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Sea Otter Population In Trouble: Survey results show first decline in 3-year average since 1990

The 2009 spring sea otter count shows that the California sea otter population continues to decline. The total number of sea otters spotted was 2654, down 3.8% from last year's numbers.

"This is bad news," said Allison Ford, Executive Director of The Otter Project, "but not unexpected. Sea otters are facing a lot of pressures, and we're not doing enough here on land."

This year's count finds the otter population at levels below that of the 2006 count, suggesting a serious setback for the population. The official population numbers are compiled based on the three year averages; this year's average is down by 0.5%. USGS reports that this is the first time the average has been down since 1990. Although USGS somewhat attributes the low count to worse viewing conditions than previous years, this survey is not the only indicator of poor population performance.

The Otter Project uses four indicators to assess the health of the otter population, and survey results are just one of those indicators. However earlier this year The Otter Project reported in its [March 2009 status](#) update that the population appeared to be in decline. Today's numbers support that assessment.

The historic California otter population ranged from 12,000 to 18,000. The current population has been nursed back from a small colony of survivors of the fur hunts that nearly rendered the otter populations extinct. Long heralded as an Endangered Species success story, the health of today's otters is questionable.

"The health of the otter population is about more than just numbers," said Ford. "Otters are the marine version of the canary in the coal mine, and they've been telling us for awhile now that something's not right."

Among the most serious threats to sea otters are disease and factors that contribute to immune suppression. The presence of legacy chemicals such as DDT in the ocean have long been considered a threat to otter health; in addition to agricultural pesticides, urban runoff deposits harmful pollutants right into the oceans and bays. "Healthy sea otters come from clean water—not the chemical soup we're making in the bay," said Ford.

In addition to disease, threats to otters include food limitation, boat strikes, fishing gear entanglement, and even violence from humans. This is particularly problematic south of Point Conception, where political dealing led to the no-otter zone. The no-otter zone stretches from Santa Barbara all the way to Baja, and otters in the zone are not given full protection under law.

“We used to think that a big oil spill was the only problem we had to overcome to save the otters,” said Ford. “That’s still important, but in the meantime, we’re constricting their range, putting them in contact with deadly chemicals, and booby trapping the waters. It’s obvious that something more needs to be done.”

The Otter Project believes that addressing water pollution, including agricultural and urban runoff and legacy chemicals is integral to otter health, as well as ending the no-otter zone and continuing to prevent oil spills.

For more information please visit www.otterproject.org