

Scientists seek cause of dying marine animals

Animals

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SANTA CRUZ — Dead Monterey Bay sea otters packed in ice chests are arriving almost daily at a national laboratory in Madison, Wis.

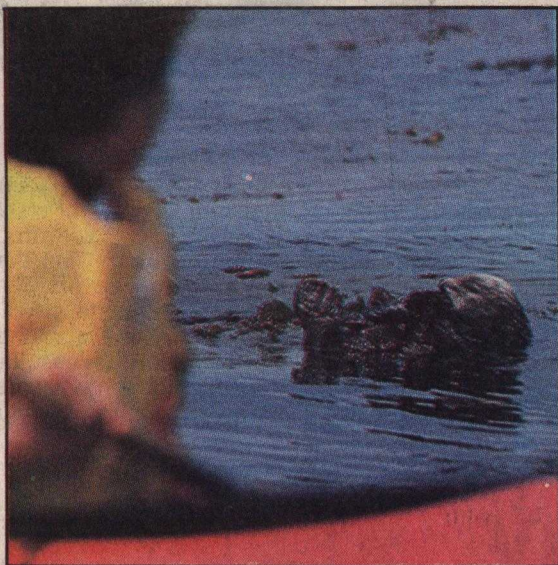
At the same time, dozens of sea birds, wrapped in plastic bags sealed with tape, are being driven to state and national laboratories in Rancho Cordova and Berkeley.

Together, the scientists are trying to figure out what has caused a sudden rash of deaths among animals in Monterey Bay.

It could be a virus or infectious disease, say some. Others suspect the deaths are related to a massive "red tide" of plankton blooming in Monterey Bay this month. A few fear deliberate poisoning.

"It is definitely unusual, but we need more information back from the labs before we start speculating," said Kate Simons at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Ventura.

More than 175 ailing sea birds — common murrelets, endangered brown pelicans and surf sco-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

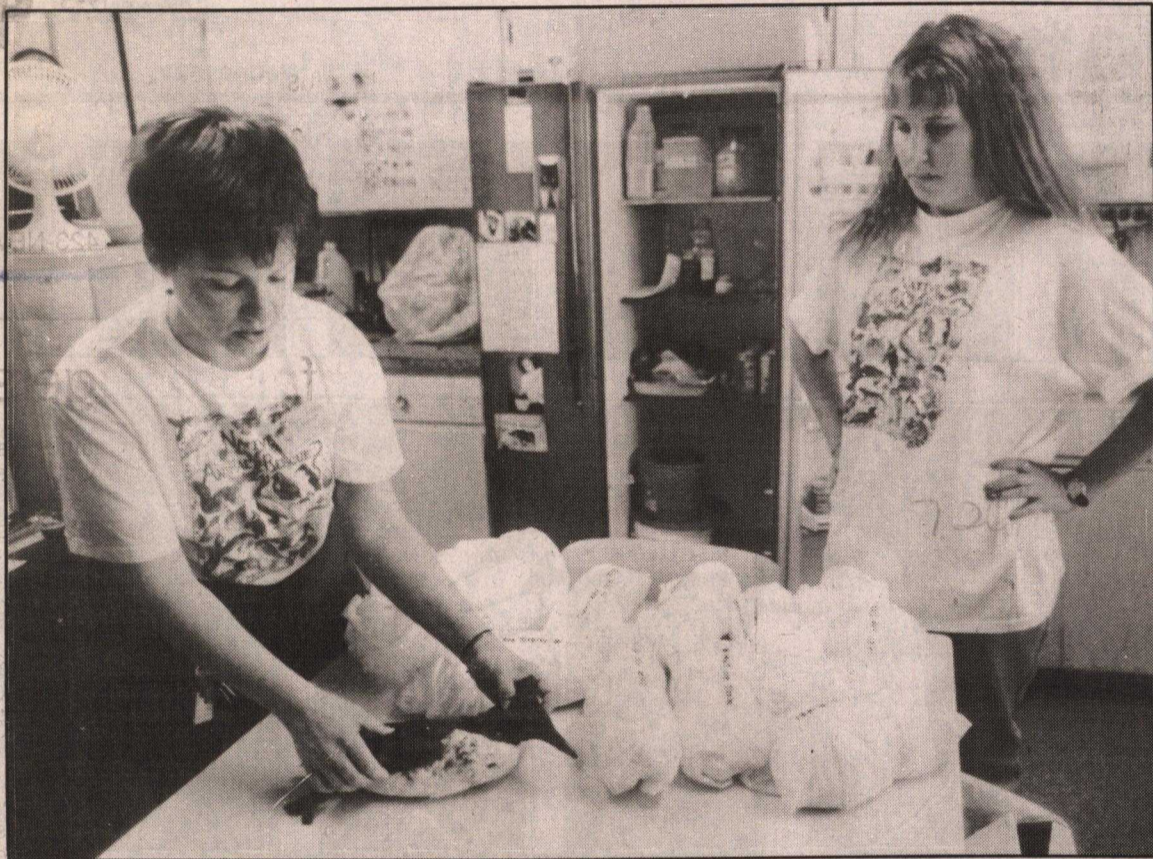
Ten sea otters have died near the Monterey Peninsula.

ters — have been picked up from beaches between Pajaro Dunes and Pescadero over the past five weeks and brought to the Native Animal Rescue Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Live Oak.

Volunteers there force-feed the birds and try to keep them alive. They have succeeded with about

Please see SEA ANIMALS — BACK PAGE

A-10 — Wednesday, July 26, 1995 — Sentinel



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Lori Moak-Kean and Debra Grodt prepare dead birds at Native Animal Rescue.

Sea animals

Continued from Page A1
half the birds.

The dead birds are being dissected and tested by wildlife veterinarians around Monterey Bay, as well as researchers at the state Department of Fish and Game Wildlife Toxicology Laboratory in Rancho Cordova, and the National Public Health Center in Berkeley.

"There are a lot of reasons sea birds die. We really don't know what's going on yet," said Pam Swift, who has dissected four Monterey Bay murrelets at the Wildlife Toxicology Lab in Rancho Cordova.

Swift says she hopes to learn more from pathologists who are studying tissue samples from the birds.

In the meantime, Lori Moak-Kean, executive director of Native Animal Rescue, is overwhelmed with dead birds — 20 arrived Tuesday, and more were expected today.

"The alarming part for the staff and volunteers at NAR is that we're not sure what we're dealing with. Do we have a poison, a virus, just what is happening?" said Moak-Kean.

While the dead birds are washing up in Santa Cruz, dead otters have been showing up on beaches near Monterey since last week. One was near Elkhorn Slough, another near Asilomar and 10 were on the Monterey Peninsula.

At first, marine biologists figured the otters were dying natural deaths. But when the death toll began to mount, Ellen Faurot-Daniels, a researcher at Friends of the Sea Otter in Monterey, began to get very worried.

"It is suspicious at this point," she said. "In our 27 years, we've never seen this many dead otters in this short a time in this small an area."

Otters are considered a threatened species. A

census this spring showed the population had increased by less than 1 percent, about 18 otters, since last year. All together, environmentalists estimate about 2,400 sea otters are alive today.

"I think we're kind of swept into complacency here because they're so easy to see," said Faurot-Daniels.

She said the deaths of the otters are indicative of the tentative health of the entire Monterey Bay.

"They're sort of the furry canaries of the oceanic coal mine," Faurot-Daniels said.

The dead otters are being shipped to the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wis., where veterinary pathologist Lynn Creekmore is dissecting them to find out how they died.

"Unfortunately, we haven't found anything that would be indicative of any infectious or toxic agent we are familiar with," Creekmore said Tuesday after completing six necropsies.

All of the otters have been females, and all but one were adults. Their stomachs were empty, which indicates they had been sick and not eating. But they have also all been fairly fat, which indicates that whatever killed them came on pretty quickly, she said.

Two of the otters had very pale livers, a sign of toxic poisoning, said Creekmore.

Now she is studying tissue samples for bacteria and viruses, potential toxic agents, natural and man-made, she said.

"All I can say right now is that we don't know what is killing them, and that it is unusual to have that many submitted from such a small area," she said.

Tuesday, a team of veterinarians and marine biologists from the state Department of Fish and Game and the Monterey Bay Aquarium took blood samples from live otters in the bay for comparisons.

"Obviously we're very concerned about this," said Mimi Drummond, a spokeswoman for the aquarium.