

Is the sea otter endangered again

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The sea otter, hunted nearly to extinction along the West Coast in the early 1900s, regained its strength by the 1970s but now faces problems again and experts aren't sure why.

When the otter was protected by international treaty in 1911, only a tiny remnant colony of about 300 animals remained south of Monterey. The colony eventually grew to number more than 1,000.

In the late 1970s, Southern California fisherman worried about the sea otters' appetite for shellfish prepared to face an expected onslaught of the animals into their fishing grounds in search of food. But the otters never showed up.

State and federal wildlife agencies recently counted 1,194 otters, about the same number as were found 10 years ago. The animal is on the endangered species list, but that designation is under review and it may either be upgraded to a full endangered classification or eliminated from the list.

Last year, the otters did not move south of Pismo Beach, the first time they haven't expanded their territory south in the previous nine years, wildlife officials said. The northern boundary has remained Monterey Bay for the last three years.

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"I remember seeing reports that sea otters were ready to round the bend at Point Conception and head south," said Carl Benz, head of the otter recovery program for the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. "From a biological standpoint, we now know that isn't about to happen."

Although the otters never came face to face with gun-toting Southern California fishermen, as the fishermen had threatened if the animals moved south, some experts say man's activities have nevertheless limited the otter population.

Increased use of gill nets by commercial fishermen may have been responsible for the death of some of the 153 otters whose carcasses washed ashore in 1981. The number of carcasses in 1980 was 143, more than double the previous average of 60 animals a year.

Legislation passed last year limiting the use in Monterey Bay of nets that entangle and drown the otters and the number of recovered sea otter carcasses dropped back to 100.

Oil development poses other hazards for the otters, some contend.

"The sea otter is most vulnerable to oil spills because it does not have an insulating layer of blubber like seals and whales," said Carol Fulton, executive director of Friends of the Sea Otter. "If its fur becomes matted with oil it quickly freezes to death."

Congress last year deleted four northern offshore basins from a lease sale for oil development, protecting the sea otter range. However, the Department of the Interior said it would try again this year to lease the area.

Some conservation groups have asked the Interior Department to establish a new colony for the sea otters at San Nicolas Island in the Santa Barbara Channel in addition to the original colony along Big Sur.

However, fishing groups have opposed that suggestion.

"There seems to be no reason why this location should be chosen over several others," said Lad Handelman, chairman of Save Our Shellfish in Santa Barbara. "We believe the otters could be transplanted to Northern California or Oregon with less conflict and less danger from oil development."