2010 Spring Newsletter

Friends of the Sea Otter (FSO) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1968 and dedicated to the protection of a rare and threatened species, the southern sea otter, throughout its North Pacific range, and all sea otter habitats.
Dear Members & Friends:

Please meet our board members and staff:

Jud Vandevere
Jud studied the natural history of the southern sea otter for many years. In The Sea Otter (Enhydra lutris): Behavior, Ecology, and Natural History by Dr. Riedman and Dr. Estes, Biological Report 90 (14), there are references to nine articles authored and two co-authored by Vandevere.

Chris Miller
Chris has been involved with Friends of the Sea Otter for many years. He is also employed at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Ryan Bigelow
Ryan is an environmental professional interested in maintaining and protecting wildlife habitat. He has been a board member with FSO since 2008.

Pam Ferris-Olson
In the 70s Pam helped Margaret Owings and Betty Davis write several position papers for FSO. She wrote a masters thesis on the conservation of the southern sea otter. Since she left California, Pam has raised two sons; the youngest a masters student in North Carolina is working toward becoming a marine biologist. Pam currently lives in the Dayton, Ohio area and works as a freelance writer. Pam is glad to once again be part of a team that works hard to protect the sea otter and its marine habitat.

Alexis Martinovich
Alexis first fell in love with the ocean during her childhood on the Gulf Coast in Florida. She is now in her last year of a master’s in International Environmental Policy at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. She has worked with the Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program, and she is excited to expand her work in hopes of making the ocean a healthier and happier place for otters!

Staff
Jennifer Covert
Jennifer has been with FSO since February 2008. Although she moved to NYC this past September, she has remained an active staff member. Jennifer continues to act as a liaison between our consultants, board, and other like-minded organizations.

Ashley Downing
Ashley is pursuing a Master’s degree in International Environmental Policy at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. She began working with FSO in June 2009. She takes care of all the office tasks and communicates with members and volunteers.

Jason Lutterman
Jason is currently a graduate student pursuing a master’s degree in International Environmental Policy at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. He is excited about advocating for the sea otter at FSO starting this summer by coordinating volunteers and communicating with members from the Carmel office.

If you are interested in becoming a Board member with FSO, please send a copy of your resume and a cover letter explaining why you would like to be on the Board to info@seaotters.org. The time commitment is about 5 hours per month.

Good luck, Candace!

FSO would like to thank Candace Leong for her dedication to our organization for the last 2 years. She had to step down from the board because of other responsibilities, but we wish her well and thank her for donating her time to FSO and the otters!
Dear Senator ,

I am writing to urge you to support the Sea Otter Research and Recovery Act (H.R. 556). This act would allow for funding to increase sea otter research and recovery programs. The $5 million a year will secure programs and research opportunities needed to better understand the high death rate and slow recovery of the southern sea otter population.

The southern sea otter is an endangered species, and its numbers have started to decrease in recent years. Hundreds of years ago there were as many as 15,000 of this species in the Pacific, but today only about 2,800 remain.

As a member of the nonprofit organization, Friends of the Sea Otter, I am dedicated to seeing these animals make a comeback along the California Coast. The southern sea otter is an important charismatic keystone species, and without them the unique kelp forest along the California Coast will be in great danger. The sea otter is a species we cannot afford to lose.

Thank you for considering my point of view on this matter. I believe it is an important issue, and I would like to see the Sea Otter Research and Recovery Act pass to ensure the recovery of this important animal.

Sincerely,

Name
address

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Zonal Management Update

Friends of the Sea Otter has continued its collaborations with other local, regional and national sea otter environmental organizations to seek an end to zonal management along the Southern California coast. Zonal management is a program that was established in 1987 for the translocated population of sea otters at San Nicolas Island. It states that any sea otter found in the management zone must be physically removed back to the parent population.

At the beginning of March our group met with the Navy to discuss the future of zonal management around Saint Nicolas Island. Now we are discussing with the groups the best way to move forward either administratively or to try to pass new legislation that would end zonal management and allow for natural range expansion.
FSO Art and Poetry Contest

First place: Paulina Hernandez
“Happy Otter”

Age 8

“Sea Otters are cute and furry. They have really cute faces. I especially like the way the mommies float on their backs with their babies on their tummies.”

Second place: Naomi Popiel
“Simply Sea Otters”

Third place: Kela Dowd
“Sea Otter Sees a Boat”
Thank you to all of the children who entered their amazing drawings and poems into the FSO Art and Poetry Contest. You are all so talented, and we are so glad that you are interested in sea otters!

Age 9
First place: Tah-Teh Kennedy
“Living with the Otters”

“Sea Otters are my favorite animals. They are soft and fuzzy. They are really playful. I like the way they can float on their backs in the ocean.”

Second place: Irene Campos
“Sea Otter and the Mermaid”

Third place: Daychines Jones
“Sea Otter Nation”

Honorable Mention:
Jailynn Barbosh
“A Cute Otter”
Age 10
1st Place
Rebecca Schwind – “A Still, Quiet Night”
“Otters are really cute and so interesting to watch. They do back flips and are playful. The mothers carry their babies on them and when they go after food, I’ve seen the mothers wrap their babies in seaweed so they won’t float away while they look for food.”

A Still, Quiet, Night
By Rebecca Schwind

Two otters,
On the sparkling surface of the water,
One has been eating,
There is a bit of clamshell on his mouth,
Beautiful sunset behind them,
Like a sunset backdrop for a movie, a play, or a photo shoot,
Graceful little birds,
Soaring,
With their little beady eyes,
No bigger than marbles,
Watching these furry creatures,
On this still, quiet, evening,
Silence fills the air,
The only sounds are the tiny, graceful, splashes of the otters,
The gentle waves lapping softly upon the rocks,
The gentle cooing sounds of the birds,
And the owl hooting.
Night has come on the bay.

Second place: Chris Diffey “Otter Love”
Sea Otter Rap
By Ben MacDonald

These otters are magic like Harry Potter. They’re swimmin’ and fightin’ all day in the water. They got their shells, and they are cracking them all day while the other awesome otters got nothing to say. Chillin’ in the bay down in Monterey. Sleepin’ on seaweed, and eatin’ clams all day. As you can see, otters are tight. They rock it at the ocean all day and all night.

I was first attracted to sea otters when my grandparents took my brother and I on a boat ride through the Elkhorn Slough. Sea otters were everywhere! They were funny when they played with each other. These animals are cool and make me laugh. Thank you, Ben MacDonald
Elkhorn Slough, one of the few remaining estuaries in California, is centrally located in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and is the third largest estuary in the state. Approximately four percent of the southern sea otter population uses this area for refuge and foraging.

Most people are familiar with the group of otters that raft together in Moss Landing Harbor – the entrance to Elkhorn Slough. This group is primarily made up of male otters and often swells to over one hundred at night. They have been intensively studied by Okeanis, a non-profit based out of Moss Landing.

Okeanis was founded in 2006 to promote the knowledge and skills necessary to manage and maintain functional marine ecosystems for the benefit and prosperity of people and wildlife. They are achieving their goals through technical training, capacity building, research, and information sharing. Recently, Okeanis completed a two-year study of the otter raft in Moss Landing Harbor by conducting twice monthly 24-hour observations to record otter numbers, locations, activities, boat and kayak interactions and more. Numerous volunteers assisted in the observations and were an integral part of the project.

The study determined that the otters of Monterey Bay are using the harbor primarily for refuge. Eighty-five percent of this group forages in the bay rather than the slough. The number of otters using Moss Landing Harbor, the number hauling out on land, and selection of haul out areas is closely related to temperature and wind direction. More otters come into in the harbor and more are hauled out at colder temperatures. The preferred haul out area is the one best shielded from the wind.

This study also included otter observations further up the slough, which was an extension of earlier work conducted by Okeanis’ Chief Scientist Dr. Daniela Maldini, Thomas Kieckhefer and Sue Lynn Reif of Pacific Cetacean Group, Captain Yohn Gideon of the Elkhorn Slough Safari, as well as students and dedicated volunteers.

A little over a mile up the slough from this group, near the area known as Seal Bend, is another group of otters familiar to kayakers and boaters. This group is referred to as a nursery, as it is populated with females, their pups, and one or more dominant males. The number of otters here can fluctuate between just a few to over twenty, and forage mainly within the slough.

Another mile further up the Slough is a 460 acre wetland area called Parsons Slough. The Elkhorn Slough Tidal Wetlands Project chose Parsons Slough for restoration efforts, including the construction of an underwater retaining wall, or sill, at the entrance. The sill is designed to mute tidal action in the slough and reduce scour. Okeanis was contracted to study the marine mammals in this area in support of the construction planned for the fall of 2010. Okeanis felt this was a natural addition to previous otter research in Elkhorn Slough and began observations in the fall of 2009.

Despite limited funding, significant findings have already been made. Parsons Slough and the adjacent Yampah Island area provide unique habitats for otters in areas off limits to kayakers and boaters. Within this complex, there are three otter territories, each patrolled by a single dominant male and used by multiple females and female/pup pairs. The Parsons Slough area, mostly mud flats and tidal creeks, is used mainly for resting and foraging by a single group of up to twenty otters. The Yampah Island area is more diverse, with pickleweed, mud banks, and tidal creeks. Okeanis volunteers have observed two groups of ten otters in this area.

The otters travel in and out of the Parsons Slough area by diving under the railroad bridge, often grabbing a mussel or two for a snack, and foraging on crabs as they travel. Surprisingly, on
several occasions, we observed them entering the Parsons Slough area by walking over the railroad embankment.

The Yampah Island tidal creek opens on one end in the Parsons Slough entrance and on the other end, into Elkhorn Slough, about a mile to the west. Okeanis volunteers have observed otters in this area as comfortable on the pickleweed as they are in the water. Otters have frequently been observed playing with Western grebes, often for over an hour, without hurting the grebe. Once a grebe has been captured by an otter it seems to learn that it can't escape. The grebe will then remain near the otter, even when the otter is on the pickleweed and the grebe is in the water. Other interesting otter behaviors include standing meerkat-like on the pickleweed to scan the area, females fighting off aggressive males, the dominant male galloping across the pickleweed to chase off a sneaker male, and curious otters investigating the camouflaged zodiac we occasionally used for close up observations.

Direct observations to research these rare behaviors are difficult and time consuming, requiring at least three observers in different locations. Okeanis’ next goal is to augment the direct observations with video and still cameras. Our first Internet-based camera has been installed and is used primarily for monitoring and counting seals that rest on the mud banks at the entrance to Parsons Slough.

Okeanis is hoping to obtain sufficient funding to install an additional video camera, of equal or greater quality, in the center of the Yampah Island tidal creek to count and monitor these fascinating otters. Another video or time lapse camera is needed for the southern area of Parsons Slough. Once installed, the cameras can help us study these otters without disturbing them, and provide useful information to the Tidal Wetland Project before, during and after the sill construction. Okeanis needs help, with funding, as well as volunteers to aid in the time consuming (but rewarding) monitoring duties.

If you are interested in volunteering to help monitor sea otters at the Elkhorn Slough please email info@seaotters.org.
Thanks to our devoted donors. Without you we could not support sea otters.

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