U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Conserving Sea Otters in Southwest Alaska

Accepting the Challenge

The Story So Far

Sea otters are disappearing from southwest Alaska. These populations were among the first to recover from the disastrous effects of 170 years of fur hunting. Less than 20 years ago, biologists believed that more than 80 percent of the world's sea otters could be found in this area, which ranges from Attu in the western Aleutian Islands to the southwest corner of Cook Inlet. Results of an April 2000 aerial survey of the Aleutians revealed that the population had declined by 70% since 1992; the Service responded by designating sea otters in the Aleutian Islands as a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) later that year. This recognition focused attention on the declining sea otter population and prompted the Service to conduct additional surveys in southwest Alaska. The results of those later surveys indicate that sea otter populations have plummeted throughout most of southwest Alaska during the past 10-15 years (see: *Sea Otter Declines in Southwest Alaska; A Growing Concern, November 2001)*.

Sea Otter Workshop

The Service hosted a sea otter workshop on April 3-4, 2002. Experts from diverse fields participated and shared information, ideas and opinions about the possible cause of the decline and potential threats to recovery of the population. Topics included: sea otter reproduction, survivorship, disease, contaminants, starvation, predation, human harvest, and interactions with commercial fisheries. They also discussed strategies for future surveys to continue monitoring population trends. A summary report from the workshop is currently in preparation, and will be available soon.

The Endangered Species Act

By designating sea otters in the Aleutian Islands as a candidate species under the ESA, the Service affirmed that the species is in trouble and should be considered for listing as a threatened or endangered species. The Service is currently evaluating all available information on the sea otter decline to determine if listing under the ESA is warranted, and anticipates making a proposal in late 2002. This decision will be published in the Federal Register, and there will be a 60-day public comment period for interested parties to provide us with their input.

If the Service decides that sea otters in southwest Alaska should be listed under the ESA, several things would happen. A Recovery Team would be formed to develop a plan that would identify steps to bring the sea otter population back to a healthy level. Additional resources would become available to investigate the decline and monitor the population. Activities that are permitted, funded, or carried out by Federal agencies would be reviewed to insure that they would not jeopardize recovery of the sea otter population. The Service anticipates that the overall impact of these measures on human activities throughout southwest Alaska would be minimal.

The ultimate goal of these actions would be to insure the recovery of sea otters in southwest Alaska. Sea otters are considered a keystone species in the nearshore marine environment; a healthy sea otter population is vital to the health of the ecosystem as a whole.

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