

U. S. MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

Southern Sea Otter

Abundance and Trends

Before commercial hunting began in the mid-1700s, an estimated 150,000 to 300,000 sea otters occurred in coastal waters throughout the North Pacific Ocean. In 1911, hunting was prohibited under the terms of an international treaty for the protection of North Pacific fur seals and sea otters signed by the United States, Japan, Great Britain (for Canada), and Russia. By then, only a few thousand otters remained, including a small colony of about 50 otters along the coast of central California. By the time the [Marine Mammal Protection Act \(MMPA\)](#) was enacted in 1972, the California population had grown from as few as 50 to more than 1,000 individuals (an average annual growth rate of about 5 percent).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) listed the southern sea otter population as threatened under the [Endangered Species Act \(ESA\)](#) in 1977 and adopted a recovery plan for the population in 1982, which was updated in 2003. The recovery plan specifies that the species should be considered for delisting when the average population level over a three-year period exceeds 3,090 animals.

The FWS estimated southern sea otter abundance in 2016 was 3,272 individuals, a record high since 1972. The 2017 count declined somewhat, to 3,186 otters, but still exceeded the potential delisting threshold for a second straight year. The population has continued to decline, with a most recent abundance estimate of 2,962 otters in [2019](#). No survey counts occurred during 2020. According to the [2021 stock assessment report](#), the observed decline reflects lower numbers of otters in the northern and southern portion of the mainland range, offset somewhat by continued growth of the central portion of the mainland range and the translocated population at San Nicolas Island. The declining mainland counts since 2017 could be due to increased mortality from shark bites and other causes such as harmful algal blooms and disease.