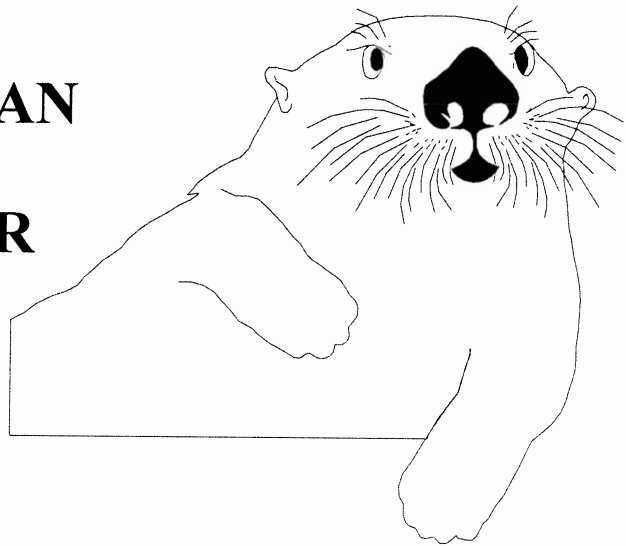


**CONSERVATION PLAN
FOR THE SEA OTTER
IN ALASKA**



June 1994

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Marine Mammals Management
Anchorage, Alaska**



PREFACE

This conservation plan for sea otters in Alaska has been approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It will be used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the ongoing management and conservation of sea otters. It was prepared by staff of the Marine Mammals Management office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with the assistance of the Marine Mammal Commission and the Sea Otter Management Plan Advisory Team. While many of the contributions and recommendations made by participating individuals and organizations have been incorporated into this plan, it does not necessarily represent the views of these individuals and organizations. Parts of this conservation plan solely represent the views of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

This plan will be reviewed annually and revised at least every three to five years. It will be modified subject to new findings, changes in species status, completion of tasks, legal interpretations, policy changes or Congressional direction. Completion of most tasks is dependent on obtaining new funds.

Literature Citation should read as follows:

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1993. Conservation Plan for the Sea Otter in Alaska. Marine Mammals Management, USFWS, Anchorage, AK. 47pp.

Approved: _____ Date: _____
Regional Director

I. INTRODUCTION

Sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*) are conspicuous members of ice-free but cold temperate and sub-arctic nearshore ecosystems of the North Pacific. The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972, as amended, transferred management authority for sea otters in Alaska from the State to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Since passage of the MMPA, the FWS's management approach has been conservative, allowing populations of sea otters to increase in number and re-occupy most of their historic range. In some regions, populations of sea otters have reached equilibrium densities.

The return of sea otters from near extinction, and the re-occupation of most of their historic range is one of the great wildlife conservation stories of the century. However, the species' recovery has not come without controversy. The conflict between sea otters and humans over shellfish resources is probably the most serious problem that has arisen. With healthy populations of sea otters firmly established in most of their historic range in coastal Alaska, now is an appropriate juncture to examine existing and potential management problems and resource conflicts, and consider potential solutions to those management problems and conflicts.

Preparation of this plan follows a recommendation from Congress in a report accompanying the 1988 amendments to the MMPA which calls upon the Secretary of the Interior to consider whether non-depleted species of marine mammals would benefit from preparation of conservation plans, as well as a 1989 recommendation from the Marine Mammal Commission that the FWS prepare a conservation plan for sea otters in Alaska. This plan is a vehicle for guiding ongoing conservation and management activities for sea otters in Alaska.

This plan was developed with the assistance and input of many individuals and groups. The planning process was initiated in 1991 with the establishment of a Planning Advisory Team. Members of the planning team included representatives from most organizations with a major interest in sea otters, including: Alaska Natives, conservationists, environmentalists, sport hunters, commercial fishermen, scientists, oil and gas industry, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), Minerals Management Service (MMS), and the Marine Mammal Commission (MMC). A Draft Management Plan was completed after input and review by the MMC, Alaska Native representatives and other members of the Planning Team and released for public comment on January 15, 1993, following a Federal Register Notice. The Draft Management Plan also incorporated proposed legislative amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The public comment period on the draft sea otter management plan began on January 15, 1993, and ended on February 28, 1993. Comments continued to be received and evaluated until mid-March. Public meetings during the comment period were held in Anchorage, Cordova, Homer, Hoonah, Kodiak, Larsen Bay, Nanwalek, Seward, and Valdez. Public meetings also were held prior to the formal comment period in various Southeast Alaska towns and villages, including: Angoon, Hoonah, Hydaburg, Juneau, Kake, Ketchikan, Sitka, and Yakutat. A draft final plan was published in April 1993. Additional comments were received on that plan and have been considered in the preparation of this document.

During the comment period or after the comment period had closed, 195 written comments were received. These comments were from a variety of sources, including: five organizations representing Alaska Natives, four Federal or State government offices, two tourism/marine recreation organizations, four conservation/environmental organizations, and numerous individuals. Seventy-six of the responses were the tear-off portions of the Executive Summary. Ninety-one of the responses were duplicated letters originally signed by citizens of Kodiak Island.

In addition to comments on the plan, three resolutions from Alaska Native organizations were received. With the exceptions of written responses from three conservation organizations and three individuals, all written responses were from Alaska. Appendix B contains a summary of the public comments.

The Sea Otter Conservation Plan is divided into two parts: 1) a conservation plan, prepared with the assistance of the Marine Mammal Commission; and 2) an implementation plan which details how the FWS will implement the conservation plan. This plan is not intended as a primary reference on sea otter natural history and ecology. For more information on these subjects, readers are referred to other sources, including: Kenyon (1969), Estes (1980), VanBlaricom and Estes (1988), Rotterman and Simon-Jackson (1988), Garshelis (1990) and Riedman and Estes (1990).

II. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE CONSERVATION PLAN

In order to fulfill the requirements of the MMPA and continue to ensure the conservation of sea otters in Alaska, several specific goals and objectives were identified to guide the development and implementation of this plan. Additionally, the April 30, 1994 amendments to the MMPA allow for co-management of subsistence use by Alaska Natives and the FWS which will require participation by both organizations to implement the goals and objectives of this plan. Section V. of this document provides additional detail on each of the objectives presented here.

Goal A. Maintain the Alaska sea otter population within its optimum sustainable population range

In the MMPA, Congress found that marine mammal species and population stocks should not be permitted to diminish beyond the point at which they cease to be a significant functioning element in the ecosystem of which they are a part, and should not be permitted to diminish below their optimum sustainable population (OSP) level. The term OSP is defined in the MMPA as "...the number of animals which will result in the maximum productivity of the population or the species, keeping in mind the carrying capacity of the habitat and the health of the ecosystem of which they form a constituent element." This statutory definition has been interpreted by both the FWS and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for application in the management context as follows: "Optimum sustainable population is a population size which falls within a range from the population level of a given species or stock which is the largest supportable within the ecosystem to the population level that results in maximum net productivity. Maximum net productivity is the