Environmental organizations pool resources to shape water policy

Water shapes our lives. Water availability defines and sets limits for growth and development in California. Water quality impacts the health of our communities and keystone species like the sea otter. Local and national environmental groups recognize the importance of water and have been working together to protect our waterways from over-use and contamination.

As Friends of the Sea Otter concluded through review in March 2004, “levels of bacterial pathogens and chemical contaminants in ocean and river water are often above acceptable levels in the Monterey Bay.” Friends of the Sea Otter is working with other local environmental groups to address the root causes of these problems including agricultural and storm water runoff. Together with the Ocean Conservancy, Save Our Shores and countless others, we supported farmers as they developed a new program to prevent the erosion of soils, and minimize the adverse effects of pesticides and fertilizers. Named the Agricultural Waiver Program, the policy creates incentives for good farming practices like installing catch ponds, and planting cover crops to prevent runoff. The success of the project is one example of a united environmental community working with industry and government to achieve sustainable solutions to water challenges.

Please turn to page four

FSO launches new research project by Deborah Benham, Ph.D. candidate

Since the rediscovery of a remnant population of sea otters on the Big Sur coast in the 1930’s, the California population of this species has been increasing slowly at an average of 5% per year. This rate of recovery is slower than seen in northern populations and appears to be due to high mortality rates rather than low levels of reproduction. Declines in the population were seen in the 1980’s and were found to be due to fisheries interactions which have since been reduced. The causes of a second decline between 1995 and 1999 are still not fully understood, but factors involved could include infectious disease, prey limitation, fisheries interactions, contamination and interactions with people. From 2000 to 2002 the population remained relatively stable and the most recent counts in 2003 and 2004 have shown an increasing trend in the population to around 2,800 animals.

Please turn to page three
Message from the Executive Director

The power of teamwork!

Wow, what a great year for Friends of the Sea Otter! We have accomplished a lot with a great team effort.

There are certain times in our lives that, as we look back, we count as memorable or defining. Several years ago I went on a Sierra Club backpacking trip to one of my favorite places in Arizona. Not paying much attention to the itinerary, I realized when I got there that I would be mountain climbing — scaling cliffs with only hand and toe holds. I'm terrified of heights! I did it though. With the support of my team, each of us focusing on a different aspect of the climb, I made it up the wall — we all did. Not alone, but as a team. That is what Friends of the Sea Otter has now, is a fabulous team — a great staff, Board and wonderful members all working together toward our common goal to protect the sea otter and its habitat.

Over the past year, FSO has been able to expand its advocacy efforts with the addition of our Policy Director, Heather Allen, an International Environmental Policy major from the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

Another recent addition is Erin Lantz, a biologist who started as a volunteer and continues on in a multitude of roles including education, research and membership.

Brittany Brooke’s title is Outreach and Membership Director, though that’s only the beginning of what she does. Brittany is also the creative drive behind the look of our store and the logical mind behind the organization of our office.

William Brooke continues to be our dedicated Retail and Volunteer Manager. In addition to running the store, he is redeveloping our volunteer program and is looking to recruit new volunteers in the next few months.

Anne Bradley, our Administrative Manager, keeps up with the office operations, but also writes grants and edits the newsletter. We keep her busy.

Thanks to this wonderful group and the support of our Board and members, I am able to rely on the team and focus my efforts on advocacy, policy, fundraising, and everything else that can help the sea otter and its habitat.

What an incredible team!

D’Anne Albers
Executive Director
Research Project  from page one

Much of this increase appears to be due to higher numbers of animals at the northern and southern extremes of the sea otters’ range. In Monterey Bay, an area where until recently a large proportion of the population has resided, numbers have been stable but not increasing for several years. It is unknown at this time why the number of sea otters in the Monterey Bay area is not increasing. Possible explanations include food limitation or some anthropogenic cause. The Monterey Bay coastline is subject to high levels of human use, particularly around urban areas such as Monterey, Santa Cruz and Moss Landing. These areas are all subject to heavy industrial and recreational use and there is concern that increasing interactions with human activities could be having an impact on the natural behavior and subsequent distribution of sea otters in the bay. Preliminary results from research carried out over the last three years has found that sea otters in the Monterey Peninsula area are significantly affected by recreational boat traffic both in terms of their behavior and distribution. There are ongoing efforts to work with tour operators and managers to reduce levels of interaction and educate visitors to the bay.

Friends of the Sea Otter has created the Sea Otter Distribution and Ecology Research (SODER) Program to further investigate these trends. This data will be useful in managing interactions between people and sea otters in urban areas. Fine-scale monitoring of sea otter abundance, distribution and behavior in relation to factors such as weather, day of the week, sewage outflow, fishing-related activities and recreational boat traffic/disturbance will allow us to determine how sea otter demography and behavior co-vary with oceanographic conditions and anthropogenic impacts, and if necessary, to develop strategies to mitigate effects of urbanization and the resulting crowding and competition for resources.

Twenty years ago (1985-1992), the Monterey Bay Aquarium conducted similar fine-scale demographic surveys along a central portion of the sea otter range (southern Monterey Bay). The SODER Program will be carried out in collaboration with the Monterey Bay Aquarium and it is hoped that comparisons between the two data sets will facilitate a better understanding of the sea otter population in this area. Monitoring fine-scale temporal and spatial changes in sea otter distribution will also provide a means to better understand and quantify some of the uncertainty inherent in the biannual surveys of the mainland southern sea otter population that are carried out from Half Moon Bay to Point Conception along the California coastline. Because each area is only surveyed once, temporal and spatial variability during the census is unknown and interpretation of short-term population trends are problematic. The data generated by the SODER Program will improve our ability to reliably describe population trends, which is essential to ensure sea otter recovery.

It is hoped that the SODER Program will also provide an opportunity for members of the public to get involved in hands-on scientific research and learn first hand about the challenges faced by sea otters in California. Though the data collection for SODER will be carried out by experienced scientists, there will be opportunities for members of the public and school groups to accompany these researchers and collect their own data under supervision that can then be used in school and college projects. This data will be made available on the FSO Web site so schools that have been involved can follow the progress of the research.

If you are interested in finding out more, or participating in the SODER program, please contact Brittany Brooke at science@seaotters.org.
Shaping water policy from page one

The environmental community on the Monterey Peninsula has come together to address storm water runoff from urban communities as mandated by the Clean Water Act. Communities the size of Monterey are actively engaged in developing water basin management plans all around the country. Watersheds criss-cross local jurisdictional boundaries compelling neighboring cities and counties to work together, in many cases for the first time, to protect our coastline. Friends of the Sea Otter continues to work with local community leaders from Pebble Beach and Monterey as well as the National Resources Defense Council to develop lasting policies that decrease the impact of runoff and its associated contaminants on the sea otter.

Development is the central issue linking land-use policy with protection of our rivers and oceans here on the Central Coast. That is why Friends of the Sea Otter is proactive about educating the community. We proudly co-hosted an expert panel discussion on Urban Water Management with local land use advocates Land Watch Monterey County and Sierra Club Ventana Chapter in January. Events like this panel discussion brought local leaders together with community members in a creative dialogue about complex water issues. Additional programs of this type are being planned now. If you would like to become involved in local community events about water quality, check out our website www.seaotters/currentissues.


Thanks to the leadership of Representatives Sam Farr (D-CA), Jim Greenwood (R-PA), Curt Weldon (R-PA), and Tom Allen (D-ME), our nation may soon have a federal policy to protect our oceans. Friends of the Sea Otter urges citizens to lobby their local congressional representative to support legislation of the Oceans 21 Act that provides a national vision for protecting, maintaining and restoring our oceans and calls for an ecosystem-based approach to ocean management.

"Oceans 21" is a product of the Oceans Act of 2000 and the subsequent four-year long panel review on the health of our nation's oceans. When Congress passed the Oceans Act of 2000, it established the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy with a mandate to establish findings and develop recommendations for a new and comprehensive ocean policy. The last review of this scale was conducted 35 years ago. Since then, rapid development in ocean-related industries such as fisheries, tourism, and maritime trade has taken a heavy toll on the ocean environment.

After careful thought and consideration, the Commission released its final report, An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century, which calls for the establishment of a new national ocean policy that balances use with sustainability. It is based on sound science and includes an ecosystem-based management approach. Following suit, U.S. Congressmen and co-chairs of the House Ocean Caucus Greenwood, Farr, Weldon and Allen drafted and presented to the House the Oceans 21 Act.

Provisions in the bill include a set of national standards for ocean protection and use; an interagency consultation coordinate process to ensure federal actions uphold the policy; development of regional ecosystem plans to carry out the policy; and ocean science and education programs to increase public awareness and better inform management decisions.
George Washington and the sea otters
by John C. Pinheiro, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History, Aquinas College

Can you imagine the “Father of Our Country” riding his horse through the woods of Virginia atop a saddle made from the skin of a Pacific sea otter? Unfortunately, the first American citizen to make landfall on the Central Coast certainly could.

Joseph Barrell was a Boston merchant and sailor who grew wealthy by using the Revolutionary War to enlarge his fleet of ships. When the war ended he founded a company that had one goal – to open a northwest passage to China. The ships Columbia and Lady Washington, with George Washington’s encouragement, left Boston in September 1787 and became the first sailing ships from North America to pass around Cape Horn.

The trip to the Pacific Coast took eleven months. On May 24, 1788, they landed at Santa Barbara and, against strict orders from the U.S. government, met with the local Spanish governor, Juan Fernández. Relations were friendly, and the sailors gave Fernández a medal engraved with Washington’s image.

On the ships’ return to Boston Barrell minted medals of his own to commemorate the trip, and he sent one to Washington. Washington gladly accepted the gift, returned “his hearty wishes for success” to Barrell’s “enterprise,” and expressed his hope “that the day will arrive” when the young United States might take advantage of all the Pacific Coast had to offer.

Unfortunately for the otters, two things the Pacific had to offer were otter furs and otter skins. And so in 1793 Barrell decided to give Washington another gift, “the only entire Sea Otter Skin brought to this Country, which was procured by the Columbia & Washington, on the North West Coast of America.” He thought the skin would be perfect “as a seat for your Saddle.” Washington graciously accepted “the Sea Otter skin with which you were pleased to present me.”

By “North West Coast,” of course, Barrell was referring to what we now call the Central Coast, not today’s states of Oregon and Washington. So if you ever wondered how far back we can trace the decimation of the sea otters, now you know that the first such sea otter skin taken by an American sailor was also given to the first American president, George Washington.

---

Want more Washington?

If you visit our website, you will find full pdf versions of the George Washington letter shown on this page. So visit us online today!

seaootters.org
Student Contest Winners!

Last year we asked kids to come up with new ideas about how to protect sea otters. We could only publish a few, so here are our top picks with some of our favorite pictures, too.

1st Place
J.D. Russo, 3rd grade, Carmel Valley, CA
“My idea is that there could be a program that would let people adopt a number of gutters. They could paint signs that deliver the message ‘don’t put trash in the gutters, it’s our water and the animal’s water!’”

2nd Place
Katie Deckelmann, Salinas, CA
“When washing your car, you probably shouldn’t hand wash your car, but if you do, you just use a special soap. It’s called biodegradable soap. This is good because since it is biodegradable, it will just dissolve before reaching the sea. If it wasn’t biodegradable, the otters might drink it and it could be harmful.”

3rd Place
Alexis Gomez, 5th grade, Fresno, CA
“When you set sail do not dump trash or oil in the sea. Another way is to not disturb their habitat. Do not litter on the beach or around your house.”

Honorable Mention

Mikey Bellairs, 6th grade, Watsonville, CA
“By helping the food supply be safe we can save sea otters.”

Lucas A. Fink, 3rd grade, Carmel, CA
“I will collect plastic bags for a project. I know it will help the environment if I collect and turn them in at stores. Right now I am not doing this. This will change.”
New selections from the Otter Trove

Be sure to check out our entire inventory of fabulous otter items! Drop by our retail store in Pacific Grove, visit us on-line at www.seaotters.org, or call us at 831-373-2747 to order items.

"Love, laughter and friends welcome here." Laser-engraved and hand-painted. Sea green or country blue. 7" x 27". $56.95

10" plush purse — just large enough to fill with child-sized treasures. $8.95

Lightweight bag made of 100% pure hemp fiber. Friends of the Sea Otter embroidery. 9" x 6-1/2". $19.95

Friends of the Sea Otter 32 oz. polycarbonate water bottles. Deep-sea-blue, aqua-teal, archin-purple, algae-green, or storm-tossed-gray. $10.95

Otter-shaped soaps handcrafted exclusively for Friends of the Sea Otter by member, Maria Mitchell (see sidebar). A variety of natural colors and scents. $5.95

Support Your Cause!
MyCause.com

Shopping elsewhere online?

You can still help Friends of the Sea Otter by shopping through MyCause.com. It is a service that lets Internet shoppers direct a portion of their purchase price to Friends of the Sea Otter. Before shopping with top Internet retailers like Barnes & Noble, Travelocity, Best Buy and The Gap, visit FSO's homepage and click on the mycause.com link. From there you can choose from a wide variety of retailers and know that you are continuing to support Friends of the Sea Otter. FSO receives up to 12% of your purchase price, and it doesn't cost you a penny extra! A great deal for you and for us!

Featured Artist:
Maria Mitchell

"I am a member of the Friends of the Sea Otter currently living in Washington State. I enjoy hiking and experiencing the beautiful outdoor areas and wildlife of both California and Washington. I create my otter-shaped soaps with love for sea otters and hope for the successful recovery of their populations in California as well as in Washington, Alaska and beyond."

Maria has been a dedicated member since she first learned about Friends of the Sea Otter in the summer of 2004. Her unique mold offers a one-of-a-kind sea otter shape. She donates these beautifully hand-crafted otter-shaped soaps exclusively to FSO to help strengthen our conservation programs. Each soap is individually spiced and scented for a richer experience.

Friends of the Sea Otter is grateful for Maria's hard work and continuing support.

Do you know someone who deserves a Sea Otter Salute?

Do you have a friend, family member or coworker who is passionate about helping sea otters, the ocean, or the environment? We want to know! Every year we will honor a sea otter champion for their efforts in environmental conservation. The selected recipient will be featured in our newsletter and on our Web site, and will receive a Friends of the Sea Otter T-shirt.

Please send your nominee information to:
Friends of the Sea Otter, Attn.: Sea Otter Salute
125 Ocean View Blvd. #104
Pacific Grove, CA 93950

Please include complete contact information for yourself and your nominee (name, address, phone number and e-mail address, if you have one).
Welcome to the Friends of the Sea Otter newsletter!

Look inside for:

P. 1 SODER Program Update
P. 2 Sea Otter Action Alert
P. 4 Water Policy Heats Up
P. 5 George Washington and sea otters
P. 6 Student Contest Winners!
P. 7 Gifts from the Retail Center
P. 7 Featured Artist

Margaret's Corner

Inspiration from Margaret Owings, beloved co-founder of Friends of the Sea Otter
1913 - 1999

"A Cliffside Seat" from the Otter Raft in May, 1973 - after a winter not unlike that of 2005

During immense storms with high seas along our coast this winter, many sea otters could have lost their lives. How can they survive this beating, one asks? From my Cliffside seat, I have watched two otters – tossed and thrown, turned, inundated, rocked and spun. Waves, breaking high, appeared to sweep these small bodies up and over stony promontories. The two moved together, seeking anchor in scattered broken sprays of kelp. Where large kelp canopies formerly lay, only tattered remnants remained. How could these little mammals sustain life? Needing food for warmth and energy, how could they find strength to catch sustenance? It would appear that they could find no rest.

Following the full day of storm, came a night with action more intense! At dawn, I arose and reached for my binoculars. Waves were swelling and detonating against the cliff. Waters were brown with mud leached out from the cliffs and washed down some 600 feet from slides along the road above. Sea lions were visible, holding together in a woven mass of bodies, flippers raised. I scanned the waters but could find no otters. Back and forth, I moved my glasses. "They are gone", I thought. "They have been bashed against the rocks! They simply wore out and gave up!" I felt fear, a defeat, a sense of loss.

By noon, the sea had lessened its momentum and there, directly below our house, floated the relaxed form of a sea otter – hind feet flattened out and tail like a small blade of grass. One hundred feet away, another otter was rocking like a cradle. On her chest, her front paws embracing it, a new born pup perched, white as a dandelion fluff. A Bonaparte’s gull passed through my vision in the glass – and I must say, I experienced an abrupt moment of not seeing clearly.

Announcement!

FSO's Annual Meeting has been scheduled for Saturday, October 8th
Additional events will be held Sunday
Look for your invitation in August!