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Otters along coast thriving; potential clash with fisheries seen

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by **Craig Welch**
 Seattle Times staff reporter

Sea otters are rebounding in dramatic fashion along Washington's coast, pushing their way deeper into the Strait of Juan de Fuca and south toward Willapa Bay.

And that's forcing marine biologists and wildlife managers to prepare for a potentially uncomfortable collision between the charismatic critters and some coastal fisheries.

"It's a classic recipe for political polarization," said Glenn VanBlaricom, an associate professor of marine ecology at the University of Washington. "People love sea otters, but they could run right into shellfish harvesters whose livelihoods depend on their food sources."

Wiped out of Washington waters in the 19th century by pelt-hungry hunters, otters have staged a comeback since being reintroduced to the western shores of the Olympic Peninsula in the late 1960s.

The population has grown 30-fold in as many years, and their range is expanding so far and fast some scientists suspect groups of otters may someday - for the first time - make Puget Sound home.

Historically, only the rare individual or pair made their way into the Sound.

VanBlaricom shared his research yesterday with several hundred scientists and government leaders in Bellevue at the fifth Puget Sound Research Conference. The three-day event brings together researchers on everything from water quality, fish ecology, marine mammals, birds and storm-water treatment.

As many as 300,000 otters once populated the North Pacific - from Russia to Mexico - although that figure had plummeted

to a few thousand by 1911. Since then, numbers throughout the region have shot back up to over 100,000, though the animals have not returned everywhere, according to a state recovery plan.

Washington's story remains a far cry from parts of Alaska, where otter numbers are declining, or Los Angeles, where federal agencies said a reintroduction effort failed.

Here, while sea otters remain protected under state law as an endangered species, their numbers are increasing by 10 percent a year. The population now hovers at 600 animals, roughly a quarter of what marine experts think the environment can sustain.

But such a healthy return comes with complications.

Because they lack blubber, otters eat a quarter of their weight each day to fuel their supercharged metabolisms. Their munchies of choice include the seafood humans crave - sea urchins, Dungeness crabs, clams, abalone. And their recent travels toward rich harvest areas such as the Dungeness Spit put them on a direct route toward multimillion-dollar commercial, recreational and tribal shellfisheries.

Steven Jeffries, who heads marine-mammal investigations for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said it's tough to determine whether it will be a few years or a few decades before conflicts begin.

Washington otters could instead spread north toward Vancouver, B.C.

"We don't really understand the forces behind the expansion," Jeffries said.

But already they're making their presence known inside the Strait of Juan de Fuca and south along the Olympic coastline.

In the early 1990s, a group of more than 100 male otters that were reintroduced at LaPush worked their way around Cape Flattery into Neah Bay. By last year, the animals had made their way past Sekiu, Clallam County.

In 1997, researchers noticed sea-urchin populations had dwindled in Neah Bay - an area that in 1988 supported a tribal harvest of 1.6 million pounds.

Meanwhile, to the south, otters last year worked their way past Destruction Island, toward popular razor-clam harvest areas.

"None of these fisheries, based on evidence from other areas, are likely to survive the presence of sea otters," VanBlaricom

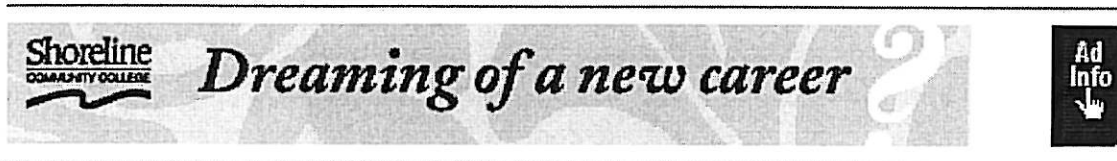
said.

Along central California's Morro Bay, otters were considered a leading culprit in the decline of commercial red-abalone fisheries. Within a year after large numbers of otters worked their way into Alaska's Prince William Sound, the commercial crab fishery closed.

"It seems inevitable that we'll see the emergence of conflicts," VanBlaricom said.

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