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 sea otter, and its habitat.
Please meet our board members and staff:

**Jud Vandevere**: For many years Jud studied the natural history of the southern sea otter. In *The Sea Otter (Enhydra lutris): Behavior, Ecology and Natural History* (Fish and Wildlife Service, Biological Report 90 (14)) by Dr. Riedman and Dr. Estes 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 an active volunteer at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

**Pam Ferris-Olson**: Pam wrote several position papers with Margaret Owings and Betty Davis and a masters thesis on the conservation of the southern sea otter. Pam currently lives in Ohio area and is working on a PhD in leadership. She is glad to once again be part of a team working hard to protect the sea otter and its marine habitat.

**Jennifer Covert**: Jennifer has been with FSO since 2008. She serves as Senior Program Manager and is a member on the FSO Board of Directors. In her role as program manager Jennifer liaises with other conservation organizations, legal and scientific consultants, and educators to advocate for the sea otter locally, regionally and nationally. She currently resides in New York City and works for a sustainable development organization.

**Jason Lutterman**: Jason has been pursuing a master’s degree in International Environmental Policy at the Monterey Institute of International Studies while he has served as FSO’s Program Manager. Jason has worked in FSO’s Carmel office handling accounting systems, communicating with members and volunteers, and many other duties essential to the daily operation of FSO.

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**Our Mission**

“Friends of the Sea Otter is committed to and advocates for the conservation of sea otters, the preservation of their habitat, through education, research, and policy decisions that will ensure the long-term survival of this species.”
Hello Dear Sea Otter Fans & Members:

It’s been an active and exciting summer and fall. Since the last issue of The Raft, FSO has been hard at work advocating for and defending sea otters. Much of the last month has been devoted to asking FSO members to submit comments on the No-Otter Zone (see more information on this in a later section of this newsletter). FSO has been fighting to end the zone for over 20 years. We are pleased to report that there have been some great responses from many of you through email messages and attendance at public hearings and we thank all of you for your heightened support and engagement.

Read on to learn more about FSO’s activities, including:
• A more in depth look at the current status of terminating the No–Otter Zone
• Alaskan sea otters facing legislation that would legalize the sale of plain otter pelts, without limits
• Updates on the Sea Otter Fund Tax Check-off and 2011 Spring Census
• Review of FSO’s Annual Meeting
• Tribute to our stalwart sea otter supporter Jud Vandevere, FSO Board and past staff member

“To guard the sea otter, we cannot direct him nor can we protect him from his environment. But as his ally, we can guard the quality of our shared environment – the coastal waters.” – Margaret Owings

With respect and appreciation,
The Staff and Board of
Friends of the Sea Otter

Goodbye to Ryan

Friends of the Sea Otter extends thanks to Ryan Bigelow for his contributions as an FSO board member. Ryan recently stepped down in order to dedicate more time to his work with the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Program and his family. We wish Ryan the best of luck with his future endeavors!
Sea Otter Awareness Week

Sea Otter Awareness Week was celebrated from September 25th through October 1st to spread awareness about this engaging and biologically important marine mammal. Though FSO has been defending the sea otter for 40 years and has made some progress in a number of areas, sea otters continue to confront a variety of challenges that threaten the species and its recovery. Last year, 2010, marked the second consecutive year that the southern sea otter population decreased. Unfortunately there was no official count in 2011 due to poor weather conditions, leaving us with no way of knowing what the current population trend is and no reason to believe the sea otter population has improved.

Sea otter awareness events were held across the country at museums, aquariums, zoos, and other similar institutions. Here on the central coast, FSO partnered with Monterey Bay Kayaks to offer discounted kayak rentals for members to explore the Elkhorn Slough, a renowned otter habitat and hangout spot.

We also joined the Monterey Bay Aquarium for its annual “otter days” celebrations – two days full of activities, presentations, and special exhibits focused on sea otters and their habitat.

If you did not get a chance to visit your local Sea Otter Awareness Week event, be sure to mark your calendars for the last week of September in 2012!

Know of a museum of natural history, zoo, aquarium, or other similar institution that you think would enjoy participating in Sea Otter Awareness Week next year? Let us know at info@seaotters.org.

Sea Studio’s Otter 501

“A storm grows, a sea otter pup is separated from her mother, and a young woman bound for adventure blows in to town. On a wild and windswept beach these lives collide and an entire species’ survival gets personal. Through Katie’s eyes you will see our playful pup, otter number 501, get an amazing second chance at life in the wild. As the two learn to navigate the opportunities and risks of life without anchor we see the incredible efforts people have undertaken to save sea otters from the brink of existence. Framed against the strikingly beautiful Monterey Bay coastline, the last stronghold of these iconic animals, Katie discovers just how serious this threat remains. Their adventure, unexpected as it was, illustrates what we can do to contribute to the growing movement to protect the southern sea otter…and ourselves.”

To learn more about the film Otter 501, produced by the Sea Studios Foundation, please visit their facebook page.

Annual Meeting

On October 1st, the final day of Sea Otter Awareness Week, FSO hosted its annual meeting in Monterey. The staff and board present at the meeting were happy to meet with a dedicated group of members who shared our enthusiasm for sea otter conservation.
Tax Checkoff

On September 1st Californian governor Jerry Brown signed into law A.B. 971 which reauthorized the option for California taxpayers to donate a portion of their tax return to the California Sea Otter Fund.

The California Sea Otter Fund supports vital research and recovery efforts for the southern sea otter performed by the California Department of Fish and Game and the California Coastal Conservancy.

The fund must meet a certain minimum amount each year set by the California Tax Franchise Board. Already in 2011, over $330,000 was raised for the Sea Otter Fund. For 2012, the minimum contribution amount is $267,934 in order for the fund to appear on the 2013 tax form. Please help keep this important funding source for sea otters on California’s tax forms! Check the box in 2012!

2011 Spring Census Canceled

For the first time in two decades, the spring census of southern sea otters was canceled due to poor visibility from inclement weather in the spring and summer months. Otters are usually sighted through land-based telescopes and aerial observations, but heavy fog and rainy conditions compromised the accuracy of the aerial survey.

The cancellation of the census, though unavoidable, is especially tragic given last year’s numbers that showed a count of 2,711 animals – a cumulative decline of 11.6% since 2007.

The census data is collected each year and averaged over three years by the U.S. Geological Survey and volunteers. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service then uses the data to track the progress and population trends of the southern sea otter. According to the Fish and Wildlife Service Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan, the southern sea otter population must reach 3,090 for three consecutive years to qualify for delisting from the Endangered Species Act.
Spot Sea Otters, Honor Jud Vandevere

To honor sea otter expert, conservationist, and board member Judson “Jud” Vandevere, FSO will be reintroducing our Otter Spotting program. We are looking for volunteers to take to the Monterey coastline in 2012 to look for sea otters, record pertinent information for research purposes and to promote the involvement of the community in our efforts.

Jud Vandevere has been a member of FSO since its inception in 1968. A friend and partner of FSO’s founders, Margaret Owings and Dr. James Mattison, Jud has tirelessly worked to bring the southern sea otter back from the brink of extinction for over 40 years.

In the early years of the organization, Jud pioneered behavioral research of southern sea otters through dedicated and patient observation. His research and observations were published regularly in The Raft and in a number of scientific articles. Jud was often joined by Margaret Owings, Dr. James Mattison, and even Philippe Cousteau when observing sea otters in the Monterey Bay. Because of his unique and intimate knowledge of sea otters, Jud was a major contributor to the Emmy Award-winning documentary The Unsinkable Sea Otter by Philippe Cousteau.

Though an avid observer and researcher, perhaps Jud’s greatest contribution to sea otter conservation was in sharing what he knows with the public. Over the decades, Jud has taught the natural history of the Monterey Peninsula with a particular focus on sea otters to countless classes and groups from elementary school children to students at the University of California extension campus and Monterey Peninsula College. Jud served for eight years as a docent at Point Lobos State Natural Preserve and laid the groundwork for what would become the Preserve’s modern docent program.

As an avid advocate for the sea otter and the environment as a whole, Jud has participated in the founding of many local chapters of organizations like the Sierra Club, the California Native Plant Society, and the American Cetacean Society. There is no doubt that much of what we enjoy in the Monterey Bay Area, from the beautiful natural landscapes to the abundant and healthy waters of the bay, is in some part due to the valiant work of Jud Vandevere.

In honor of Jud and all the work he has done on behalf of sea otters, FSO is recruiting volunteers to once again inspire sea otter conservation through observation and engagement of the public. Volunteers, equipped with a scope or binoculars, will spot otters, record pertinent information, and engage the public by informing them of basic sea otter facts and trivia.

If you are interested in becoming an Otter Spotter, please contact us at info@seaotters.org.

Photograph from issue No. 2 of The Raft (Dec. 1969) of Jud Vandevere (right) and Tad Ottman (left) spotting sea otters along the Big Sur coast. Photo By James Mattison, M.D.
NO-OTTER ZONE

The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has finally decided to review its policy of a No-Otter Zone south of Point Conception, CA established in 1987. The policy hinged on the successful establishment of a colony of sea otters at San Nicolas Island, a barren yet kelp-rich island isolated within the No-Otter Zone. Unfortunately, after the Service relocated 140 sea otters to the island in the early 1990s only 13 took up permanent residence. The remainder either died due to the stress of relocation, disbursed into the No-Otter Zone, or swam back to their home range.

The sea otters that remained in the waters off San Nicolas Island experienced difficulties for reasons that are mostly unclear. Not until 2001 did the number of sea otters at San Nicolas increase to over 25. Today fewer than 50 otters are estimated to reside in the vicinity of the island. This number is significantly fewer than the 250-500 otters that were estimated to become established there in the original plan.

What Ending the No-Otter Zone Means

Fifty-three sea otters were reported in the 2010 spring census to reside “illegally” within the No-Otter Zone. According to the current law, these otters should be captured and relocated back north of Point Conception. The Fish and Wildlife Service has refrained from doing so since 1993 due to the high casualty rate associated with capturing and transporting otters. A further 46 sea otters, remnants of the translocation program, live within the No-Otter Zone but are isolated at San Nicolas Island. Together, these 99 sea otters living unprotected within the No-Otter Zone make up about 3.6% of the total southern sea otter population.

If the No-Otter Zone designation were removed these 99 otters, and all future sea otters that venture into this area, would be granted the same legal rights and protections enjoyed by the rest of their species under the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act. Extending these protections might involve banning irresponsible fishing practices like the use of gill or trammel nets in areas of sea otter habitation off the coast of Southern California. Gill and trammel nets have proven to kill otters and have been banned in the rest of the sea otter range since the 1970s, but are still used in portions of Southern Californian waters. Ending the No-Otter Zone would also remove requirements for the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove sea otters that venture into the No-Otter Zone in the future.

Ending the No-Otter Zone also promotes the recovery of the Southern Californian coastal ecosystem. Allowing the return of the sea otter to Southern Californian waters would restore the natural ecosystem. The absence of the sea otter has resulted in a systematic trophic cascade by which the sea urchin population flourished. Without a substantial predator to regulate their numbers, urchins have proliferated and inhibited the growth of kelp forests by feeding on the holdfasts that anchor kelp to the ocean floor. The result has been the prevalence in Southern California of “urchin barrens”, large expanses of ocean floor largely dominated by sea urchins and bereft of the extremely productive and biodiverse kelp forest ecosystem.

FSO’s Members Speak Loud and Clear

FSO’s members have spoken out against the No-Otter Zone for twenty years. This past fall, thousands added their voices by sending letters and signing petitions to support the Service’s proposed decision to end the No-Otter Zone.

Dozens of sea otter advocates from all over California went a step further and attended public hearings in Ventura, Santa Cruz, and Santa Barbara to support the proposed action. Fishing interests oppose ending the No-Otter Zone and are actively pressuring the Service to maintain the status quo. This is why it is very important for FSO to demonstrate that the public supports the return of the sea otter to Southern California waters and the recovery of the nearshore ecosystem.

FSO applauds all those who attended the public hearings on behalf of the sea otter! FSO member and dedicated sea otter advocate, Debbie Paolini stated at the Santa Cruz hearing: “The sea otters are not on trial!” Its up to us to represent the sea otter and ensure its voice is being heard.

What’s Next?

Whether the Fish and Wildlife Service will listen to the public, who is clearly behind the proposed decision to end the No-Otter Zone, or bend to the pressures mounted by fishing interests remains to be seen. The public comment period ended on November 21st and during the next year the Service will be undertaking an internal process in order to make a final decision by 2012.

If sea otter advocates are victorious and the Fish and Wildlife Service officially ends the No-Otter Zone, it is likely to be the first step of many to securing a brighter future for sea otters in Southern California. Fishing groups have already indicated they intend to challenge the decision in courts if the Fish and Wildlife Service rules in favor of freeing the sea otter. Friends of the Sea Otter will remain vigilant in the fight to protect the sea otter, and continue to depend on the support of our members and donors. Only through your help can we remain a strong voice for sea otter recovery.
On July 30th, 2011 Representative Don Young (R. – Alaska) introduced H.R. 2714. The bill threatens to reauthorize the sea otter fur trade for segments of the Alaskan sea otter range. Though cleverly authored as if the bill were aimed to enhance the local native people’s ability to practice their cultural traditions, in public comments and actions Rep. Young revealed the real purpose of the bill is to institute a management plan for Alaskan sea otters on behalf of fishing groups.

Alaskan Sea Otters

The coastal waters off the southern Alaskan coast are at the heart of the sea otter’s historical range, and since the end of the fur trade, have rebounded unlike in many other regions. From the Aleutian Islands to British Columbia, sea otters number approximately 70,000, though their concentrations and disbursement vary region by region.

To better monitor northern sea otters in Alaska, the Fish and Wildlife Service has divided the Alaskan sea otter range into three distinct population segments (DPS): the southeast, southcentral, and southwest populations. Immigration between these areas is rare. Because the southwest population has experienced such a
rapid decline in numbers, they have been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and Rep. Young’s bill only targets the southcentral and southwest DPS for management.

The southcentral DPS is perhaps the most successful sea otter population with the most recent survey counting 12,774 otters. However, these sea otters still face challenges. In 1989, an Exxon-Valdez oil tanker struck a shallow reef in the Prince William Sound, killing nearly 4,000 sea otters in the ensuing oil spill. Since then, studies have shown that the sea otter population and parts of the nearshore ecosystem are only slowly recovering from that disaster.

**The Southeast DPS**

The southeast DPS is the successful result of a translocation program in the 1960s that established 13 colonies of sea otters in southeast Alaska. From these colonies the population has grown to 9,136 sea otters based on aerial surveys from 2006 and 2007. Growth, however, has been unequal within the southeast DPS. Dividing the range into two segments (northern and southern segments) reveals that the growth in population numbers has been largely concentrated in the southern segment and within Glacier Bay National Park in the northern segment. Outside of Glacier Bay, the growth rate of the northern population has struggled and either declined or stabilized in the last few decades, even though abundant habitat remains unutilized by otters.

**Legal Hunting of Sea Otters**

The Marine Mammal Protection Act outlaws the killing of a marine mammal and the trading of its parts. However, an exception exists for unlimited and non-wasteful harvesting of sea otters by native peoples for subsistence and traditional purposes. It is lawful for native peoples to hunt sea otters and sell their parts, but only if the parts are sufficiently modified in a traditional fashion (to produce, for example, traditional handicrafts and garments). The selling of an unmodified sea otter pelt remains illegal under the current law, protecting sea otters from the commercialization of their fur.

According to a 2009 study conducted for the U.S. Geological Service (USGS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Glacier Bay National Park, George Esslingen and James Bodkin found that 8% of the sea otter population inhabiting the northern segment of the southeast DPS (outside of Glacier Bay, where hunting is illegal) is hunted annually. Because evidence of other common threats to sea otters (predation, pollution, disease and food limitation) is lacking, Esslingen and Bodkin believe that the high harvest rate may be the cause for the decreased population growth rates of the sea otters in this region.

Sea otter harvest levels in southeast Alaska have increased since the study was published. Mean annual harvest from 2003-2010 was 401 animals, representing a 24% increase over 1990-2003 levels. In 2010 alone, 601 sea otters were harvested from the southeast DPS. This was the highest annual harvest since 1993 and accounts for a 55% increase over the annual harvest in 2003.

**The Threat**

Rep. Young’s bill threatens to increase the harvest levels and therefore increase pressure on northern sea otter recovery. The bill would remove the requirement under the Marine Mammal Protection Act that harvested sea otter parts be fashioned into a traditional craft by native peoples. This would open the market for the trade of unmodified sea otter pelts. Nothing in the bill would restrict pelts from being sold to businesses and then be fashioned into coats or other commercial items. As current harvest rates may already be affecting the growth of the southeast otters’ range, any further increase of this rate due to the commercialization of sea otter fur could be disastrous for sea otters.

The bill also fails to create an enforcement mechanism by which the origin of harvested sea otters can be verified. Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act every sea otter harvested must be “tagged” and recorded by a Fish and Wildlife agent at stations located throughout Alaska. Though it is common to tag harvested sea otters within the DPS in which the sea otter lived, it is still lawful to tag otters outside their range leaving it so that there is no way an FWS agent can verify whether a harvested sea otter originates from the threatened southwest population or not. Therefore, even though the southwest population is excluded, this bill may still result in more harvests from the threatened population.

What the bill does accomplish is a de facto management plan for northern sea otters in the interest of Alaskan fisheries. Because fishing groups must compete with sea otters for certain species, an indirect management plan to stabilize growth or reduce the number of sea otters in the region would benefit fishermen greatly.

The bill is disastrous for sea otters, the environment, and the people of Alaska. The sea otters maintain kelp ecosystems, as previously mentioned in the No- Otter Zone article, and provide numerous ecological and economic benefits to the nearshore environment. The sea otter is also a well-known tourist attraction in Alaska.

If harvest rates continue to increase, all the progress that has resulted because of the reintroduction programs of the 1960s will be lost.

**How can you help?**

This bill represents a major threat to sea otter recovery in Alaska. The fur trade of the 18th and 19th centuries nearly destroyed the species. Write to your elected officials and urge them to oppose H.R. 2714 and S. 1453 (its counterpart in the Senate), the bill to reauthorize the Alaska fur trade. Visit www.seaotters.org/takeaction.html to learn how.
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