Contact: Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August XX, 2015

Liam Antrim at 360-457-6622 x 16

Email: [Liam.Antrim@noaa.gov](mailto:Liam.Antrim@noaa.gov)

Research Coordinator

**NOAA Subtidal surveys assess sea otter effects on nearshore habitats**

Two teams of NOAA scientists joined forces on August 3-7 to conduct subtidal dive surveys in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. Survey transects replicated work completed in decades past to evaluate changes associated with re-introduction and expansion of the sea otter population along the outer coast of Washington.

This research is a collaboration between NOAA’s Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary and NOAA Fisheries’ Northwest Fisheries Science Center, who provided staff time and expertise from their scientific dive team.

Divers returned to locations visited in 1987, 1995 and 1999 to evaluate community changes associated with growing sea otter numbers, expansion of their range and changes in availability of their food sources, or prey. Long-term monitoring is essential to understand the health of marine populations as well as changes that occur in response to predation by sea otters and other pressures on marine resources.

Sea otters are voracious feeders, eating more than 12 pounds of seafood (25% or more of their body weight) daily. Washington sea otters’ diets consist of a variety of invertebrate species, including crabs, mussels, clams, scallops, abalone, sea urchins, octopus, squid, snails, and sea stars. They can dive to over 100 feet in search of food. As the number of sea otters grows and their consumption of prey increases, scientists expect to see a corresponding shift in marine communities, and potentially in kelp bed habitats. Data gathered through the subtidal SCUBA surveys will provide important information about the condition of sanctuary subtidal communities, and Pacific Northwest coastal ecosystems in general.

The northern sea otter (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*) was hunted to local extinction in the early 1900s as a result of the fur trade. To reintroduce the species to the outer coast of Washington, 59 sea otters from Alaska were released near La Push and Point Greenville between 1969 and 1970. This sea otter population has grown to approximately 1,600 individuals (based on the 2014 census), and northern sea otters now occupy a primary range north of Cape Elizabeth to Tatoosh Island, with some venturing into the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Salish Sea. Sea otters are a well-documented keystone species, with feeding habits that have a significant influence on nearshore marine communities.

Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary is administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and was designated in 1994 as the first national marine sanctuary in the Pacific Northwest. It encompasses about 3,189 square miles off the Washington coast, extending from Cape Flattery to the Copalis River. Significant natural and cultural resources include 29 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises, large populations of nesting seabirds, shipwrecks, and some of the most spectacular wilderness coastline in the lower 48 states.

NOAA’s Northwest Fisheries Science Center conducts the science necessary to conserve marine and anadromous species and their habitats off the Washington, Oregon, and California coasts and in freshwater rivers of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. Our research provides reliable, relevant, and credible information to help decision-makers and natural resource managers build sustainable fisheries, recover endangered and threatened species, maintain healthy ecosystems, and protect human health. The Center is also dedicated to enhancing public awareness, education, and stewardship of our marine resources.

NOAA’s mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Join us on **[Facebook](http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/exit.html?https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FNOAA" \t "_blank)**, **[Twitter](http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/exit.html?https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2FNOAA" \t "_blank)**, **[Instagram](http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/exit.html?http%3A%2F%2Finstagram.com%2Fnoaa%3Fref%3Dbadge" \t "_blank)** and our other **[social media channels](http://www.noaa.gov/socialmedia/" \t "_blank)**.

# # #

**On the Web:**

NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries: [http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov](http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/)

NOAA Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary: <http://olympiccoast.noaa.gov/>

NOAA Fisheries, Northwest Fisheries Science Center <http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/>

###