off the coast of southeastern Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. This range reduction alone qualifies the southern sea otter for threatened status.

The remaining habitat and population is potentially jeopardized by oil spills, and possibly by other pollution and competition with man. The fact that less than 2,000 (possibly as few as 1,000) otters occupy the present range, makes the species particularly vulnerable to any sort of disruption.

There also seems no doubt that the southern sea otter has made a comeback from a formerly much more imperiled status. The population now seems to be relatively dense in the area that is occupied, and there is no known immediate problem that could result in extinction. An endangered classification, therefore, is not warranted at this time, the Fish and Wildlife Service determined.

The original decline in sea otter populations was caused largely by the fur trade. Through State, Federal, and international protection, this factor is not now a problem. Illegal killing does occur, but is not considered a threat to the overall population.

No critical habitat has been determined yet for the southern sea otter, but the Service is collecting data now for such a proposal. All persons with pertinent information are invited to send it to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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