Contact: Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**NOAA Subtidal SCUBA surveys assess sea otter prey availability**

A team of NOAA scientists joined forces on August 3-7 to conduct subtidal SCUBA surveys in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. Survey transects replicated work completed in 1987, 1995 and 1999 to evaluate the community changes associated with re-introduction and expansion of the sea otter population along the outer coast of Washington.

The surveys are 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..

Sea otters are voracious feeders, eating more than 12 pounds of seafood (25% or more of their body weight) a day. Sea otters’ diets consist of a variety of invertebrate species, including crabs, mussels, clams, scallops, abalone, sea urchins, octopus, squid, snails, and sea stars.. Many of these species, in turn, consume kelp, an important structure-forming habitat in these coastal areas. As the number of sea otters grows and their consumption of prey increases, scientists expect to see a corresponding shift in the marine communities, and potentially 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*) is a well-established keystone species that was extirpated from Washington State in the early 1900s as a result of the fur trade. After the reintroduction of 59 sea otters from Alaska in 1969-1970, the sea otter population on the coast of Washington state has grown to approximately 1,573 individuals. After their initial reintroduction near La Push and Point Greenville, northern sea otters now occupy a range north of Cape Elizabeth to Tatoosh Island.

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.

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**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/>

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