

## Sea Otters



The Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*) is the smallest marine mammal, and quite arguably the cutest, with its gentle expression and playful nature endearing it to many. With up to one million hairs per square inch of skin, this species has the densest fur of any mammal. Unfortunately, this made it a major target of the fur trade in the 1800s and, as a result, the Sea Otter was hunted to near extinction. Sea Otter populations have since somewhat recovered but the species is still classified as Endangered on The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ and faces threats including oil spills and other forms of pollution.

**Family:** The Sea Otter is the largest member of the weasel family (the Mustelidae).

**Size and lifespan:**

- Baby Sea Otters, known as pups, are only 10 inches long when they are born.
- Adult males can grow up to five feet in length and weigh up to 90 pounds in Alaska and occasionally reach 80 pounds in California. Females are generally smaller.
- The average lifespan of this species is 10 to 12 years but Sea Otters have been known to live up to 25 years.

**Geographical range:**

Canada; Japan; Mexico; Russian Federation; United States.

**Habitat and Diet:**

Sea Otters live in coastal areas with shallow water. They find their food on the ocean floor, and carry out all other activities, such as eating and grooming, at the surface. Sea Otters are known to consume over 100 different prey species, including sea urchins, clams, mussels and crabs. They eat between 25% and 40% of their body weight daily to help keep them warm, and usually feed in the morning and afternoon.

**Did You Know?**

Sea Otters have learned to use tools to help them eat. The diet of these marine mammals consists of shellfish which are rather hardy creatures, and so Sea Otters have learned to use rocks to bash open the shells to reach the juicy dinner inside. Sea Otters can often be seen floating on their backs with a rock on their stomach, bashing a clam or mussel against the rock.

**Behaviour:**

Sea Otters are very social animals, and float in single-sex groups known as 'rafts', which can be formed of anywhere between 10 and 100 individuals. When resting or feeding, Sea Otters often wrap themselves in kelp to stop themselves floating away with the current, and are frequently observed holding hands with other individuals in the raft to avoid separation.



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**Importance of Sea Otters:**

Sea otters are key players in the health of the kelp forests they inhabit. They prey on animals that graze on kelp stalks, such as sea urchins, and so prevent them from becoming so

abundant that they completely destroy the habitat. As a result of having such a huge effect on their coastal marine ecosystem, despite not being numerous, Sea Otters are called 'keystone species'.

#### Did You Know?

Sea Otters do not have a layer of blubber like other marine mammals, and they rely solely on their fur to keep warm. If caught in an oil spill, a Sea Otter will have great difficulty keeping warm in the cool ocean, as the oil causes its fur to lose its insulative properties.

#### Threats:

Sea Otters face several threats, though thankfully overhunting for the fur trade is no longer one of them. Pollution is a major contributor to Sea Otter deaths, with oil spills affecting their ability to insulate themselves, and run-off from the land that contains chemicals and disease-causing organisms. These pollutants are washed into the sea and absorbed by shellfish and other prey of Sea Otters. By eating lots of these contaminated shellfish, Sea Otters become infected or intoxicated, which often leads to illness and eventually death.

#### But there is hope...

The IUCN SSC Otter Specialist Group together with other organizations they are working hard to save the beautiful Sea Otter and its coastal habitat.



For more details on the Sea Otter and to search for information about more than 59,000 other species, please visit [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org).

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