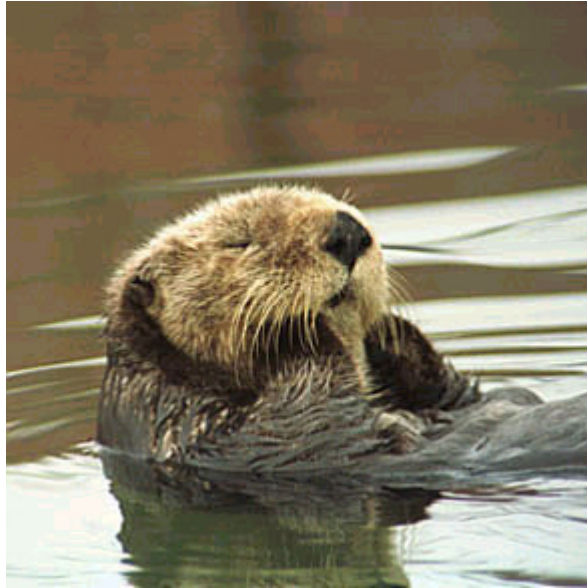


The Wonderful Fuzzy Sea Otter!



What is a Sea Otter?

A Sea Otter is a marine mammal that lives in the waters of the North Pacific Ocean. It is the smallest marine mammal in North America and is usually about 4 feet long. Females generally weigh up to 45 lbs. while males can get to a whopping 65 lbs.! Sea Otters generally live to about 11 years old.

Where can I see a Sea Otter in the wild?

Sea Otters can be spotted in kelp forests, bays and coastal waters near islands, reefs and fjords. In British Columbia they are found along the West Coast of Vancouver Island and the central coast near the community of Bella Bella. If you are in the Vancouver area the only place to spot a Sea Otter is at the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre where three live a happy, well-fed life.

But if they live in the ocean isn't that a Sea Otter I saw in the Fraser River?

No, what you probably saw was a River Otter. Sea Otters live in the ocean and very rarely come on land. When they are not swimming or hunting they will spend their time resting on their backs. They sleep, eat and groom while lying on their backs. River Otters will come onto land to rest, eat and give birth to their young. Sea Otters do everything, including giving birth to their young in the ocean.



Can a baby Sea Otter swim right away?

No. Sea Otter babies are called pups and because their first coat (*Lanugo*) acts as a life preserver, they will float to the surface of the water like a cork when they are born. A Sea Otter pup cannot swim for several weeks after being born and the mother will carry it on her stomach this whole time. She will spend all of her time tending to her baby on her belly. She will groom it, feed it, play with it and teach it all while floating on her back. It's a very good thing Sea Otters tend to only have one pup at a time. Can you imagine triplets?

The pup will shed the *Lanugo* at about 2 months of age and only then can it make its first dive.

How many Sea Otters are there in the world?

- BC's Sea Otters are considered a threatened species and number from 2,000 – 3,000.
- Russia - 13,000
- California – 2,000.
- Washington State – 800
- Alaska – aprox 60,000 – 90,000

One note, with the decline of the seal population Killer Whales have started seeing Sea Otters as an alternative snack. The Sea Otter population in the Western Aleutian Islands, Alaska has been reduced by 90% from 1992 – 1999. The population in the Aleutians now stands at 6,000. Hmm... guess you can't eat just one?

What is the biggest threat to the Sea Otter?

Oil spills are the biggest threat to the Sea Otter. After the Exxon Valdez Oil spill a total of 1061 dead Sea Otters were collected and another 357 live Sea Otters were captured and treated. *“Perspectives of on the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill.* <http://www.valdezscience.com> Some of these live Sea Otters were released back into the wild while others who were determined not to be able to survive on their own were transferred to permanent facilities.

Why are Sea Otters so vulnerable to oil?

The difference between Sea Otters and most other marine mammals is that Sea Otters rely on their thick fur to insulate them from the cold water rather than relying on a layer of blubber as insulation. When the oil soaks the fur it will stick together in clumps and allow the water to reach the Otters skin. The Otter, without his thick blanket of fur protecting him, will now become hypothermic and die from the cold. He can also die from ingesting the oil. The Otter will try to groom the oil off with his mouth and he will ingest or inhale a large quantity of it. The oil will have detrimental effects on the Otters kidneys, liver and lungs.

How thick is a Sea Otters fur?

The Sea Otter has one of the thickest fur coats in the animal world. The adult Sea Otter pelt contains between 800 million to 1 billion individual hairs! That means roughly 100,000 hairs per square centimeter. It is essential they very keep their hair clean so they spend approximately 15 % of their time grooming their hair. They do this by licking and blowing on the hairs.

Are Sea Otters hunted?

Sea Otters were almost hunted into extinction because of their dense coat. In 1911 they were given Federal Protection and their numbers started to increase. Alaska natives (Indians, Aluets, and Eskimos) can still hunt Sea Otters for food or to make Native articles and clothing. The Alaskan government regulates this process and all animals must be tagged and checked by the Fisheries and Wildlife office within 30 days. (*Hunting and Use of Sea Otter by Alaska Natives – Jan. 2001-*) (<http://alaska.fws.gov/LawEnforcement/factsheets/seaotter.pdf>)

**Photos courtesy of Friends of the Sea Otter
<http://www.seaotters.org/>**