

TESTIMONY OF

**THE HONORABLE SAM FARR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
THE 17TH DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA**

**BEFORE THE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE
ON INSULAR AFFAIRS, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE**

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Thank you Chairwoman Bordallo and Ranking Member Brown, for this opportunity to participate in this hearing on the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act (H.R. 556) which I re-introduced in January. I would also like to express my gratitude to both of you, Chairwoman Bordallo and Ranking Member Brown, for your continued efforts on behalf of our nation's vital oceans and wildlife. I am especially thankful for the work that you and your staffs did to incorporate the constructive feedback we received during last year's hearing into this bill. This new bill is tighter and will be more effective. I would like to provide some background on the history of Sea Otters and how they are intertwined with the history of California's Central Coast.

The Southern Sea Otter population once numbered in the tens of thousands and ranged from Mexico to Oregon. But the trade in sea otter fur reduced their population from tens of thousands to nearly extinct off California by the early 1900s. In the 1930s, a small, remnant population of less than 100 animals, was discovered in a remote cove in Big Sur, on the coast of my district. Since then, they have slowly begun to recover. They now number around 3000 and their range extends along the central coast to Pt. Conception.

The presence of the California sea otter has become an icon of the California Coast, the ocean environment off the central coast, and our coastal culture in general. These charismatic animals bring significant tourism revenue to California's coastal communities. Protecting them is not only directly advantageous to the sea otters themselves, but also fosters indirect benefits on a greater scale because their populations have important effects on other marine populations and the surrounding ecosystems.

For instance, the demise of sea otters allows their prey sea urchins to proliferate unchecked, leading to the alarming overgrazing of kelp beds by the urchins. The kelp forests are one of the ocean's nursery grounds for a multitude of marine animals. Research shows that the absence of sea otters has a direct link to the sharp decline of kelp along portions of California's coast. Thus, the sea otters are of paramount importance to the coastal ecosystem.

Further, research by some of the scientists invited to this panel has proven that they are a bellwether species, much like a canary in a coal mine. Sea otters are an effective indicator species for toxins and diseases in the marine environment, both of which can affect the health of humans and other wildlife.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, and research Scientists at the U.S. Geological Survey and California universities, have worked to understand and protect sea otters. Groups such as Defenders of Wildlife, Friends of the Sea Otter, and The Ocean Conservancy have worked not only to save the sea otters themselves, but to also raise public awareness to help protect this important species under the auspices of the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Due to these efforts, the southern sea otter population has increased to around 3,000 animals. However, these numbers are still significantly less than what is necessary to consider the population stable and unfortunately in recent years, their population growth has been much slower than their northern counterparts.

The mitigation of earlier problems such as entrapment in fishing gear has helped the sea otters' recovery to this point. Researchers are beginning to identify indirect hazards for sea otters such as non-point source pollution and pathogens that can cause mortality, further slowing their population growth. Such realizations support the need for continued research and preventive measures to respond to these issues, while continuing to ward against the direct killings/takings that still occur.

California took the first step toward addressing these emerging concerns by signing into law California Assembly Bill 2485, which establishes a state fund for sea otter conservation. Californians had the option of donating a portion of their tax returns to sea otter conservation. In the last few years, several hundred thousand dollars have been raised, but recent economic woes in California, and nationwide will probably stem the flow of such generous contributions this year. However, the sea otter is a federally protected species and the State cannot go it alone.

I have worked with my colleagues to secure Federal funds to support a continued and complete recovery of the population. This bill, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act continues this work and provides more tools to protect the Southern Sea Otter and the vital coastal ecosystems which they inhabit. Thank you again for this hearing and I look forward to marking this legislation up soon.