

California otters holding on but still at risk, feds say

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LOS ANGELES—Southern sea otters are holding their own along the California coast but their fragile population is still at risk from disease, oil spills and other disasters, according to a draft report released Tuesday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A "stock assessment" based on a spring 2007 survey found more than 3,000 southern sea otters in the state and said their numbers have grown by a slow but healthy 5 percent a year since 2001.

However, the population is still well below the 8,400 that the wildlife service estimates to be the lowest number of otters necessary for the species to survive a catastrophe—to survive figure is still well below the estimated 8,400 otters that the wildlife service estimates is the optimum sustainable population—that is, the number necessary for the species to keep from being wiped out by a catastrophe.

The draft assessment report will be available for public comment for 90 days before the final report is written.

Southern sea otters once ranged from Oregon to Baja California in Mexico but they were prized for their luxurious pelts and were nearly wiped out by hunting by the early 1900s. The species received protection under the International Fur Seal Treaty in 1911 and the federal government listed them as threatened in 1977.

Otters generally live in about a 250-mile range of near-shore waters from San Mateo County to Santa Barbara County. Because the population is relatively small and its range limited, the species is vulnerable to a "natural or human-caused catastrophe," especially an oil spill.

Otters also are at risk of getting caught in fishing nets and in crab and lobster traps, the survey indicated, although no deaths and only one capture were reported for 2006, the latest year for figures included in the assessment.

The assessment accurately represents the state of the otter population, said Andy Johnson, who manages the Sea Otter Research and Conservation Program at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. He was involved in the otter survey that provide data for the assessment but did not write the report.

"The people who are studying sea otters ... are quite concerned, although there's a fairly good feeling that at least the population's holding its own. We're not expecting anything catastrophic," Johnson said.

"Their population has been moving upward in recent years but there's still concern about the overall health of the population," Johnson said.

"It still seems as though there are factors that are suppressing the population" from expanding more quickly but it was hard to say what factors might be involved, Johnson said.

Researchers have said many otters have died from infectious diseases, including some that originated onshore. Those included a parasite found in cat feces and fungus spores found in dust raised in agricultural and construction areas. Also, water pollution may weaken the otters' immune systems, researchers have speculated.

"They really are, in many ways, human issues," Johnson said. "The otters are so close to shore and what we dump on the land is affecting the otters."

The sea-going otters are "a kind of sentinel for what's going on in that habitat," Johnson said.

"The general view is they're trying to tell us something, that things aren't beautiful and pristine ... and if we don't look at that closely, the whole system could collapse some day."

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