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Sea otter's stay raises scientists' hopes

An extended visit to Cape Arago by one of the furry mammals prompts dreams that many more will follow naturally

Sunday, October 17, 2004

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Nobody's officially given him a name. And no one knows whether he came to Oregon as a tourist or a transplant.

But he was here for at least six months -- and scientists hope the lone sea otter who took up residence at Simpson Reef on Cape Arago is a sign that the species is beginning a natural recolonization of the Oregon coast.

"There were thousands of them here once, and I think we've got room for dozens of them today," said Wendell Wood, Southern Oregon field representative for the Oregon Natural Resources Council. He saw the sea otter in August while he was leading a field trip on the coast.

The last official sighting of the otter came on Labor Day weekend, when the season ended for volunteers who staff the overlook there. A student at the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology in Charleston looked earlier this month but didn't spot the otter. Seas were rough, so that wasn't unusual.

The otter could still be there, said Jan Hodder, the institute mammalogist. It will take multiple failed sightings before reaching the conclusion that the animal has left, she said.

In the past decade, confirmed sightings of sea otters along the Oregon coast have noticeably increased, said Roy Lowe, project leader for the Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge. In addition to several sightings near Simpson Reef, sea otters have been spotted at Cape Blanco, Yachats and Yaquina Bay in recent years.

This particular otter is the only one that has stuck around for a while, as far as anyone knows. The only suitable habitat in Oregon for sea otters is on the south coast, near shore reefs where kelp beds attract their favorite food of sea urchins and abalone.

One theory is that this sea otter might be a pioneer from a rebounding population in Washington, where a recent count put the number at nearly 750, up from 59 relocated there in 1970. It might have come from Destruction Island, the southern edge of Washington's sea otter habitat.

The visiting otter in Oregon could be an "advance wanderer" -- usually a male that takes off on its own, said Brian Hatfield, a biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey's Western Ecological Research Center in San Simeon, Calif.

Typically, the wanderer is seen in an area for a couple of months, then disappears. In this case, Hatfield said, he doesn't know of a wanderer staying in the same spot by itself for so

long.

That gives him hope that other otters might follow and establish a population at Simpson Reef naturally. "If the population in Washington continues to grow, it's just a matter of time," he said.

Sea otters are the smallest marine mammals, growing to 4 feet long and ranging from 45 to 65 pounds. Their fur -- 600,000 to 1 million hairs per square inch -- is the thickest of any animal and was highly prized by fur hunters.

The animal was hunted to extinction in the state in 1906. Naturalists estimate that as many as a million sea otters once inhabited the Pacific Rim from northern Japan to Mexico's Baja California, but the surviving population in the continental United States had fallen to 300 animals at California's Big Sur by 1911, when they were protected from hunting by the International Fur Seal Treaty.

Federal wildlife managers tried to re-establish sea otters on the southern Oregon coast in 1970 and 1971, releasing 53 near Port Orford and 40 near Cape Arago. But all of those animals disappeared by 1981.

Roseburg retiree Dale Paulson was the first to spot the Oregon sea otter on Feb. 28. Paulson has spent a lot of time in the past six years at Simpson Reef, the state's largest gathering place for sea lions and other pinnipeds.

"When you really watch nature a lot, you pick up on what's not quite normal out there. Then you take a second look, and get your binoculars and then say, 'Wow!,' " he said.

"I was just backing out of the parking lot. I looked out, and I saw a circle of sea lions. They had encircled this animal. I noticed that it was floating on its back. I stopped and pulled out my binoculars and could see that it was a sea otter."

Scientists say the loss of sea otters has wreaked havoc on Oregon's coastal waters by allowing the proliferation of sea urchins, which have consumed beds of kelp and other inshore seaweeds that shelter fish and provide food for a host of organisms in the ocean food chain.

"Right now it's as if the sun's energy is falling on a desert out there. Where it's supposed to be coming down on a rainforest and being converted to food for the system, it's falling down on a desert and just heating up the water. The whole system's messed up," said Dave Hatch, a Portland engineer.

In 2000, Hatch co-founded the Elakha Alliance to promote the restoration of sea otters to the Oregon coast, which he said could boost depleted coastal fisheries and spur ecotourism. "Elakha" means "sea otter" in Chinook jargon. The downside of having sea otters re-colonize the Oregon coast would be a reduced harvest of some seafood.

"It's pretty well-documented now that in the presence of established populations, there won't be commercial populations of sea urchins, abalone and some clams," Hatfield said.

Thirty Oregon fishermen currently hold licenses to commercially harvest sea urchins, but the catch has fallen from a high of 9.3 million pounds in 1990 to fewer than 100,000 pounds in recent years, said Matt Hunter, a state biologist. The sole fisherman with a commercial license to harvest abalone takes a maximum of 3,000 pounds a year. Both species are open for recreational fishing.

Many fans of Oregon's lone sea otter are willing to make the trade-off.

"The sea otter is a natural part of this system, and I think most Oregonians would welcome having sea otters back on our coast," Wood said."

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