

1751

Sea otters discovered by Bering during his famous expedition. Population around 300,000 individuals.

1911

North American Fur Seal Treaty offers first legal protection for sea otters. Post fur trade population numbers under 2,000 individuals.

2012

Active Sea Otter management for almost a century. Population numbers around 125,000 individuals.



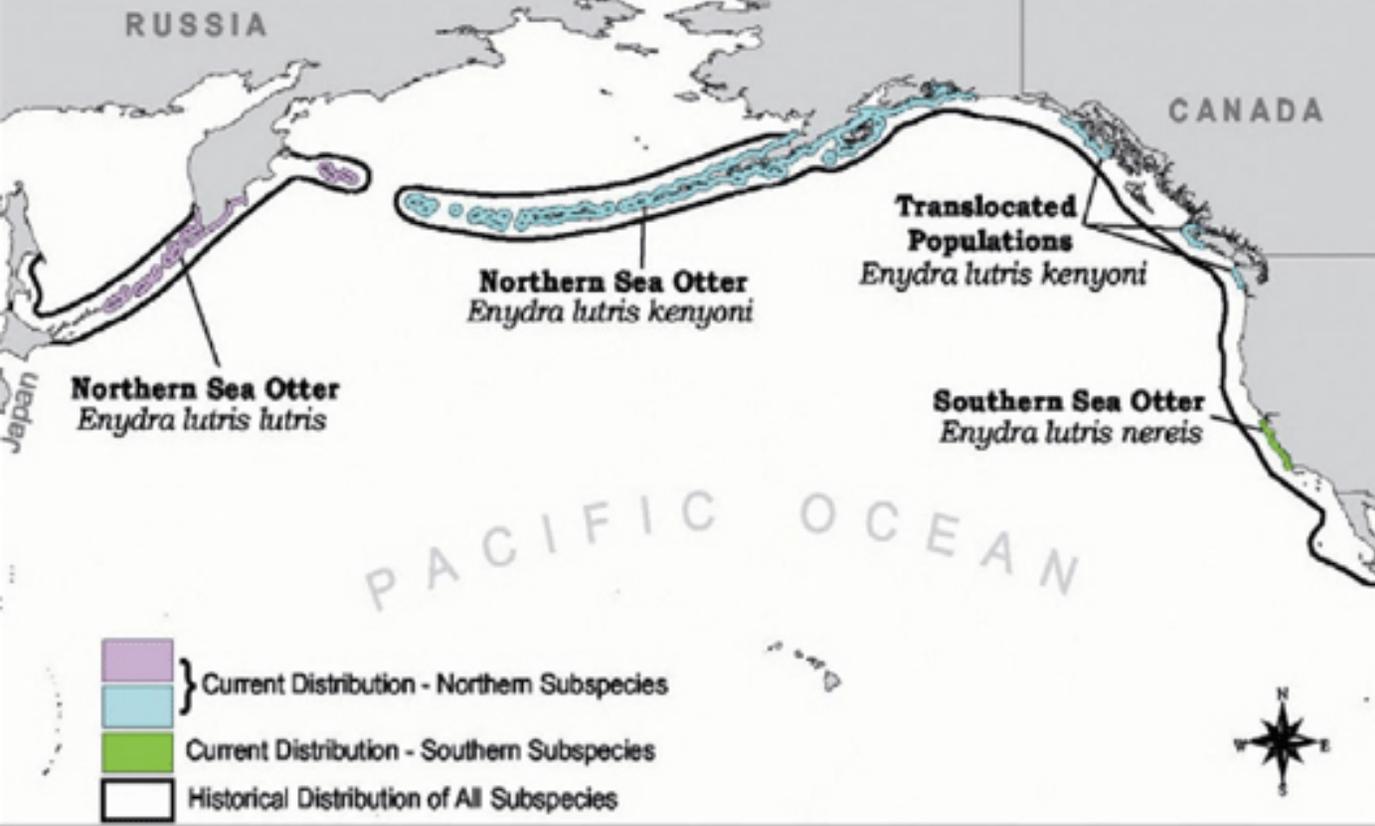
Female sea otters invest a lot of energy into their young. They even carry their young on their bellies while resting, until they are old enough to be on their own.



Northern sea otters often have lighter fur than their southern counterpart. This is because white fur should lose heat less quickly, keeping them warmer in their colder climate.

TAKING BACK THEIR RANGE

HOW THE FUR TRADE,
OIL SPILLS, AND
CONSERVATION
EFFORTS HAVE
ALTERED SEA OTTER
POPULATIONS



FACTORS AFFECTING RECOVERY

OIL SPILLS

One major factor which has challenged Sea Otter recovery is the effects of large oil spills at sea. When exposed to oil, sea otter fur loses much of its insulating properties, which often results in hypothermia. There are however, numerous other negative results of this exposure. One of the largest oil spills on record, the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989 killed about 5,000 individuals in the Alaskan population.

SLOW REPRODUCTION

Female sea otters do not reach sexual maturity until four to five years of age. Once they are mature, sea otters breed only once every one or two years, producing only one to two offspring each time. This results in a relatively slow reproductive rate even in the presence of favorable conditions.

CONSERVATION

Through active management, research, and conservation efforts the sea otter population had risen to around 125,000 individuals by 2012. However, this species is still in need of much attention. According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the population is once again in decline.

THE FUR TRADE

Sea otter fur is the densest of all mammals, with about 100,000 hairs per square centimeter. They rely on the density of their fur to insulate them from the harsh ocean temperatures in which they live, as well as to provide buoyancy. Unfortunately, the insulating properties of its fur also made it a very popular material for coats and other outer layers of clothing. As such extensive fur trapping in the 18th and 19th centuries led to their rapid decline.

THE RESULT

From the time they were discovered to the enactment of the North American Fur Seal Treaty of 1911, the sea otter population was reduced from around 300,000 individuals to less than 2,000. They were expelled from much of their historic range and the remaining individuals were disconnected, existing in isolated communities.