

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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MARINE OTTER INCLUDED UNDER THE MARINE MAMMAL PROTECTION ACT OF 1972

The marine otter of Chile and Peru, a cousin of the river otter, has been officially designated as a marine mammal and will now benefit from the additional protection of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has announced.

Although the species is also listed as endangered, its new designation will enable the United States to conduct periodic research and, through international agreements, monitor the status of native populations. In addition, in some instances the Marine Mammal Act imposes stiffer penalties and greater restrictions on the use of listed species than does the Endangered Species Act.

Two subspecies of the marine otter are recognized: the first, from southern Chile, is slightly darker brown on the surface than the one from northern Chile and Peru.

This species inhabits the coastal waters along the west coast of South America from central Peru south to Cape Horn, Chile. Little is known about its seasonal movements. It occurs mainly in the coastal region, but it is also known to ascend rivers to at least 650 meters above sea level.

Darwin found this otter abundant in the Chonos Archipelago and among the islands off the southwestern shores of Tierra del Fuego. It has been greatly diminished in numbers since Darwin's time, but in 1923 the Chicago Field Museum Expedition found it to be common along the southern end of Chiloe Islands, Chile. Nothing is known about numbers of the marine otter along the northern coast of Chile, but in Peruvian waters the population is estimated to be between 200 and 300. In the Cape Horn and southern Tierra del Fuego region this species has been practically exterminated. One specimen was collected at Wollaston Islands, Tierra del Fuego, about 25 years ago.

Unlike the sea otters of the Northern Hemisphere, marine otters belong to an entirely different group that also includes river otters. Presumably they developed from stream-dwelling animals after becoming isolated in coastal areas when the middle part of South America's west coast became drier.

The Fish and Wildlife Service action is based on information summarized above and the fact that the Marine Mammal Commission has independently recommended to the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service that the marine otter be listed. The Commission is an independent body established by Congress to consult with the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce in their implementation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.