

GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

Southern Sea Otter

Enhydra lutris

Range/Habitat

- The sea otter is found along coastal areas of the northern Pacific Ocean and the southern Bering Sea. Three separate populations live along the coasts of Russia, Alaska and California.
- The southern sea otter lives along the central California coast.
- It is found in marine habitats with rocky or muddy sea bottoms and is frequently associated with kelp beds. It sometimes ventures onto land.

Physical Characteristics

- The southern sea otter is dark to reddish brown in color with a lighter colored head, throat and chest.
- It has a long, stout body, a short broad head and a snout with whiskers.
- The tail is short in comparison to other otters and it has webbed hind feet that can be spread wide like flippers, making the southern sea otter well adapted for swimming.
- The forepaws are smaller with retractile claws and are hand-like when used to groom, eat and hold tools for breaking open prey.
- The southern sea otter has blunt, rounded teeth that crush shelled, invertebrate prey.
- Its body is covered in a dense fur that must constantly be groomed to maintain its insulating properties and cleanliness.
- The male grows to a maximum length of 4 feet 10 inches (1.48 m) and a weight of 65 lbs. (30 kg), while the female reaches 4 feet 7 inches (1.4 m) and 45 lbs. (20.4 kg).
- A newborn southern sea otter pup is a buff color, 22 to 24 inches (55 - 60 cm) in length and four to five lbs. (1.8 - 2.3 kg).

Diet/Feeding

- The southern sea otter consumes many types of prey including sea urchins, snails, mussels, crabs, scallops, fish, barnacles, octopus, worms and squid, which it captures with its clawed paws, not its jaws.
- It must eat 20 to 25 percent of its body weight every day to maintain normal body temperature, so it will spend much of the day hunting.

Conservation Status

- The sea otter once lived along most of the coastal North Pacific Ocean. It was hunted for its prized pelt until it almost became extinct.
- The southern sea otter is currently listed on CITES and on the IUCN Red List as “endangered”. It is listed as “threatened” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and “depleted” under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1977.
- Potential threats to this mammal include entanglement in fishing nets, oil spills and predation by the great white shark.

Additional Information

- The southern sea otter usually submerges for about 52 to 90 seconds, but the longest dive recorded was four minutes and 25 seconds long.
- The male lives to be about 15 years old in the wild, while the female’s life span is about 20 years. Their life spans are longer in an aquarium or zoo setting.

- It is believed that the southern sea otter will wrap itself with kelp to keep from floating away on the waves while it is sleeping.
- The female sea otter is pregnant for four-and-a-half months and has a delayed implantation for two months.
- The sea otter is one of a few marine mammals to have fur instead of blubber. Water conducts heat more rapidly than air, so the otter needs its thick coat of fur to help maintain its body temperature. Its fur is the densest of all mammals. It has about 350,000 to 1,000,000 hairs per square inch, compared to dogs that only have 1,000 to 60,000 hairs per square inch. The sea otter's fur traps air to further insulate it from the cold ocean water and to provide additional buoyancy.
- During the mating season, the male bites the nose of the female in an unusual display of reproductive behavior. Therefore, sexually mature females are distinguishable by bloody or scarred nose regions.
- This mammal uses rocks, shells and other hard materials from the ocean floor as shell-crushing tools, while balancing its prey on its chest and stomach.
- Classified as a marine "fissiped", the sea otter is a well-adapted aquatic carnivore that has separated toes on its front paws instead of webbed feet. The fingers are not easily distinguished as the digits are covered, similar to mittens. Its claws are retractable and its front feet have rough pads. Both of these features help sea otters more easily grasp their slippery or spiny prey. On its hind paws, the pads are reduced and may be absent, except on the toes. Its fifth digit or little toe is longer than other otters, allowing the sea otter to spread its web wider when swimming.
- The southern sea otter is in the same family as weasels and river otters.
- This animal also has a high metabolic rate that is about 2.5 times greater than terrestrial animals. The hind feet and front paws lose the most heat, so the sea otter often can be seen holding them out of water to conserve body heat while it floats on its back at the surface.
- The sea otter can dive to 180 feet in search of food. It uses its nose and whiskers to help locate prey and detect vibrations under the water. It also uses a pouch or flap of skin located under each foreleg to store food until it returns to the surface.
- Hearing, smell, touch and sight are very good in sea otters and are important in hunting as well as detecting danger.
- The sea otter helps maintain the health of kelp beds by preying on sea urchins, which, if allowed to proliferate, can destroy a kelp forest because they eat the base of young kelp. An adult male sea otter may eat as many as 50 urchins each day.
- A sea otter pup can emit a strong high-pitched call when in distress or separated from its mother. It is nursed by its mother for six months to a year, but can begin foraging in shallow water habitats as soon as six weeks after birth.
- The southern sea otter has been known to live alone but frequently occurs in small groups where food sources are plentiful. It will rest in a group called a "raft". Males usually raft together during non-breeding season. Adult males are highly territorial during breeding season and will not permit other males to enter their territory. Females raft with their pups and other females. However, by nature, the sea otter is not a social animal as are other otter species.

Sources

National Audubon Society Guide to Marine Mammals of the World. Reeves, R. R., et al., 2002, pgs. 13, 36-37, 42-45

Marine Mammals of the World. Nowak, R. M., 2003, pgs. 20, 227-228

National History of Otters. Chanin, P., 1985, pgs. 15, 16, 18 - 21