

# Sea Otter

*Enhydra lutris* (“In the water like an otter”)

## What do they look like?

Sea otters have round heads, small eyes and small ears. Their tails are long and flat and their hind feet are webbed. Their fifth digit is longer which helps them to swim - a lot like flippers! Their front feet have retractable claws so they can grab food, the front paws are used more for grooming and foraging than swimming. Sea otter fur can be a brown colour to almost black, their guard hairs can be, light brown, or black. As a sea otter gets older their hands and necks get lighter until they are almost white. Sea otter fur is the finest of any mammal. There are between 850,000 to 1 million hairs per square cm. The hair is very important as they need to keep warm in the water. A sea otter will spend lots of its time cleaning and grooming their fur. If the fur gets dirty or oily it won't stay water proof and that means water will get through and make the otter cold.



**What noises do they make?** Sea otters coo (especially mothers to cubs), whistle, whine, scream, squeak (especially cubs), grunt, growl and hiss!

**Where do they live?** Rocky shores, coastal wetlands kelp forests along the coasts of the Pacific Ocean from California up round Alaska and northern Russia down to northern Japan.

They spend their time between the ocean floor searching for food and floating on the surface of the water where they eat, groom, sleep and play.

## What do they eat?

Clams, sea urchins crabs, fish, snails, even octopus. They dive up to 250 feet to capture their food. Sea otters also use “tools” such as rocks to open their food. It is one of the few mammal species to use tools.

**How long do they live?** Up to 23 years in captivity, but usually 10-12 in the wild

**How many babies do they have?** 1 and they give birth in the water.

**How big are they?** 1.25 – 1.8 metres and weigh 18-40 kg (Alaskan slightly bigger)

**What is harming them?** Oil spills; water pollution; people catching too many clams and urchins, leaving little food for otters; killer whales whose usual food is being overfished by humans so whales are turning to eat otters; a germ (*Toxoplasma gondii*) washed into the sea from cat litter flushed down the loo in California.

**How bad is it?** Endangered status: Endangered, population decreasing (Red List 2014)