

SEA OTTER NUMBERS TAKE A TURN FOR THE WORSE

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(08-16) 12:22 PDT SAN FRANCISCO -- The California sea otter - which fought back from near extinction after a century or so of wholesale slaughter - appears to again be hitting the skids, and nobody can figure out the reason.

It is the second consecutive year of decline for the cuddly-looking sea mammals after a decade of small but encouraging increases in their numbers.

The U.S. Geological Survey's study of the state's otters, also known as southern sea otters, counts the whiskered shellfish eaters each year and reports a three-year average to account for variables. This year's figure of 2,711 otters along the California coast represents a 3.6 percent decline compared with the 2009 survey. Even more disturbing is the 11 percent drop in the number of otter pups compared with last year.

"We have seen a decrease in sea otter numbers throughout most of their range, particularly in those areas where most of their reproduction occurs, while pup counts have dropped to 2003 levels," said Tim Tinker, the lead scientist for the Geological Survey's western ecological research center. "A number of human and natural factors may be influencing this trend, and we are working to better understand what those are."

The southern sea otter, or *Enhydra lutris nereis*, once frolicked from Alaska's Prince William Sound to Baja California. The coast-loving creatures, which can weigh up to 100 pounds, are the heaviest members of the weasel family. Oceangoing otters - including the southern, northern and Asian varieties - are unique among marine mammals in that they use tools to break open shellfish and sea urchins.

Otters worldwide once numbered close to a million, with as many as 17,000 populating the California coast at the time of the Declaration of Independence. It was their soft, thick fur that nearly did them in. Starting in the late 1700s, fur hunters killed them by the thousands for their luxurious pelts. By the beginning of the Gold Rush, sea otter skins were more valuable than gold.

Once thought to be extinct

Otters were thought to be extinct in California by 1938, when a small population of about 50 was discovered near Big Sur. The smallest marine mammals in U.S. waters, they have been listed since 1977 as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The Geological Survey count is done every year in early autumn and late spring along 375 miles of coastal waters from Half Moon Bay to Santa Barbara. The number of otters has been calculated every year since 1985 in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Monterey Bay Aquarium. Scientists prefer to use data from three consecutive years in order to correct for yearly climatic variables, unusual conditions or one-time occurrences.

The 2009 average was 2,813, down 0.46 percent compared with the previous three years. It was the first decline of a three-year average since the mid-1990s, researchers said.

Besides another decline, this year's study found that the geographic distribution of the furry critters had shrunk. There were fewer otters at the northern and southern ends of their range, which is from Pigeon Point to Gaviota State Park, researchers said.

What's clear, Tinker said, is that large numbers of sea otters are dying.

"Our data suggest that breeding-age females are dying in higher-than-usual numbers from multiple causes, including infectious disease, toxin-exposure, heart failure, malnutrition and shark attacks," Tinker said.

Male otters also appear to be gathering in places far from their normal range, apparently in search of food, scientists said. Sea otters' tendency to hunt near the shore also means they come in contact with pollution and may sometimes ingest contaminated prey.

Heavy storms and a reduction in kelp over the past winter might have something to do with the pup mortality, researchers said, but nobody really knows for sure.

Tinker is leading a team of scientists who are trying to come up with definitive answers by comparing the health and habitat of the various sea otter populations.

Funding dwindles

One problem, though, is that California may soon lose a major source of money for sea otter research. Taxpayers now have the option of donating to the California Sea Otter Fund when they file with the Franchise Tax Board, but the check-off on the form will be eliminated after the end of the year unless \$258,563 is donated by taxpayers or good Samaritans. As of June, the fund was \$31,000 short and most people have long since filed their taxes.

"Here we have a population that is declining, and the program that can help solve the problem is in jeopardy of disappearing," said Jim Curland, a sea otter specialist for Defenders of Wildlife.

"In order to save California sea otters, we have to find out why they are dying, and researchers can't find that out if their only funding source is gone," he said. "This species is an emblem for California. It is the canary in the coal mine for the marine ecosystem. ... We certainly don't want to lose them on our watch."

California otters have voracious appetites and are sometimes shot by fishermen and urchin harvesters who consider them pests, but researchers do not think there are enough of those killings to impact the overall population.

Sea otters cannot be removed from the threatened species list unless their population climbs above 3,090 for three consecutive years, according to the Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan written by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.