FRIENDS OF THE SEA OTTER -- BIG SUR, CALIFORNIA 93920

Photo by William Bryan

THE OUTLOOK
by Margaret Owings

Watching the daily pattern of the sea otters, effortlessly rocking in the rhythm of the sea, is a pleasure rarely found in other forms of wildlife appreciation. Their rafts, clustered along the edges of kelp beds or fanning out almost suspended between air and water are islands of small dark forms ingeniously using tools of rock to crack crustaceans or using stipes and blades of kelp as anchor cords for stability in moving waters — ever accompanied by the tap-tap sounds of animals at work.

The otter's survival along the California coast, after its near extinction by the fur trade, was a miracle which awakened public attitude to ask for full protection. The International Fur Seal Treaty in 1911 was the first positive step and in the U.S. the otters moved into the category of "rare and endangered". But the southern sea otter has not made the extraordinary come-back that his northern neighbors have in Alaska. With a population in the realm of one thousand (last census 902) we do not consider him outside the threatened category.

Yet, on May 21, 1971, the California Fish & Game is presenting a new list of "rare" and "endangered" mammals to the Fish & Game Commission, a Commission with authority by the Legislature to declare which species of Wildlife are thus classified. THE SOUTHERN SEA OTTER HAS BEEN REMOVED FROM THE "RARE" LISTING — and a letter from G. Ray Arnett, Director of Fish & Game, substantiates this with the statement "the sea otters are no longer an endangered species nor do we consider them rare."

The criteria used by the Department in this recommendation asks for evidence showing a small population; whether a specialized habitat is required and whether there is hope of successful introduction elsewhere. They also ask whether pollution is a threat and whether the mammal is harassed by man.

With the southern sea otter population dangerously low, with increasing pollution of marine life on which they feed — showing residues of mercury, cadmium, copper and zinc as well as other toxic wastes and pesticides; with continual harassment by man in his competition for the abalone resource; with the growing threat of oil tanker traffic along the coast from which oil spillage could literally wipe out these animals, coating their fur, destroying warmth and causing death — we question the Department which shoulders the stewardship of wildlife for the benefit of the people.

Their "endangered" list is a cautious one, and for your interest numbers two mammals: the Morro Bay Kangaroo rat and the Salt marsh harvest mouse. Splendid species such as the Tule Elk, the Mountain Lion and the southern Sea Otter are apparently political issues which they dare not tangle with.
MOTHERS AND PUPS
by Judson Vandeevere

Very few large pups and no small pups could be located during the fall of '69 and '70. In both years, mated-pair behavior (see the December 1970 issue of the Otter Raft) commenced during the first week in October, and in both years the first newborn pups were seen by the first week in November; apparently the gestation period is 13 months. I noted a steady increase in the number of fluffy pups during the months of November through February. Therefore, the pupping peak for the southern otters differs significantly from the peak in summer to early fall reported by Kenyon for the northern otters.

Many mothers with newborn pups join other mothers with pups and occasionally they raft with otters who do not have pups. A mother usually prepares for a feeding bout by swimming slowly upon her back, using but one of her large webbed, hind feet as a paddle, while holding her pup upon her chest with both forepaws. Every few seconds she extends her head and neck forward and turns her head 90° so that one submerged eye may scan the underwater environment. Upon selecting a feeding area, she will gently float her pup off her chest prior to her first dive. Southern otter mothers have not been seen to share their food with their small fluffy pups; northern sea otters, Kenyon writes, are able to consume solid food from birth.

The first newborn of each season have been observed at Point Lobos, the southern headland for Carmel Bay. The Point and the Bay have served as an otter nursery for many years.

This year some mothers bearing pups were seen to move slowly farther north to Carmel Bay's northern headland points: Pescadero, Midway, Sunset, and Cypress. By February a few mothers and pups were observed still farther north at the southern headland for Monterey Bay: Point Pinos. In March three mothers with pups could be seen at Otter Point, Pacific Grove.

On the first of March, following a week of gusty winds, 16 mothers with pups plus an additional 44 otters appeared to have taken shelter in Stillwater Cove; Yankee Point Cove contained 24 adults and 5 juveniles; and 3 pups with 8 adults were between Pescadero and Midway Points. These three areas contained large pup to adult ratios.

TRAVELING PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBIT

An exciting and beautiful traveling photographic exhibit containing unique color enlargements of otters securing food underwater is now available upon request for public showings. Recently prepared by William Bryan with the assistance of the California Academy of Sciences and the Friends of the Sea Otter, this display has been enthusiastically received in both Santa Ana and Pacific Grove, California. Inquiries concerning the availability of the exhibit, which features the photography of Dr. Mattison and William Bryan, should be addressed to Friends of the Sea Otter, 44 West Alisal Street, Salinas, Calif. 93901.

RECENT CENSUSES

Fish and Game biologists counted 902 southern sea otters between Soquel Point and Point Estero during their April 1971 aerial survey. They counted 718 in February, with one seen north of Soquel Point. A comparison between the largest census, 1,040 in May 1970, and the second largest, 1,014 in June 1969, would suggest a discouraging low annual increase for the California population of approximately 2%.

The apparent 15% decrease, between May 1970 and April 1971, may be due to less favorable censusing conditions, rather than a population decline.

162 otters were seen south of Cambria this April, only 60 in February. We have noted a seasonal massing of otters at the peripheries of their range each spring. In summer and fall most of these otters appear to return to the older portions of their range, forsaking the more abundant forage that exists in the red abalone beds south of Cambria.
PHILIPPE COUSTEAU AND THE OTTER

by

Judson Vandevere

Paddling about Stillwater Cove one morning, Dr. Mattison and I were surprised to find an otter approaching us rather than sensibly retreating. We motioned to Philippe Cousteau who was following us in his Zodiac. Philippe slipped into the water and swam slowly toward the unusually bold otter. Soon they were swimming together in mutual curiosity much to our amazement. Philippe signaled to his diver Jackie who swam cautiously toward the strange mammalian pair carrying a cooked commercial crab! Philippe lay on his back, cracking and eating parts of the crab as his inquisitive friend drew closer. Soon the otter and Philippe were sharing the same crustacean.

Although we had witnessed a most remarkable scene, during the following seven weeks the Cousteaus continued to interact with otters in the Monterey area obtaining sensational colored underwater footage of otter activities which they plan to show world-wide television viewers this fall.

CORRECTION – LIFE MAGAZINE, 14 MAY ’71

A caption in the 14 May ’71 issue of Life, on pages 8 and 9, contains much misinformation. The paragraph should read: Diver Wayman photographed otters from Monterey’s Wharf No. 2 in the summer of ’70. Otters do not feed in rafts, they disperse when in search of food, usually in early morning or late afternoon. Their favorite food is the urchin. When attempting to secure an abalone 20 unproductive dives may be required to obtain one. No one has reported otters surfacing with two or three abs. Because abalones have a single shell covering only one side, the otters eat the meat out of the shell without breaking it. The 1040 or so southern sea otters are presently endangered and are still shot in spite of the law’s protection. Otters occupy but one-seventh of California’s coast and abalones are in short supply in southern California where there are no otters. Finally, the “beast’s” impact on man’s abalone is demonstrated by an out-of-focus photograph of an otter eating a clam!
CRISIS AT WHALERS BAY
by Leland R. Lewis

The wind was sharp out of the western quadrant, blowing smack into the mouth of Whalers Bay, piling one steep swell on top of another. I watched all day the spume-blown train of steep seas sweeping across the great raft of inshore kelp, cresting on the reef anchored in its midst, then rolling ashore in a cascade of spray among the weathered rocks that protect the sandy cove at the foot of our front yard. Point Lobos, projecting on the skyline to the southwestward, and Pescadero Point, a bulwark against the prevailing weather from the northwestward, generally shelter our bay. The extensive raft of kelp just offshore, home for a large colony of sea otters, lies well within the windline that whips the sea to white caps beyond the sheltering points.

Perhaps the otters came ashore in their more prolific days when they blackened the coastal coves in uncounted number, but our colony lives and frolics exclusively in the security of the kelp; except for unusual circumstances they never venture ashore. A mother otter will deposit her nursing baby safely amongst the kelp blades floating on the surface and proceed with her business of diving for the day's food, often a considerable distance away. Fishing from a small skiff in this same cove last summer we were surprised to see a grown otter swimming full tilt for our boat moored to the kelp; when practically upon us the mother otter scooped her tiny offspring — unseen by us until that very moment — from its floating haven amongst the screening kelp and, with her nursing on her breast, back-paddled to the distant safety of another raft of kelp.

Against the crashing sound of the surf this day a bird screamed loudly somewhere between the shore and the reef. The startling anguish of the strident cry focused my eye on a small dark form, apparently a wave-caught bird tumbling shoreward in a froth of breakers. Each time it fought to rise above the surface of the cresting sea that frenzied cry cut through the booming surf and commanded my closer attention. Now, only a few yards from me, I could plainly see my half-drowned "bird" — a small sea otter struggling frantically to keep its head above water, tumbled by each successive sweep of the breaking surf closer toward shore. With the last rush of a particularly big wave the otter was swept right for the spray covered rocks to which I had unconsciously advanced, knee-deep in the surf. Suddenly up to my waist in the foam of the onrushing wave, I scooped up the half-drowned animal, grabbing him by the hind feet for fear of being bitten by his small but sharp front teeth. Perhaps this was a fortunate position in which to hold my rescued otter at the outset for he was sputtering and spraying a stomach full of swallowed seawater as he struggled feebly in my hand. The little fellow was sopping wet! — the water had penetrated the air blanket normally trapped among the fibers of its fur. I hurried him along the path from the beach to our brick porch, calling for a towel and a blanket. My wife, surveying the rescue from the kitchen window, quickly appraised the baby otter's urgent need: it was crying loudly and stridently for its mother, somewhere out in the tumult of the sea-swept kelp. She wrapped the little one in the towel, rubbing and drying gently but vigorously, attempting to soothe its constant cry with gentle words of her own. Finally the baby stopped crying long
SEA OTTER SANCTUARY
SITE OF FIVE MEGATON NUCLEAR TEST
by Lewis A. Carter

On the April 13 NBC news, David Brinkley announced that the Atomic Energy Commission will explode a device of 5 megaton power on Amchitka Island. This island, established by the U.S. as a SEA OTTER SANCTUARY within the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge in 1936, has been administered by the U.S. Dept. of Interior since its establishment, except for the years of World War II when it was used as a military and naval base. After the war, the island reverted to its authorized use and several important conservation programs were initiated and carried out including the first promising restoration of the SEA OTTER. Until 1960, the island was left to the peaceful devices of Fish & Wildlife Service and Alaska Fish & Game Agency.

The idea of taking this island for a nuclear and thermo-nuclear test site was developed by some persons in the AEC. Quite by accident, as Pierre Salinger relates, this secret plan was discovered by President Kennedy and promptly halted. But in 1964, the AEC once again announced that Amchitka would become the test site. The public outcry was widespread but impotent to stop the first project, OPERATION LONG SHOT, October 1965 when a 80,000 ton nuclear device exploded 2,300 feet under ground. Again, in October 1969, a second thermo-nuclear device (one megaton power) was exploded 8,000 feet underground. Among the bio-environmental studies before this test, experiments involving placement of sea otters inside sealed steel tanks and firing 50 mm cannon inside were carried out to test their shock threshold. No otters survived.

The AEC has been reticent about further details of the new 5 megaton test. To explode such powerful devices in an area of the Pacific known for its seismic instability is, in itself, enough reason to halt the project but to add, once again, a location established as a National Wildlife Refuge and more specifically set aside as a SEA OTTER SANCTUARY, we consider an offense to public interests and public property.

IN A LETTER — DECEMBER 21, 1970
Carl L. Hubbs, Professor of Biology Emeritus
Scripps Institute of Oceanography, wrote:

"I had the rare privilege of having seen an adult sea otter scampering over the intertidal kelp at Gorda in 1916, when I carried out a survey of the inshore fish fauna along the central California coast. I have kept in rather close touch with the survival and increase of this end of the species of marine mammals. Years ago I saw one on a Coast Guard flight around San Miguel Island, and my technician Al Allanson saw one soon later on a trip to San Miguel. Of course it was a great surprise and delight to hear of one being sighted and photographed during the Christmas bird census in the Point Loma kelp.

The capacity of sea mammals to escape complete extermination has been surprising and gratifying. For twenty years I have been watching the buildup of the population of the Guadalupe fur seal, after I rediscovered it in November, 1954. Over the last few years I have found that the very similar Juan Fernandez fur seal, long thought extinct, is staging a comeback on the islands far off Chile."
enough to regard us quizzically with its black button eyes shining trustingly from a welter of fur. There was no bite to this little fellow, who sucked our fingers in his search for warmth and sustenance. When he realized that none of us was his recently lost mother, he emitted another long, heart-rending cry. I knew that I must seek help, I attempted without success to reach the Fish & Game warden. After various phone calls, I finally reached Judson Vandevere, an expert on sea otters, who arrived in a very few minutes at the brick-porch emergency platform with its towels and blankets and one lone, loud-crying baby sea otter. He examined our charge with an expert’s eye, found him in good condition, and pronounced him a male, two or three weeks old.

Now, what to do with him. The several stranded otters previously taken into captivity by scientific laboratories of the Fish and Game Department had all died within a few days. The best move, we believed, would be to restore him to his mother, but how? It was getting dark. The surf had subsided somewhat but was still a formidable cascade of flying spray. In the hope that the pup’s cries might attract his mother to the beach, we placed the nursling on the sand above the tide and withdrew beyond the berm. Miraculously, within a few minutes a full grown sea otter—presumably the baby’s mother—appeared only ten yards offshore, rising half out of the water to better see her offspring, and answering his cries for help with the deeper throated voice of a mature animal. Rescue seemed imminent but the mother surveyed the shore briefly, then disappeared in the surf; we waited in vain for her reappearance and only rescued the baby otter from the rising tide when darkness obscured the sea.

Casting back for what might have been the right move at the critical moment when the mother first appeared we felt that tossing the small otter well out into the surf might have resulted in reuniting them. But flinging the otter back into the rough water from which we had so recently rescued him was unthinkable. So now we had a suckling otter to care for through the night! A baby bottle with Similac and whipping cream was offered and taken by the nursling. Jud Vandevere, joined by his young son, settled down to an all night vigil on the beach with the baby otter, just in case the mother might appear again to claim her own during the dark hours. Eventually, the little otter squirmed his way into Judson’s son’s sleeping bag and spent the night curled up in the warmth of the young naturalist’s arms.

Early morning brought a clear sunrise with wind and sea abated but with a rough surf still running. The memory of the fishing skiff experience of last summer came flashing back, and, acting on my suggestion, Jud Vandevere and I set out to find a means to transport our rescued otter out to the raft of kelp from which he had been blown. An obliging diving instructor, Bob Brandeberry, down for the day with his daughter and friend and their boards and gear from San Mateo, agreed to take our baby otter through the surf to the kelp. Placed unprotestingly in a wire basket lashed to the fore part of one of the paddle boards, the little otter successfully rode the wave crests to the kelp bed with Brandeberry’s team. They put the pup on a supporting mass of kelp and wound a few strands about his body to hold him in place. Then they back-paddled a considerable distance and stood by. The little one resumed his piercing cries for his mother and we waited, hoping our human scent on the baby’s fur wouldn’t delay his rescue. Bill Bryan, nature photographer, had set up his powerful telephoto camera ashore and I focused the field clearly on our little otter. Just then, as if on cue, responding to the primordial instinct that has enabled the California sea otter to survive in the face of much greater adversity, the mother otter appeared in the field of the scope, rose out of the water to better view her offspring, then swept him off the kelp and swam toward the rest of the colony. The baby was safe at last!

Skindivers, Bignati and Brandeberry returning the otter pup to the kelp bed. Photo by Leland Lewis
OTTER MAIL
Excerpts from a few of the letters we receive each month.

"If shooting was the answer to conservation, then one would have to shoot ¾ of the population of San Diego in order to preserve the abalone."

Michael E.O. Pilsen, Assis, Professor Oceanography
University of Rhode Island

"My concern for the otter is both ecological and sentimental. The sentimental portion of my feelings has to do with a period of 18 months that I spent in the Aleutian Islands — primarily on the island of Amchitka. There were no towns, no inhabitants, no theatres, no recreation. I therefore turned to observing and studying the only animals in sight — seals, whales, sea birds and a small energetic animal I soon learned was the SEA OTTER. The animal provided much fun with his strangely intelligent behavior. I soon learned to crawl to the edge of small coves to watch them, sometimes from only 20 feet. Remembering what they gave to me, I expect to help them in some way."

Lawrence P. Fatz, Lakeview Terrace, California

"It has been a terrible thing to see the change from an abundant fish population in our waters since 1923, when in many ways we had more enjoyment from our contact with the Pacific ocean, to the almost watery desert we have today."

Herbert F. Read, Burbank, Calif.

"In July 1970, we visited the Monterey Peninsula in the hope of seeing SEA OTTERS. We had expected that they would be like the wolves of Isle Royale — present but not visible, but to our utter delight, we found them not only visible but showing off. Enchanted, we spent several days wandering along the shore and snapping pictures. We spent quite a lot of money on the peninsula — motels, restaurants and drug stores for films. It seemed to me, the owners of your tourist facilities stand to lose more income through the 'thinning' of the sea otter colony than the abalone ostensibly lose by its growth."

Dr. & Mrs. Robert Angell, Denver, Colorado

"It is a shame that ecologists are still having a difficult time convincing people that nature truly does have its own checks and if we could just quit tampering, everything would be better off."

Judy Arnold, Rolling Hills Estates, Calif.

"I stopped buying abalone when I first heard the otters were blamed by the fishermen for cutting down on their profit."

Mrs. Charles F. Ely, Jr., Houston, Texas

May, 1971 — 1982 Members

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