



Fish Factor

Danger posed to fisheries in Southeast by sea otters

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Several things pose dangers to various fisheries in Alaska, but there is one big threat in the Panhandle that is seldom mentioned: sea otters.

Sea otters in Southeast Alaska were hunted almost to extinction by Russian fur traders in the 18th and 19th centuries, and estimates peg the population at just 2,000 in 1911. Sea otters were re-introduced to the region by ADF&G in the 1960s; within a decade their numbers reached 160,000 animals, and otter counts have grown exponentially ever since.

Sea otters can grow larger than four feet and weigh up to 90 pounds. They are voracious feeders and eat 25% of their body weight each day. Sea otters are blamed in part for the collapse of the lucrative abalone fishery, which ended in 1995.

"It is clear that abalone cannot co-exist in commercial quantities with sea otters," said a 1999 fishery report to the state Board of Fisheries.

Now, their appetites are starting to take a bite out of other commercially important species.

"We've closed many fisheries now - sea cucumbers, urchins, and just this last year we closed the first geoduck fishery due to presumed sea otter predation," said Zac Hoyt, a diver and research biologist at ADF&G in Petersburg.

"When you're under water in a geoduck bed, it's pretty amazing how efficient otters are at getting these big clams that burrow two or three feet under the substrate," he added. "It's literally like a back hoe has been on the bottom in those sandy areas."

No one knows how many sea otters have set up housekeeping in Southeast or

how much shellfish they're feasting upon. Hoyt and Sunny Rice, the local Sea Grant marine advisor, aim to start finding out.

"The first step of our proposed project is to get an estimate of how many otters are in southern Southeast before we can move forward with anything else," Rice said, adding that concerns by fishermen and subsistence users prompted the study.

More fishermen, especially Dungeness crabbers, are telling her they are being forced out of traditional areas by sea otters, Rice said. Should they be holding on to their dungie permits?

"The reason we're tackling this whole thing is due to a lack of scientific information," Rice said. "It would be nice to verify what we're hearing from commercial fishermen - they'll go into a bay and see evidence of otter predation all along the shore, and at the same time, they're not catching any crab in their pots."

"We want to try and estimate the take of four commercially important species by sea otters - Dungeness crab, geoduck clams, urchins and sea cucumbers," Hoyt added.

The project also aims to learn how far the otters are foraging.

"Is there some reason why they haven't come all the way into the far inside waters of Southeast Alaska, or have they just not gotten here yet? That's an important question for fishing fleets," Rice said. How fishermen and otters might co-exist remains a big question. Complicating the problem -- sea otters are listed as a protected species by the federal government and cannot be harassed in any way. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will collaborate with the two year project.