

MAMMALS

SEA OTTER

ABOUT

In the past sea otters were found in near shore waters around the North Pacific Rim from Hokkaido, Japan, through the marine coastal areas of the Russian Far East and the Pacific coastal areas in the United States as far south as Baja, California. Sea otters have the thickest fur in the animal kingdom. Unlike other marine mammals, the sea otter does not have a layer of blubber (fat) to keep it warm. It is the largest member of the weasel family. Southern sea otters grow to about four feet in length. Females weigh around 45 pounds (20 kilos) and males 65 pounds (29.5 kilos). Northern sea otters can be much heavier and reach up to 100 pounds (45 kilos). The life span of a male is on average 10 to 15 years and the female can live 15 to 20 years. Their diet consists of sea urchins, abalone, mussels, clams, crabs, snails and about 40 other marine species. Sea otters breed throughout the year and females typically have one pup after a gestation period of six to eight months.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sea otters are classed as threatened and are being deeply affected by oil spills, habitat loss, disease, commercial fishing net entanglements and competing with shellfish fisheries. They are the only mammals other than primates (i.e. chimpanzees) known to use tools like small rocks, which help them hammer open or pick off food from rocks. They can dive up to 330 feet deep when searching for food. Sea otters often rest in coastal kelp forests, anchoring their bodies with strands of kelp, which stops them drifting loose. If an otter's fur gets covered with oil or any unnatural substance it is vulnerable to cold and exposure and will often die. Two hundred years ago the popularity of otter fur nearly led to its extinction. Today there are about 2,500 southern sea otters off the coast of California and 70-80% of the world's sea otter population is found in the waters of Alaska. For more information visit www.defenders.org.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The Sea Otter is the largest of which family?

- a. primate
- b. kelp
- c. weasel
- d. rodent

Answer is C.

