

Pacific sea otter termed threatened species

By E.G. WHITE-SWIFT
Of the Emerald

OTTER THREATENED: The southern sea otter of the central California coast has been listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

The historical range of the southern sea otter has shrunk by 90 per cent. The original range extended at least 1,500 miles from Morro Hermoso on the Pacific Coast of Baja California, to the Strait of Juan de Fuca in Washington.

The original stock is now represented only by a group along a 150 mile section of the central California coast, although small groups of the sea otters from Alaska waters have been introduced at several points along the West Coast, including Oregon. The range reduction alone qualifies the otter for threatened status.

The remaining habitat and population is potentially jeopardized by oil spills, and possibly by other pollution and possibly by man. The fact that less than 2,000 otters are concentrated in the present range makes the species particularly vulnerable to any sort of disruption.

The sea otter is not in immediate danger of extinction. The population is fairly abundant within the occupied portions of its range. The USFWS believes that the more stringent protective status — endangered — is not warranted.

The original decline in sea otter populations was caused largely by the fur trade. Through state, federal, and international protection, overhunting is no longer a problem.

It was protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 which contains a moratorium on killing. None may be killed without a scientific research permit issued under that act. These regulations will remain in force.

Listing as threatened provides the additional protection of the Endangered Species Act's "critical habitat" provisions. These will enable the USFWS to determine the living space requirements for the otter, and prohibit any federal action that could infringe on its habitat needs.

No critical habitat has been determined for the southern sea otter, but the USFWS is collecting data now for such a proposal. All persons with pertinent information are invited to send it to the Director, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20242.

JUDGMENT RESERVED: In 1969, the Reserve Mining Company of Silver Bay, Minn., was charged with polluting Lake Superior through the discharge of iron residues into the lake.

The seven-year battle in the courts is a landmark in environmental law. It is also the subject of "Judgment Reserved," a new book by Oregon State University engineer Frank Schaumburg. It documents one of the longest and

most costly environmental conflicts in history.

"The crux of the Reserve controversy," Schaumburg states, "is whether the risk of an unknown, but possible, hazard to public health and marginal water pollution problem justify the enormous expenditures of energy, resources and dollars by Reserve and ultimately by society. Though a decision has been rendered, final judgment must be reserved."



A Federal District Court initially ruled against Reserve in 1974 but a court of appeals reprimanded the judge who heard the case for "great bias" and ordered corrective action and new hearings.

There were no "winners or losers except perhaps the participants from the legal and technical professions who garnered many millions of dollars in fees and salaries," Schaumburg summarizes in the book.

"Environmentalists won their argument to stop the discharge of tailings into Lake Superior," he adds, "but lost in their efforts to obtain immediate cessation of in-lake disposal. Reserve won its battle to continue operations but lost its preferred tailings disposal sites in Lake Superior."

\$10,000 COMMITMENT: Pepperdine University's \$10,000 Bicentennial Junior Tyler Ecology Award was given to Ted Whitesell, the assistant Alaska representative of the Sierra Club in Anchorage.

His work involved the first citizen's study of the Tongass National Forest in southeastern Alaska. The efforts were described as providing the conservation community of the Tongass region with an invaluable information base for the proper management of the forest.

What is Whitesell doing with the \$10,000 prize? He's giving it away. Part of the money will go to the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, some will go to a group in Montana that is producing a handbook for wilderness activists, and the rest will go to other conservation and environmental groups.

SCHOOL ASBESTOS: State School Superintendent Verne Duncan has asked Oregon school districts to check buildings for potentially harmful asbestos ceiling material.

The request was made after a New Jersey physician said the spray-on material may have caused chronic respiratory problems for a child in New Jersey.

In a letter Duncan sent to superintendents, he described how to test for the presence of asbestos fibers. Bill Wilmot, architectural consultant for the Oregon Department of Education is assisting in the investigations from his Salem office (378-3582).

DEADLINES EXTENDED: The deadline for public comment on the Willamette National Forest's draft environmental statement on geothermal development in the Breitenbush area has been extended to Feb. 15.

The extension was made necessary because many individuals and organizations failed to get copies of the statement in the original mailing.

Siskiyou National Forest supervisor W.P. Ronayne has announced a two-week extension of the review period for the Draft Environmental Statement on the Land Use Plan for the Rogue-Willamette Planning Unit.

In order to be considered in the preparation of the final environmental statement, comments must be received on or before Feb. 14.

A limited number of single copies of the statement are available upon request. Write to Ronayne, P.O. Box 440, Grants Pass, Oregon 97526.

Berry packs toxic punch

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tea made from the leaves of mistletoe plants appears to be safe in moderate quantities, but those using this brew as a possible coffee substitute should make sure there are no berries in the mixture, experts said today.

The U.S. Agriculture Department (USDA) put mistletoe tea in a list of possible coffee substitutes, but questions later arose because the plant is listed as poisonous.

USDA experts said the biggest problem with the plant is the berries, which are particularly poisonous and should never be used as food.

"I would suspect traces of the poisonous substances in the berries are in the leaves, but not

necessarily in quantities that would hurt you," said James Duke, a herbologist with the USDA's Agriculture Research Service who drew up the list of coffee substitutes.

"Every plant is poisonous to some degree," Duke continued. "I wouldn't recommend that anyone drink mistletoe tea in quantity or coffee or tea in quantity because they, too, contain toxins."

Mistletoe tea, available in some health food stores, is made from dried leaves and shouldn't present a problem if no berries are included, Duke said.

"I bought some out of curiosity and am drinking it now. But I don't recommend it because, frankly, it doesn't taste very good," Duke added.

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