

# Orcas Island Marine Lecture Series

# NOTES

## Marine-Foraging River Otters

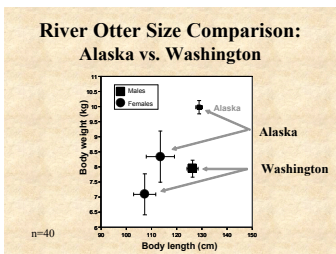
Joe Gaydos, Regional Director, The SeaDoc Society

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### Biology

- The river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) is a charismatic aquatic mammal that is found throughout much of North America.
- River otters forage on land and in marine subtidal and intertidal zones in the inland waters of Washington and British Columbia (Salish Sea).
- River otters eat marine invertebrates (sea stars, crabs, mussels, etc.) as well as fish (sculpins, gunnels, lingcod, pollock, surfperch, etc.). They also occasionally eat storm petrel (Leach's and Fork-tailed), Glaucous-winged gull and other chicks



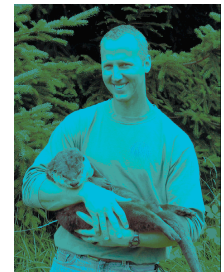
- Sources of clean fresh water are important to marine-foraging river otters.
- Current data on river otter abundance and distribution data from the Salish Sea are scarce.

### Population

- Preliminary survey work suggests that coastal river otters are widely distributed throughout the Puget Sound Georgia Basin marine ecosystem.
- Populations in the San Juan Islands probably occur at similar densities as those found in southeast Alaska (1 otter to 1.3 km of shoreline).
- Although historically river otters were trapped throughout the region for their pelts, this practice has largely stopped.

### Challenges

- Current threats to river otter populations include habitat loss, decreases in water quality, and increases in marine pollution.
- Diseases are also probably an important regulator of river otter density and otters in the region are commonly exposed to the bacterium *Leptospira interrogans* and the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*.
- More research on their natural history and diseases is needed to better understand and conserve these unique “marine” mammals.



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