



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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News

05-19

For Immediate Release
August 9, 2005

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE LISTS NORTHERN SEA OTTERS IN SOUTHWEST ALASKA AS "THREATENED" UNDER ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

The southwest Alaska Distinct Population Segment of the northern sea otter (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*) was designated as a threatened species today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and placed under the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA.) This means that any Federal agencies that fund, authorize or conduct any activities which might affect this population of sea otters must consult with the Service under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act before proceeding. Individuals who believe that activities they may conduct might harm these sea otters are asked to contact the Service to inquire about permits.

The Service has also proposed a special rule associated with Alaska Natives' traditional and cultural uses of this population of sea otters. This special rule would align provisions relating to the creation, shipment, and sale of authentic Native handicrafts and clothing by Alaska Natives under the ESA with what is already allowed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The proposed rule would provide for the conservation of sea otters, while at the same time accommodating Alaska Natives' subsistence, cultural, and economic interests. This proposal was published in the Federal Register today, and public comments are requested. Comments may be submitted to: fw7_swakseotter@fws.gov.

A Proposed Rule regarding the listing was published in the Federal Register on February 11, 2004. Following that publication, the Service accepted comments during a 120-day public comment period (twice the normal length), which closed on June 10, 2004. Of the 6,770 comments received 6,743 supported listing, 16 comments opposed listing, and 11 neither supported nor opposed the action but instead commented upon possible ramifications.

In addition to holding the comment period, the Service conducted public meetings at six locations in Alaska and a public hearing in Kodiak, Alaska. The Final Rule, published today in the Federal Register, was updated to reflect comments and information received during the public comment period, public hearings and public meeting. Substantial comments regarding the ruling are discussed in the published Final Rule, as well. The designation will become effective 30 days after today's publication.

Under the ESA, "species" is defined broadly to include species, subspecies, and also to include Distinct Population Segments, or DPS, of vertebrate species. A DPS is a portion of a vertebrate species or subspecies that is discrete from the remainder of its taxon and also is significant to that taxon. The ESA defines a "threatened" species as one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. An "endangered" species is defined as being in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

The Final Rule describes the southwest Alaska DPS of the northern sea otter as occurring in nearshore waters from the Aleutian Islands to Cook Inlet, including waters adjacent to the Aleutians, the Alaska

Peninsula, and the Kodiak archipelago. This corresponds to the range of the southwest stock of sea otters recognized in 2002 by the Service in accordance with provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Two other stocks of sea otters in Alaska that also were recognized in 2002, the southcentral and southeast stocks, are believed to be stable or increasing and are not included in the Final Rule published today.

Between the mid 1700s and the early 1900s, commercial hunting of sea otters brought the entire species to the brink of extinction. When they became protected from commercial harvest in 1911 under the International Fur Seal Treaty, only 13 small remnant populations were known to still exist, including six in southwest Alaska. Following this protection, otters from 11 of these populations gradually recovered and recolonized their former range in southwest Alaska and some other portions of their historic range.

A substantial decline in the southwest Alaska sea otter population appears to have begun in the mid- to late 1980s. In the Aleutians, there were approximately 55,000 to 74,000 sea otters in the mid-1980s, representing almost half of the world's estimated population at that time. Aerial surveys since that time, however, indicate a progressive decline in the number of otters in the Aleutians, where the current population is estimated to be less than 9,000 animals. Survey results also show substantial declines have occurred in the Alaska Peninsula, where the counts of sea otters have declined by more than 65 percent since the mid 1980s. In the Kodiak Archipelago, surveys indicate the number of otters has declined more than 55 percent since the late 1980s. Overall, the DPS has declined an estimated 56 to 68 percent over the past 10 to 15 years, and recent surveys (in 2003-2004) indicate the decline is continuing over most of the population's range.

The cause of the population decline is not clear. Production of young does not appear to be reduced, nor is there evidence that starvation, disease, or contaminants are involved. There also is no evidence that entanglement in commercial fishing gear or competition with fishermen for prey species is playing a significant role in the decline, and annual subsistence harvest by Alaska Natives is believed to be too low to contribute significantly to the decline. Some evidence points to predation by orca whales as a possible cause of the decline in the Aleutian Island chain. However, additional research will be needed before the cause of the decline can be confidently identified.

During the 120-day public comment period, Alaska Natives, Organizations, and Tribes expressed concerns that the listing would limit traditional and cultural uses of this sea otter population that are allowed under the exemptions included in the Marine Mammal Protection Act. As noted above, subsistence harvest is not thought to contribute significantly to the decline. Therefore, the Service has proposed the special rule announced above to permit traditional Alaska Native uses of the population to continue.

The Final Rule listing the southwest DPS of the otter as threatened does not include a proposal for designating critical habitat. As explained in the Proposed Rule, critical habitat is not determinable at this time. As part of the request for public comments on the proposal to list the DPS, the Service sought information regarding features and specific areas that the Service should consider for a future critical habitat proposal. If the Service does propose critical habitat for the DPS in the future, the public would have an opportunity to comment on such a proposal.

Now that the Alaska DPS of the sea otter is listed as threatened under the ESA, a recovery plan will be developed that will bring together efforts by Federal, State, Alaska Native groups, local agencies, and private entities for the conservation of the DPS. A copy of the final rule and, other information about this threatened sea otter population, is available at <http://alaska.fws.gov/current.htm>.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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