

2013 Sea Otter Report

Rachael Rooney

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Intern/Volunteer

Sea Otter Responder

Homer, Alaska

Sea Otter Responses: 97

Volunteers Hours: 308.25

SEA OTTER NUMBERS

Total number of live otters = **21**

Total number of dead otters = **76**

Total number of otters = **97**

MALES

- Adults – **29** (5 live; 24 dead)
- Subadults – **4** (1 live; 3 dead)
- Pups – **13** (0 live; 13 dead)
- Unknown – **2** (0 live; 2 dead)

FEMALES

- Adults – **5** (0 live; 5 dead)
- Subadults – **1** (0 live; 1 dead)
- Pups – **11** (2 live; 9 dead)
- Unknown – **0** (0 live; 0 dead)

UNKNOWN

(Otters lost to the tide, live otters that could not be examined, or otters scavenged or skeletal that were missing the pelvis region.)

- Adults – **17** (10 live; 7 dead)
- Subadults – **4** (2 live; 2 dead)
- Pups – **8** (0 live; 8 dead)
- Unknown – **3** (1 live; 2 dead)

VOLUNTEER HOURS

Total Response Hours = **158.5**

Total Report Hours = **51**

Total Necropsy Hours = **26**

Total Sea Otter Carcass Shipment Hours = **18**

Total Survey Hours & Mileage = **54.75** (hrs.) & **86.15** (mi.) at a 1.57 mph walking speed.

VOLUNTEER RESPONSIBILITIES

- Responded to all live and dead sea otters in the Kachemak Bay area.
- Recorded all sea otter strandings in Level A forms for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) database.
- Surveyed seven beaches in the Homer area for dead, sick, injured, or abandoned otters.
- Coordinated dead otter pick-ups and drop-offs through car, plane, and water taxi services when necessary.
- Shipped freshly dead otters to USFWS Regional Office in Anchorage, Alaska through Era Aviation Cargo.
- Coordinated and shipped two freezers worth of sea otter carcasses that went directly to USFWS in Anchorage.
- Contacted initial observers primarily via phone calls to collect information on stranded sea otters.
- Conducted sea otter outreach during stranding events and beach surveys.
- Assisted with eight sea otter necropsies at the USFWS in Anchorage.
- Performed three limited field necropsies and collected data from advanced decomposition, and skeletal/mummified decomposition otters in Homer, Alaska.
- Trained and helped the fall 2013 USFWS Sea Otter Intern.



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Dylan Peterson

2013 LIVE SEA OTTER CASES

In 2013, two live sea otters I responded to stood out among the 21 live otter cases. The first case involved an adult sea otter with an unknown health condition and unusual haul out times. Barnacle Girl was the second case, a pup found struggling to obtain food after she had been abandoned or separated from her mother at an age too young to survive on her own.

Land's End Otter (LEO)

Response Hours: 20

Report Hours: 2

The Land's End Otter was an older adult male, approximately 8-10 years old with grizzle to his upper chest and a distinctive nose scar. This sea otter was first reported as injured and bloated on 20July13 at Land's End Resort in Homer, Alaska. I first observed



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this otter in the water as he obsessively licked his right hind flipper, while keeping it out of the water. Anxiously, he hauled out right in front of the public before he reentered the water after a couple of hours. No action was taken to capture him as instructed by the Alaska SeaLife Center because LEO displayed normal otter behavior in the water – grooming, diving, and foraging. To alleviate some of the concern about LEO and give him time to heal on his own, I made flyers for Land’s End staff to hang up around the hotel to provide public awareness (Figure 1). LEO continued to haul out between the months of July to September, usually every couple of weeks for a few days at a time, and consistently hauled out around 10:30 pm on several occasions. He was always reported as a bloated otter dragging his right hind flipper. As September approached, he began to haul out in front of people more, often in the mornings and afternoons, for longer periods of time. I spent hours observing and redirecting people around LEO due to the high human foot traffic at Land’s End. Eventually, LEO’s condition slowly deteriorated at the end of August, as he showed weight loss and lethargy. Unfortunately, LEO was last seen alive on 04September13 and has not been reported since that day. LEO was an unusual case due to his unknown health condition, extensive haul out periods, and choice of haul out location. The decision to capture LEO for rehabilitation to the Alaska SeaLife Center was a difficult one. Sea otters are prone to stress and transport would risk his life, or his condition would likely lead to euthanasia soon after his arrival in Seward. On the other hand, letting him heal naturally would prevent stress and human exposure, but there was also the risk of prolonged suffering. It is possible LEO found another location to haul out, but it is more likely he succumbed to his health condition, or was hunted by Alaskan Natives for subsistence purposes.

Barnacle Girl

Response Hours: 6

Report: 0.5

Now renamed Aurora by Alaska SeaLife Center Staff, “Barnacle Girl” was a 3-4 month old female sea otter pup found near the low tide line on Bishop’s Beach in Homer, Alaska. When I first saw the pup, she was grooming and foraging on a small blue mussel shell that she could not open. Once she gave up trying to chew through the mussel shell, the pup transitioned to eating barnacles attached to nearby rocks. She rolled around and eventually swam in the shallow water



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near the shoreline, but she could barely keep up with the rougher, deeper waves. Vanessa Puterbaugh, a Marine Mammal Stranding Network volunteer, helped me capture the pup after we received permission from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Alaska SeaLife Center. Vanessa was able to throw a net over the pup that allowed her to smoothly bring the pup to shore through shallow water, where I then picked the pup up with gauntlets and put her in a small kennel. The pup was transferred to the local Homer Veterinary Clinic for a quick examination, by Dr. Jennifer Bando, to ensure her stability for a car trip to Seward. Soon after, the pup was handed off to the SeaLife Center in Soldotna, Alaska. The pup has since been successfully rehabilitated, but deemed un-releasable because she was too young and did not have the skills to survive in the wild. Currently, Aurora is at the Alaska SeaLife Center pending to be placed in an aquarium with other sea otters.

OUTREACH



I spent more time with outreach on sunny days, or when the otter (dead or live) was in a high human traffic area (e.g. Bishop's Beach, Mariner Park, and Land's End).

However, I was typically in locations where few people walked by at a time, or the initial callers had left. Most people wanted to know what I was doing, and wanted to watch the otter carcass collection process. The

information I gave out depended on the situation at hand

– some people were interested in learning about sea otter health and disease, while others wanted to know about general sea otter biology. Everyone I spoke with was always grateful for the information. In strandings with live otters, I spoke about the situation, often relaying what the SeaLife Center told me to groups of two to 20 at a time. Most people were relieved to hear that the Alaska SeaLife Center and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service were aware of the stranded otter, and ready to help it if necessary. During sea otter stranding events, I put up several Alaska SeaLife Center signs, cinder blocks to hold the signs, and rope to cordon off crowds. I also gave out the pamphlet "What Boaters Otter Know," and cards with the Alaska SeaLife Center 24/7 Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline (1-888-774-7325) whenever possible, especially during beach surveys.



OBSTACLES & IMPROVEMENTS

Overall, I had very few problems with the public or when handling live or dead otters. However, I did find a few obstacles that could be improved upon for future volunteers.

- 1.) I had miscommunication with the SeaLife Center staff during several responses that caused confusion between us, and sometimes Marine Mammal Stranding Network volunteers when they were involved. It would help in the future if the person on-call at the SeaLife Center would call or text all Stranding Network volunteers, and myself, to tell everyone who is responding. When I was unavailable I sometimes did not know who, if anyone, responded and this is a concern for fresh dead otters where data is easily lost and live otters that need immediate attention.
- 2.) In several cases, I had an individual worried about the tide washing away a carcass, so they would often move it, even without USFWS or the SeaLife Center's permission. I have since begun emphasizing to the public about not picking up sea otters without permission because a certain protocol must be followed to prevent compromising data and safety.
- 3.) It seems the Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline is not as obvious or is not posted in enough areas. People were either unsure who to call about a dead sea otter, or others mentioned they had found a dead otter, but forgot to report it. I have since worked with the SeaLife Center to make metal signs with the Stranding Hotline as permanent fixtures at the entrances of beaches, but the city of Homer has yet to agree to put the signs up. The signs would be extremely beneficial to Homer as a coastal community, and its residents who are often in close proximity with marine mammals. Additionally, in the future it may be beneficial to upgrade the signs used for stranding events. The signs used now are very flimsy – a plastic sign attached to a driveway marker with duct tape, and placed in a cement block. The signs do not hold up in Alaska weather, and are easily stolen (this happened three times during the summer) when they are left outside.
- 4.) I had a few people ask about keeping the carcass of a sea otter, and explained to them why they could not. However, keeping the pelt or any part of the otter seems to get heated. In the near future, it may be beneficial to make the possession laws of sea otter carcasses and pelts more accessible to the public (in the form of a permanent sign, flyer, or pamphlet), with a number for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Law Enforcement. I personally never had a problem with anyone, but it would be good to have future volunteers prepared for overly persistent individuals.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INTERNS/VOLUNTEERS

Finally, I have a few suggestions for future volunteers that would improve their response protocols and data collection methods.

- 1.) I insist that volunteers be diligent about turning in Level A reports. Data will get lost or misconstrued if the reports are put off more than two days. I also suggest that volunteers keep all reports in digital and paper format for reference purposes.
- 2.) Volunteers need to remember to keep track of their response, report, and survey hours and mileage, for the annual report. Carrying a waterproof field notebook is very useful for this purpose, and making additional notes or sketches.
- 3.) I would encourage volunteers to always wear a uniform with the USFWS logo when responding, as it provides visual authority to the public. A Refuge truck is extremely useful in that respect, as well as for hauling otter carcasses. Always bring the sled for carcass transport and extra supplies (e.g. body bags, gloves, water, and food), especially on long surveys such as Diamond Creek and Anchor Point. Furthermore, volunteers need to tell someone where they are because many beaches do not have phone service.
- 4.) Volunteers need to restock their supplies when returning to the warehouse. Equipment vital to the Sea Otter Responder includes zip ties, tags, four to six body bags, gloves, pens/pencils, field notebook, camera and charged batteries, GPS, first aid kit, and disposable hand-wipes.
- 5.) A new volunteer should update/confirm their name and number with the Alaska SeaLife Center, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, and Islands & Ocean to make sure everyone has the correct contact information.
- 6.) Sea otter calls need to be followed up immediately, or soon after, they are received to gather the initial observer's information regarding the location, otter's external condition, sex (if possible), and approximate size and age while it is fresh in their mind. It is also very important to tell anyone who is assisting with the pick-up of a dead otter to wear personal protective equipment (e.g. disposable gloves), to put the otter in a bag or container, and to keep the dead otter away from children and pets.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- A special thanks to Deborah Boege-Tobin and Marc Webber for their advice, encouragement, assistance, and friendship.
- I will always be thankful to the Alaska SeaLife Center Staff who rehabilitate our marine mammals so they can have another chance at life.
- I thank our Homer Marine Mammal Stranding Network Volunteers that kept me company on several strandings, in addition to having my back when I could not make an immediate response.
- I am very grateful for the Homer Veterinary Clinic Staff who have given their time and care to stabilize sea otters (and seals) for long road trips.
- I give a big thank you to Mako's Water Taxi, Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies/Peterson Bay Laboratory, the Harbor Master, and Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for reporting, retrieving, and transporting sea otter carcasses on several occasions.



ATTENTION

An adult male Northern Sea Otter has been hauling out near Land's End Resort and condos.

As long as this sea otter continues to spend most of his time in the water while displaying important survival skills (grooming, foraging, and diving), capture or relocation will cause unnecessary stress and mostly likely death.

Do Not Touch or Approach this Otter!

Currently, the sea otter is being observed by the Alaska SeaLife Center's Marine Mammal Stranding Network and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Please remember this is a wild animal with teeth. Sea otters carry diseases that can be passed onto domestic animals and humans.

Keep your pets restrained when the otter is hauled out.

Pictures and videos are fine at a 100 foot distance.

The **Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972** makes it illegal to touch marine mammals without authorization. Additionally, harassing a sea otter is a violation against the Marine Mammal Protection Act and you can be ticketed for harassment.

If you see a stranded marine mammal or anyone violating the Marine Mammal Protection Act, please report it to the **24-hour Alaska SeaLife Center Hotline at 1-888-774-SEAL (7325)**.

Figure 1: A flyer I created for the Land's End Otter as public awareness. The flyer was posted at Land's End Resort to keep people from approaching this sea otter when he was hauled out on the beach. The Alaska SeaLife Center Hotline was included to encourage the public to report all marine mammal strandings events, and Marine Mammal Protection Act violations.