



Vessel Operation Around Sea Otters

Fun Facts!

- Approximately 90% of the world's sea otter population lives in Alaska, inhabiting areas such as Kenai Fjords National Park, Glacier Bay, and Kachemak Bay.
- Sea otters lack a blubber layer, making up for it with the thickest fur of any animal. There are around 1,000,000 hair follicles per square inch.
- Otter pup fur is extremely dense, and they can't dive until they get older and grow a new coat.
- Sea otters have the highest metabolic rate of all marine mammals, so they have to forage and consume ~25% of their body weight a day.
- Otters are one of few mammals that utilize tools. They often keep rocks and foraged food under their armpits.
- The sea otters' nostrils and ears close while diving. They have good eyesight above and below water, while using their whiskers to sense vibrations during foraging.
- Sea otters are key components in their ecosystems, granting them the title of a keystone species! They control sea urchin populations, which in turn prevents the loss of kelp forests. This can lead to greater biodiversity among the system as a whole.





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Guidelines

- Scan the water surface ahead of the boat vigilantly for otters. Sea otters are difficult to spot in choppy water conditions and areas with kelp. If another person is present, have them help search for otters from clear vantage points.
- When you see a group of otters, alter your course and slow down to avoid disturbance and collision. Do not assume otters will dive and get out of the way. Even if an otter is alert and is able to get out of the way, the action of knowingly staying your course would be considered harassment.
- Give a wide berth to all otters when passing, while taking extra precaution to avoid disturbing rafts and mother-pup pairs. The Service recommends staying back 100 m (330 ft) from individuals, 200 m (660 ft) from mother-pup pairs, and 500 m (1,640 ft) from rafts.
- If you encounter a group of sea otters, do not pass between individuals. Go around the entire group.
- Do not operate a vessel at any rate of speed directly at any otters. It is illegal to pursue or chase otters. Do not single out or surround individuals.
- During poor weather conditions, sea otters are more likely to form rafts. Avoid these rafts and take extra caution to avoid disturbing them, especially if visibility is low.
- Sea otters may haul out and rest along the shoreline, on docks, and on ice. Avoid approaching otters on shore to prevent disturbance that may interrupt their behavior.

Background

- The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) prohibits the harassment, hunting, capturing, or killing of sea otters in Alaska, with few exceptions*.
- Sea otters are near shore animals who spend several hours a day foraging in waters of up to 40 meters deep. Vessel operation in otter habitat may cause disturbance or boat-strike.
- In Kachemak Bay, many otters are habituated to human presence and may not show signs of disturbance, but close encounters still cause stress. Female otters with pups are very sensitive to disturbance, which can interrupt feeding and grooming patterns.
- Sea otters in locations with limited human activity may also be sensitive to disturbance. When operating vessels in remote locations, take extra precaution and stay back 100 meters (330 ft) from otters whenever possible.

*Exceptions to the prohibition of take includes harvest of sea otters by Alaska Native people for the purposes of creating and selling authentic native articles of handicrafts and clothing, which is lawful under the MMPA.