



ON A CALM overcast day in May, four biologists sat on a rock in Southeastern Alaska with spotting scopes and binoculars. Before them more than 100 sea otters rested quietly in a dense "pod." Nearby were several other pods of 20 to 40 sea otters and a number of scattered individuals. Many carried recently born pups on their chests.

Concentrations of sea otters like this were probably common along rocky areas of the outside coast of Southeastern Alaska in the early 1800s. However, an era of intensive exploitation of sea otters followed, and by 1900 the Southeastern Alaska population had been wiped out. With the possible exception of rare strays from Prince William Sound, no sea otters inhabited the area until 1965 when the Alaska Department of Fish and Game began a transplant program to reestablish populations in Southeastern Alaska, the Pribilof Islands,

southeastern transplant success

Yakutat, British Columbia, Washington and Oregon.

The department released a total of 403 otters at six sites throughout the panhandle between 1965 and 1969. Many remained at the release sites but others scattered along the coast. Some may have died or left the area by migrating north toward Yakutat or south to Canada. Eventually most of the remaining sea otters concentrated in small areas of exceptional habitat.

Until 1971, Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologists conducted annual surveys of prime areas to determine the success of the transplants. These surveys showed that at least two groups of. sea otters had become well established near Chichagof Island and were growing steadily. The total number seen was always less than the number released in the area, however. No surveys were conducted south of Sitka Sound but reports

there.

Passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 caused the state to reduce its marine mammal program and the surveys were suspended. Reports from the public became the only source of new information. These reports indicated that sea otter numbers continued to increase and that concentrations had formed in areas that had never been surveyed.

They located a minimum of 477 sea otters in six separate areas. The actual number of sea otters inhabiting those areas may total between 600 and 800. Most important, several groups had more than doubled



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from the public indicated that at least a few small groups occurred

In May 1975, almost 10 years after the first transplant, Alaska Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists combined resources to conduct a complete survey.

since 1971. Obviously the transplants have been a success.

Sea otters are still far from abundant in Southeastern Alaska, even though very high densities occur in several areas. Each group of otters occupies only a few square miles of habitat, and only occasional individuals are seen away from these areas. The concentrations are usually found in areas that are hazardous to boats, and many people who regularly travel the coast have never seen them. However, if the current rate of reproduction continues, each group will expand its range and sea otters will become a familiar sight. Eventually we can expect to see large numbers along the outside coast from Sitka to Cape Spencer and around some of the island groups west of Prince of Wales Island. Dense populations will probably never develop in the inside waters but occasional wanderers are reported there today and their numbers will probably increase.

The best places to look for sea otters are shallow areas with many offshore rocks, small islands and kelp beds. Sea otters look much like their close cousin, the river otter, which is also common in the area, but they are larger, have a shorter, narrower tail and are very clumsy on land. They usually can be recognized by their habit of floating on their backs.

Public sightings have been of great value to the department. Often we have found that fishermen and pilots have known of groups of sea otters long before biologists located them on surveys. Anyone sighting sea otters is asked to report them to any Alaska Department of Fish and Game office.



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