

Testimony of

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Before the

Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans

Natural Resources Committee

U.S. House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3639, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act

Longworth House Office Building

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10:00 a.m., Room 1324

Chairwoman Bordallo, Ranking Member Brown, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, my name is Andrew Johnson, and I represent the Monterey Bay Aquarium. I am here today to support H.R. 3639, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act.

The coastal ocean in California offers us a remarkable richness of resources and natural beauty. Through the years, the Monterey Bay Aquarium has introduced more than 40 million people to the marine wildlife and natural communities of the Monterey Bay region, and we inspire visitors from all over the world to conserve the oceans. But the Monterey Bay Aquarium sits on the frontlines of southern sea otter habitat, and almost every day, we respond to and provide care for dying sea otters.

Because the Monterey Bay Aquarium believes that the recovery of the threatened southern sea otter population is an important—and achievable—goal, the Sea Otter Research and

Conservation (SORAC) program at the aquarium has aligned its activities to support the Final Revised Recovery Plan for the Southern Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris nereis*), which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published in 2003. Each element of our program—retrieving and treating live-stranded sea otters; collaborating on field and captive research; undertaking education and outreach programs; raising research funds; and advancing ocean policy reform—reflects the aquarium’s commitment to the federal recovery process. Unfortunately, two major obstacles jeopardize the recovery of the southern sea otter population:

The first obstacle is that sea otters live in a dirty ocean.

Sea otters reside at the interface of the land and sea. For this reason, they serve as sentinels of nearshore ecosystem health. When too many sea otters are dying, it tells us that the system is unhealthy; when the system is unhealthy, more sea otters die. Recent data support the likelihood that the land-to-sea flow of pathogens and contaminants contributes directly to the high mortality of sea otters. The death rate in the southern sea otter population has increased markedly in recent years, and their sluggish and uncertain population growth clearly demonstrates that the myriad threats they face take an enormous toll. In large measure, this increase in mortality seems related to land-based, human-caused activities:

- Sea otters die from protozoal cysts shed by domestic, feral, and wild cats and an introduced species, the Virginia opossum, when the cysts deposited in their feces wash into nearshore ocean waters where otters make their home.
- Sea otters die from acute liver failure caused by a toxic photosynthetic bacterium that transits from ponds to the nearshore marine environment.
- Sea otters die from toxins produced during harmful algal blooms.
- Sea otters die through infection by bacterial pathogens introduced into the coastal ocean in our wastewater.

- Sea otters die because agricultural and industrial chemicals, such as DDT, DDE, and PCB, persist in the environment and continue to poison the food that sea otters eat.

Sea otters have endured this onslaught, yet they remain at the threshold of obliteration. The notion that sea otters could become extinct on our watch is real and speaks to the harm we are causing to the environment. With their behavior and their bodies, the sea otters that live and die along the coast of California are telling us that we are killing them. Too many sea otters are dying to believe that recovery will occur without additional research and intervention.

The second obstacle to southern sea otter recovery involves the lack of federal financial support.

As the urgency for more research and recovery action on behalf of sea otters has increased, the funding through the federal system has contracted, leaving the recovery effort without adequate support. The lack of consistent funding at the federal level is hampering efforts by the southern sea otter research community right now to perform the work outlined in the sea otter recovery plan. The alliance of scientists and stakeholders who focus on sea otter research and conservation has accomplished an impressive amount of work with private dollars, mainly foundation and NGO funding, and other soft-money sources. Right now, the nonprofit Monterey Bay Aquarium alone contributes more money to southern sea otter recovery efforts than does the federal government and its agencies mandated with leading those recovery efforts.

The dearth of federal funding has cost scientists years of progress in understanding the causes and vectors of southern sea otter mortality—and is costing the southern sea otter its chances for survival.

Fortunately, the federal system mandates recovery, and I believe that a solution to the funding crisis is at hand with H.R. 3639. As the bill states, “Enactment of provisions to implement the United States Fish and Wildlife Service document entitled ‘Final Revised Recovery Plan for the Southern Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris nereis*)’ could lead to delisting of the southern sea otter under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.” H.R. 3639 would provide a structure and a system and funding for southern sea otter recovery, and it reflects the urgency with which we should address

the recovery of sea otters. By supplying adequate and sustained federal funding, H.R. 3639 would allow the aquarium and our many research colleagues to accelerate the pace of research and to leverage other resources for an intensive recovery effort.

Only when we recognize and understand the problems that affect the health of humans, animals, and systems in coastal waters will we be able to marshal the necessary resources to address those threats. Although H.R. 3639 seems to benefit a single species, the southern sea otter, the overarching goal of the bill and its emphasis on recovery-based research involve reestablishing a healthy nearshore ecosystem. If we save the southern sea otter, we will demonstrate that science and good effort can prevail to overcome the ravages of human influence on the environment. If we fail to save the sea otter—a charismatic and important species within the nearshore ecosystem—I find it difficult to imagine that we will save other marine species and systems.

The actions needed to mitigate the damage caused by non-point sources of marine pollution will cost many millions of dollars, so we need to gain a better understanding of those factors that affect human health, animal health, and the health and sustainability of the nearshore ocean systems before we can recommend which actions to take.

The overall purpose and scope of H.R. 3639 will provide resources and tools to help us solve the critical challenges confronting the recovery of the southern sea otter. The Monterey Bay Aquarium and our colleagues stand ready to assist in any way to improve this bill and support its passage into law. I respectfully request that you send H.R. 3639 to the Natural Resources Committee for a full vote.

Thank you for inviting me to testify.