



SOUTHEAST SEA OTTER  
STAKEHOLDER MEETING

## November 6 Meeting Summary: Southeast Sea Otter Stakeholder Meeting

Juneau, Alaska

### Background and Ecological Perspectives

Historically, northern sea otters populated Alaska's entire North Pacific coastline. Intensive commercial hunting led to the extirpation of northern sea otters from Southeast Alaska by the early 1900s. Several hundred sea otters collected from remnant populations in the Aleutian Islands and Prince William Sound were reintroduced to Southeast Alaska in the 1960s. Since that time, the Southeast stock of northern sea otters has expanded in range and numbers with the most recent estimate (2012) indicating that the population had grown to just over 25,000 animals. Status and trends are variable throughout Southeast Alaska: sub-populations in long-occupied areas have stabilized as they reach the local carrying capacity, while sub-populations in newly occupied areas are still increasing rapidly.

Sea otters strongly influence the ecosystems they inhabit. Areas where sea otters have fully recovered tend to have more abundant and

stable kelp forests, which benefit finfish and many other species that rely on kelp habitat, and sea otter recovery can also lead to healthier seagrass beds, which provide important nursery habitat for many species. At the same time, some of the shellfish consumed by sea otters—including urchins, clams, crabs, abalone and sea cucumbers—become less abundant.

### Competing Stakeholder Concerns

The growing sea otter population in Southeast Alaska offers direct competition to both subsistence, sport and commercial shellfish harvesters. Commercial dive fisheries for red sea urchins, sea cucumbers and geoduck clams have been impacted by declining biomass of commercial species. The recovery of sea otters in Southeast Alaska has led to the revival of sea otter skin sewing traditions and the sale of clothing and handicrafts made from sea otter pelts. Sea otters have also become a favorite tourist viewing experience in localized areas.

## **Current Management Structure and Practices**

Sea otters are a trust resource of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Management authority and structure is provided by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA). The MMPA established a general moratorium—with few exceptions—on the “taking” of all marine mammals in U.S. waters, thus limiting options for managing sea otter numbers in ways that account for their impacts on commercial fisheries and other species. The MMPA does provide for Alaska Natives to harvest sea otters for the purpose of subsistence and the manufacture of traditional native handicrafts. In addition to the formal management structure, some small-scale informal management has occurred where Alaska tribes have focused harvest efforts and thus reduced sea otter abundance in locally important shellfish areas near their communities.

## **November 2019: Southeast Sea Otter Stakeholder Workshop**

Sea otter population growth is a subject of interest to a variety of stakeholders in Southeast Alaska. The identification of areas of conflict over sea otter management makes clear that a careful and inclusive dialogue is necessary to find solutions. Solutions to identified problems will likely revolve around finding acceptable compromises that lead to mutually agreeable management plans and practices. To these ends, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service worked with a steering committee consisting of federal and state managers, sea otter

researchers, commercial fisheries and tribal representatives to frame and organize a stakeholder workshop.

The purpose of the workshop was to create a forum for stakeholders to review and discuss information about sea otter biology and management issues and to share recommendations to address resource conflict issues. Participants were presented information concerning the biology and ecology of sea otters; the status and trend of sea otters in Southeast Alaska; subsistence use of sea otters by Alaska Natives; and the status of impacted subsistence and commercial shellfish (available @ <https://www.seaotterstakeholders.com>). Meeting participants participated in several breakout sessions on a number of subjects including management options under the MMPA; the respective roles of federal and state managers; co-management options for the subsistence use of sea otters; and the identification of information and research needs to inform management decisions. Notes from the breakout session discussions, including recommendations, were taken and presented to all participants at the workshop.

## **Next Steps**

Based on recommendations generated at the stakeholder workshop, the steering committee will draft a report that identifies potential management and collaborative actions that could be taken in the future. We expect the report to be available to the public in early 2020.