

Animals

California sea otter population may be in trouble

By DONNA KIMURA
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SANTA CRUZ — Fewer California sea otters were counted along the coast last month, according to a recent survey of the population.

The results signal a distressing three-year trend for a species trying to make a comeback from near extinction.

A survey of the coast last month found 2,229 otters, a 2.2 percent drop from the year before. In 1996, there had been a 4.2 percent decline from the previous year.

"We are far from finished with sea otter recovery under the ESA (Endangered Species Act)," said Ellen Faurot-Daniels, science director for the Monterey-based Friends of the Sea Otter. "We clearly still have much to learn about the types of diseases affecting the sea otters: how the diseases are getting through the water, sediments or shellfish and to the otters; whether otters are suffering immune-system impairment and what any of this means in terms of overall sea otter population recovery."

Dedicated to the protection of the otter, the group is alarmed by the low counts as well as a high mortality rate that has plagued the otter the last two years.

The species was listed as "threatened" in 1977 because of its limited distribution along the California coast and the threat of oil spills and pollution on its habitat.

The population ranges along a 240-mile stretch from Point Ano Nuevo to Point Purisima in Santa Barbara County. The population typically averages an increase of 5 to 6 percent each year.

The trend, however, has been in the opposite direction since 1995, according to spring counts performed by the sea otter group, the Biological Resources Division

of the U.S. Geological Survey, the state Department of Fish and Game, the Monterey Bay Aquarium and other organizations. Another survey will be done in November.

In 1995, the count found only a slight increase, less than 1 percent, from the year before, and not the expected 5 percent increase.

As a result, Faurot-Daniels marks that year when 2,377 otters were counted as another down year.

The three straight years of low numbers confirm that there are fewer otters out there and that it is not an anomaly in the survey, which is done on the ground and by air.

Daniels hopes the trend will push U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials to take new action to help the otter.

The agency had considered removing the animal from the endangered list by 1999, when the population was expected to reach about 2,650.

"It's time to do something," said Faurot-Daniels. "We need them to acknowledge that."

The agency has been attentive to the status of the sea otter, said Carl Benz, assistant field supervisor with the service's Ventura office. He was part of the agency's Sea Otter Recovery Team, which wrote a recovery plan for the species.

"What we will be doing is having a meeting of the Sea Otter Recovery Team to go over the results and all other information to assess what is the appropriate action to take," he said.

The issue, he said, needs to be looked at in an objective and scientific manner.

"We're concerned about moving forward cautiously," he said. "We don't want to create alarm ... We know attention needs to be given to this issue and not in a



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Population surveys have counted fewer otters along the coast for the past two years running.

casual manner."

The latest draft recovery plan, which revised a 1982 report, may be revisited and new parts added, he said.

In February, Friends of the Sea Otter reported that the mortality rate among otters was up and that they were showing a lowered resistance to diseases. The death rate was about 7.9 percent last year, the group reported.

Data indicates elevated levels of a shellfish-borne parasite in sea otters. There is also evidence of a protozoan, a single-celled animal, that causes brain swelling

in otters. There are also eight bacterial diseases that afflict sea otters, according to the sea otter group.

Faurot-Daniels said the problem may stem from possible contaminants, parasites, or bacteria and viruses in the food chain.

New research, she said, is needed on the prevalence of parasites, diseases and environmental toxins.

For more information, call Friends of the Sea Otter at 373-2747. Founded in 1968, it is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the otters and their habitat.

New center will examine otter problems

Sentinel staff report

SANTA CRUZ — A leading center on sea otters will open this summer in Santa Cruz.

The Oiled Wildlife Veterinary Care and Research Center is scheduled to have its dedication ceremonies at the end of July. The state facility is next to UC Santa Cruz's Long Marine Lab.

While the center will treat wildlife poisoned by oil spills and other pollution, it is also committed to a variety of sea otter issues, said Dave Jessup, senior wildlife veterinarian for the state Fish and Game Department.

The recent counts that show a decline in the otter numbers, he said, may be one of the first issues looked at by researchers.

One of the benefits of the \$5 million center will be to bring together different resources.

"It gives us a focal point where we will work on issues of sea otter health, sea otter management, sea otter physiology," Jessup said.