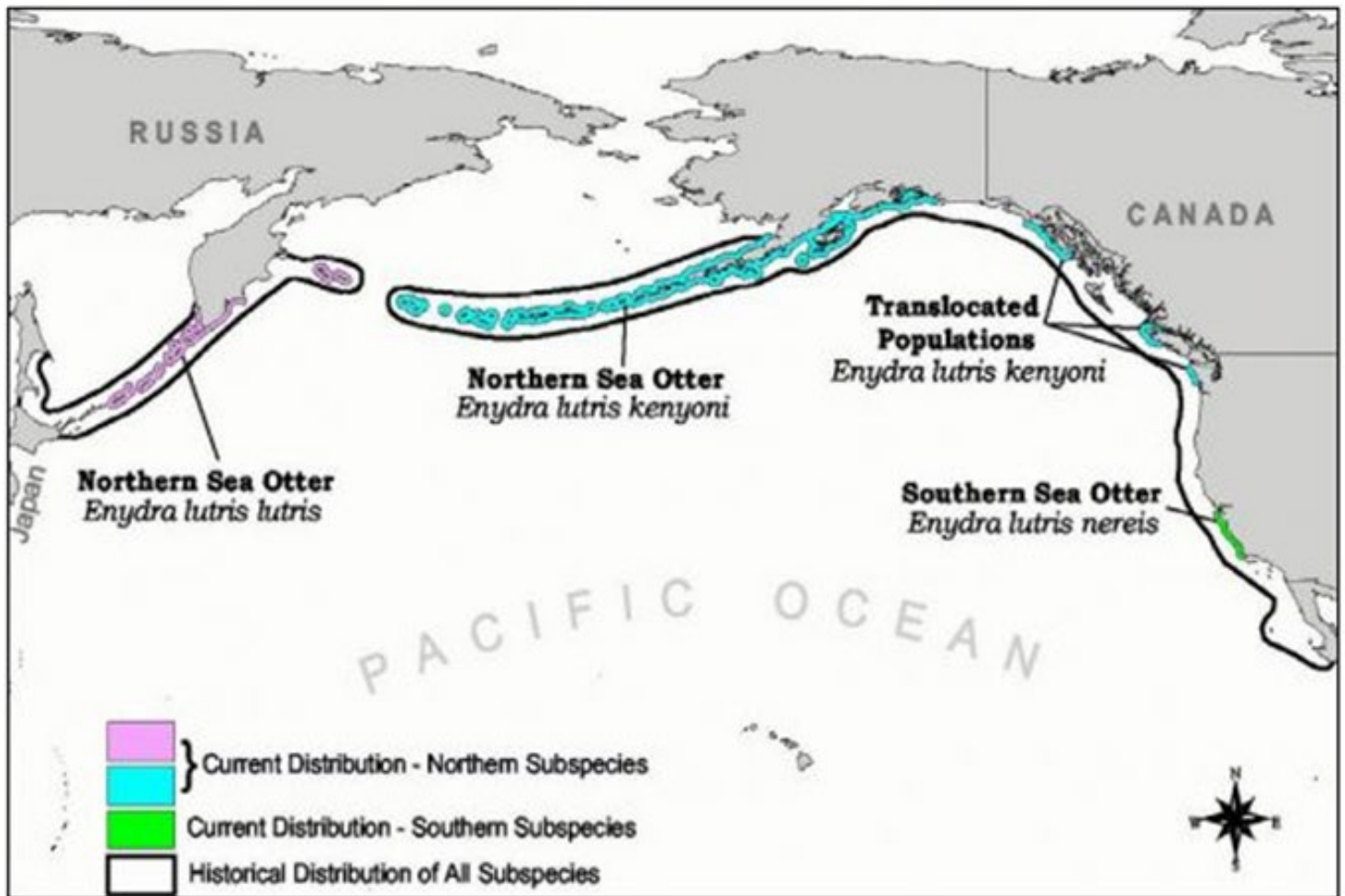


Historical and Current Sea Otter Distribution



Historical (pre-maritime fur trade) and current distribution of sea otter subspecies (from USFWS 2003). Not visible is the small, translocated population at San Nicolas Island in the southern California Channel Islands.

Historically, sea otters occupied nearshore marine waters ranging across the North Pacific Rim from the northern islands of Japan to the Aleutian Islands and southward along the Pacific coasts to central Baja California, Mexico. In the early 1700s, the worldwide population was estimated to be between 150,000 and 300,000 individuals (Bodkin 2015 and references therein).

Harvest of sea otters for their fur began not long after they were discovered in the North Pacific by Russian explorers in the mid-1700s, and by the time the protections of the International Fur Seal Treaty were put in place in 1911, fewer than 2,000 animals (~1% of the original global population) were left. Sea otters survived in 11 isolated colonies: 3 in the Kuril Islands, Kamchatka, and the Commander Islands off Russia; 7 small, scattered groups from the Aleutian Islands to Prince William Sound in Alaska; and 1 small group off the coast of central California near Big Sur. Two additional groups remained briefly in the Queen Charlotte Islands of Canada and San Benito Island of Mexico, but these subsequently died out (Kenyon 1969). The last wild sea otter in Oregon was killed in 1906, and in Washington in 1910 (Allen 2003; Scheffer 1940).

Subsequent to legal protection from harvest, several remnant populations of sea otters in the northern portion of their range gradually began to recover. But the historical range of the species from Prince William Sound (just east of the Kenai Peninsula in the north Gulf of Alaska) southward to central California remained uninhabited for many years. In the mid-1960s to early 1970s, several attempts were made to translocate sea otters from Alaska to portions of their range where they remained absent, resulting in the establishment of reintroduced populations in Southeast Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington. An introduction of sea otters to the southern Oregon coast ultimately failed for unknown reasons, although sea otters remained in the area for 10 years following reintroduction and even produced pups (Jameson et al. 1982; Riedman and Estes 1990; Kone et al. 2021).

Today, sea otter populations remain absent from their historical range from approximately Point Grenville, Washington, south to Half Moon Bay, California, a distance of about 800 miles. They also remain absent from the southernmost portion of their range, south of approximately Santa Barbara, California, except for a small, reintroduced population at San Nicolas Island in the Channel Islands.



Man posing with sea otter skins, Alaska 1892.

The reintroduced Washington population has grown over time, from 59 sea otters introduced in 1969 and 1970 to 2,785 in 2019 (Jeffries et al. 2019; click [here](#) for more information on sea otters in Washington state).



Current range of sea otters in Washington state, from individuals reintroduced in 1969 and 1970 (USFWS).

Oregon is the only State where sea otters once lived that still has no sea otter population. Only the very occasional single sea otter is spotted off the Oregon coast; most of these are most likely young males dispersing from the Washington population. Genetic evidence suggests that historically the Oregon coast may have represented a transition zone between northern and southern sea otters, with the southern sea otter ranging as far north as Newport, Oregon (USFWS 2015; Wellman et al. 2020).

The California population of the southern sea otter (*Enhydra lutris nereis*) is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The southern sea otter population has grown at only a relatively slow rate over time and there has been little expansion of its range; expansion to the north is thought to be limited primarily by mortality from great white shark bites ([USFWS 5-year review 2015](#)).

The most recent population estimate released for the southern sea otter was 2,962 animals in 2019 (Hatfield et al. 2019). Click [here](#) for more information on the southern sea otter.



Current and presumed historical range of the Southern (California) Sea Otter (from USFWS 2015)

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