

## SEA OTTER DEATH AND DECLINE TRACKING TOXOPLASMA

A UC Davis-led research team is studying how the deadly single-celled parasite, *Toxoplasma gondii*, moves from land to sea to infect and kill threatened Southern sea otters in California.

Patricia Conrad, professor of parasitology and principal investigator, says, "*Toxoplasma* infections are one of several factors reducing the potential for sea otter population recovery."



*T. gondii* can also cause serious illness in pregnant or immuno-compromised humans.

Sea otters most likely ingest *T. gondii* oocysts (eggs) shed in the feces of cats and transported via freshwater runoff to the marine ecosystem says Dr. Conrad. Research focuses on Elkhorn Slough and Morro Bay, where notable sea otter infections and deaths have been reported.

Less than a year into the project, the researchers have submitted several articles to scientific journals related to the following studies:

- 1) terrestrial ecology—researchers survey cat owners and sample cats and wild rodents for *T. gondii* parasites;
- 2) land-runoff ecology—scientists observe runoff patterns and create models to assess how *T. gondii* oocysts travel through near-shore waters into the sea; and
- 3) sea otter ecology—wildlife veterinarians and ecologists assess behavioral and dietary risk factors for parasite exposure.

Once the data have been gathered and analyzed, scientists will develop simulation models to assess how various strategies to reduce *T. gondii* in sea otters affect the risk of exposure.

A \$1.86 million grant from the National Science Foundation-National Institutes of Health Ecology of Infectious Disease Grant Program supports scientific collaborators from UC Santa Cruz, the California Department of Fish and Game, the University of British Columbia, CSU Fresno and the Institute of Ecosystem Studies, all of whom are working with UC Davis investigators in the Wildlife Health Center, Bodega Marine Laboratory and the Center for Animal Disease Modeling and Surveillance.

## Faculty-Practitioner Collaboration Ensures Rigorous, Fair Admissions Process

While prospective students—966 in 2006—hold their breaths from October until April during admissions season, faculty members and private veterinary practitioners embrace a shared responsibility to select the students most likely to succeed in veterinary school and the profession.

The **Admissions Committee** comprises five faculty members and one private practitioner, who review student GPAs and GRE scores, letters of recommendation and veterinary experience, and evaluate academic and non-academic factors. By the time selected students receive acceptance news in April, their applications have been read a minimum of six times. Each Admissions Committee member contributes about 175 hours to the total review process. The practitioner selected to the Admissions Committee each year is among those who have served on the Admissions Advisory Committee.

The **Admissions Advisory Committee** assures that candidates who have unique experience, interest or quality do not get overlooked. About 20 private practitioners and faculty members identify the diverse, "uniquely promising" students with strong veterinary experience or an interest in less common veterinary fields such as food animal practice, lab animal medicine or research.

In addition to the advisory committee, three faculty members and three veterinary students consider and recommend qualified applicants through the **Veterinary Medical Opportunity Program**. The **Veterinary Scientist Training Program** committee evaluates prospective students who intend to pursue concurrent DVM and PhD degrees.

By the end of February, Admissions Committee members have decided who will be interviewed. In February and March 2006, the committee conducted half-hour interviews with 211 candidates. Thanks to new school facilities opening this year, the school has increased the entering class size from 122 to 131 students, the full complement approved by the California Legislature.

Dean Bennie Osburn says, "The admissions process is an extraordinary team effort. It respects the students who have prepared for years to get into veterinary school and carefully weighs who will best meet the broad requirements of the veterinary profession."

### A Practitioner's Perspective



Lisa Boyer (DVM, UC Davis, 2002), co-owner of Veterinary Relief Solutions, Inc., Roseville, California, represented practitioners on the 2006 Admissions Committee.

"The committee's choices shape the future of veterinary medicine in California," says Dr. Boyer. "As an older student entering a second career, I was fortunate that someone on the Admissions Committee looked at my application and saw that I was more than a GPA or GRE score. I wanted to do the same for others."

"Together, we worked to bring about a multi-faceted view of each candidate. I tended to ask more 'real world' questions representative of situations I encountered since graduating from veterinary school. I looked at each candidate as if I were hiring a new associate. I already knew that to make it to the interview, the applicant was smart—I was looking for common sense, an ability to think on one's feet, and a realistic view of the veterinary profession. The class of 2010 has tremendous strengths and abilities—each student has something special to contribute."

"I was surprised by how many times an application is reviewed and with the number of exceptionally qualified candidates. I found the experience extremely worthwhile and necessary to ensure the fairness of our admissions process. By working together, we can ensure that our profession has the most capable and compassionate veterinarians possible."

See the *Guide for Prospective Students* at [www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/StudentPrograms](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/StudentPrograms).