

# Pinnipeds: Port only wants to keep sea lions from damaging its docks

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in October showed a decrease in chinook salmon survival from 90 percent in 2010 to 55 percent in 2014. It compared the decrease in survival with a more than 670 percent increase in sea lion populations counted by ODFW in Astoria between March 15 and May 15 over the same years.

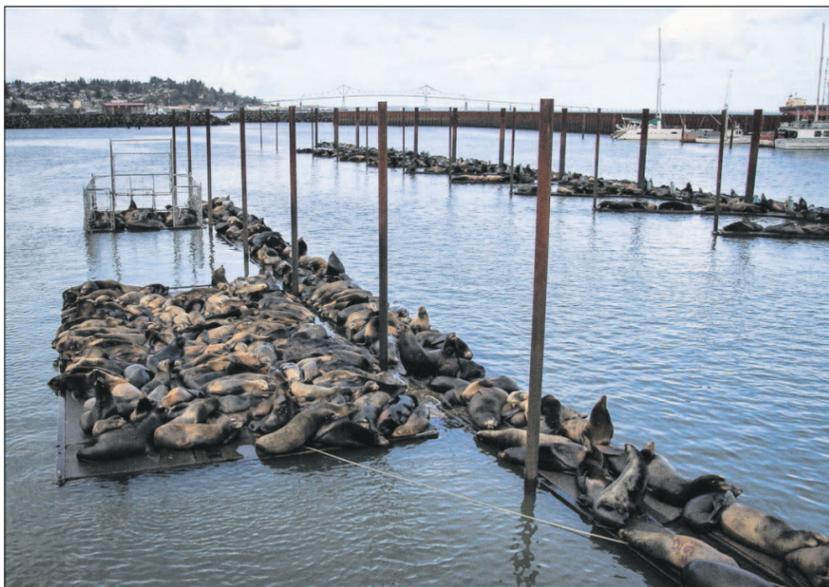
## Sea lion marina

Amid the issues of sea lion predation, the Port has maintained it only wants to keep sea lions from damaging its docks, estimating more than \$100,000 in damage to utilities and the docks themselves from sea lions.

It has removed docks, disconnected utilities from the two that the sea lions inhabit and strung brightly colored surveying tape, which has effectively dissuaded the animals from jumping onto the two docks with boats still tied to them.

"There's a public health issue," said Permit and Project Manager Robert Evert about fecal coliform in the water and the mounds of feces with the ringworm fungus that Port staff clean up off docks.

The Port has looked into galvanized steel railings — for years now — to keep sea lions from jumping up on docks. There is about 5,000 feet to cover on the Port's three docks at the basin, Operations Manager Matt McGrath said at a March 17 Port Commission meeting. The railings have worked in San Diego, but would cost \$50,000. Evert added the Port will be meeting with Smith-Root Fisheries Technology next week, which creates a low-voltage matting



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Sea lions and seals rest on the docks of the East Mooring Basin Tuesday. The East Mooring Basin has four docks, two for boats and two for sea lions.

for docks that is uncomfortable for sea lions.

## In defense of sea lions

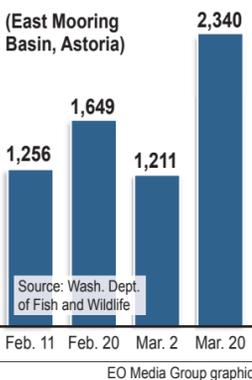
For several years, the Sea Lion Defense Brigade has kept a regular presence at the basin, monitoring ODFW's trapping and branding and reporting on its Facebook page. Members snap photos of visitors who drop by to see sea lions and regularly attend Port meetings to testify on behalf of pinnipeds.

"I want to talk about sharing on the second biggest river in North America," Ninette Jones, brigade member, told the Port Commission March 17, after being told she couldn't comment a second time on sea lions.

Brigade members see sea lions as a scapegoat for larger issues, such as pollution,

## Sea lion survey

The Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife is conducting surveys of pinnipeds along the lower Columbia River. California sea lions observed since Feb. 11:



climate change, overfishing and thousands of miles

of blocked fish passages. They've claimed that Sea Shepherd Conservation Society once offered to pay for a sea lion haul-out, although the Port has previously denied being offered funding. Regardless of whether they're hauling out on Port docks or their own haul-out, Evert said, letting them on docks is akin to domesticating a wild animal.

The Port started shutting down the causeway to the East End Mooring Basin when ODFW is trapping and branding sea lions to track them, a practice authorized in 2012 by NOAA and not as deadly as the euthanizations at Bonneville Dam, but nonetheless controversial. Tensions over the practice came to a near-boiling point Feb. 18, according to ODFW.



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A branded sea lion rests on a dock in the East Mooring Basin. Branding the sea lions allow various groups to track them.



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Orange ribbon placed along the docks of the East Mooring Basin have been used successfully as a sea lion deterrent.

**'I want to talk about sharing on the second biggest river in North America.'**

— Ninette Jones

Sea Lion Defense Brigade member, talking to the Port Commission after being told she couldn't comment a second time on sea lions

Sall said a visitor to the basin had been approached by a branding protester. The visitor then approached and harassed the ODFW employee, she said, before threatening to grab a shotgun and shoot her. Sall said ODFW reported the incident to the Oregon State Police, which couldn't be reached for comment by press time.

# Sea lions adapt to changing climate

## Females have trouble feeding pups when water gets warmer

NOAA Northwest Fisheries Science Center

In Southern California hundreds of starving sea lion pups are washing up on beaches, filling marine mammal care centers that scarcely can hold them all.

Meanwhile thousands of adult male California sea lions are surging into the Pacific Northwest, crowding onto docks and jetties in coastal communities.

How can animals from the same population be struggling in one region while thriving in another? The answer lies in the division of family responsibilities between male and female sea lions, and the different ways each responds to an everchanging ocean, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Northwest Fisheries Science Center in Seattle.

"We're seeing the population adjust to the environment as the environment changes," said Sharon Melin, a sea lion biologist with the fisheries science center.

The environmental changes affecting the sea lions can be traced to unusually weak winds off the West Coast over the last year. Without cooling winds, scientists say, the Pacific Ocean warmed as much as 2 to 5 degrees Celsius (35.6 to 41 degrees Fahrenheit) above average. What started as a patchwork of warm water from Southern California to Alaska in 2014 has since grown into a vast expanse, affecting everything from plankton at the bottom of the food chain to sea lions near the top.

"The warming is about as strong as anything in the historical record," said Nathan Mantua, who leads the Landscape Ecology Team at the Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

## Struggle for food

The Channel Islands rookeries where nearly all California sea lions raise their young off Southern California sit in the middle of the warm expanse. Female sea lions have strong ties to the rookeries. They take foraging trips of

a few days at a time before returning to the rookeries to nurse their pups.

But the unusually warm water has apparently shifted the distribution of their prey, making it harder for females to find enough food to support the nutritional needs of their pups. Their hungry pups, it now appears, are struggling to gain weight and have begun striking out from the rookeries on their own. Many do not make it and instead wash up on shore dead or emaciated.

Since the early 1970s the California sea lion population underwent unprecedented growth. The species is protected by the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act and is estimated to number about 300,000 along the U.S. West Coast. But the growth has slowed in recent years as ocean conditions have turned especially unfavorable for juvenile survival. That could lead to population declines in coming years, biologists say.

"We are working on data to look at whether the population might be approaching its resource limits," Melin told reporters in a recent conference call.

Sea lions serve as an indicator of ocean conditions because they are visible and are sensitive to small environmental and ecological changes, Melin said. The warm temperatures may well be affecting other species in less obvious ways.

"There are probably other things going on in the ecosystem we may not be seeing," she said.

## Bachelors

Unlike female sea lions, males have no lasting obligations to females or young. After mating at the rookeries in midsummer, they leave the rookeries and roam as far as Oregon, Washington and Alaska in search of food.

"They're bachelors," said Mark Lowry of the Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, California. "They just go wherever they can find something to eat."

Male sea lions search out prey with high energy content, especially oily fish such as herring and sardines, said Robert DeLong, who leads a program to study the California Current Ecosystem at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center. Increasing numbers have found their way to the mouth of the Columbia River to feed

on increasingly strong runs of eulachon, also called smelt, and have taken up residence on docks and jetties near Astoria.

"More sea lions learned last year and even more will learn this year that this is a good place to find food," DeLong said of the Columbia River. "They've learned these fish are there now and they won't forget that."

DeLong and Steve Jeffries, a research biologist with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, attached satellite-linked tracking tags to 15 sea lions feeding on salmon near Bremerton (Wash.) in November and December. Four of those sea lions are now at the mouth of

the Columbia, Jeffries said.

Counts around Astoria rose from a few hundred in January to nearly 2,000 in February, exceeding numbers in previous years at the same time. The count includes some animals from the eastern stock of Steller sea lions, removed from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife in 2013. The California sea lions also feed on spring chinook salmon and steelhead. Some of the chinook and steelhead stocks are listed under the Endangered Species Act and NOAA Fisheries is working with state officials to address sea lion predation.

By the beginning of May, the male sea lions depart for the summer breeding season

## MORE ONLINE

For more information on sea lion strandings, visit <http://tinyurl.com/nxqhwkw>  
For information on field research in the sea lion rookeries, visit <http://tinyurl.com/no7heje>  
For information on deterring problem seals and sea lions visit <http://tinyurl.com/khbmfiyw>

at the rookeries in Southern California.

"It's like flipping a switch," DeLong said. "Suddenly it's time to go."

## Warm conditions may continue

The warm expanse of ocean extends to depths of 60 to 100 meters, Mantua said, and will likely take months to dissipate even if normal winds resume. Biologists expect poor feeding conditions for California sea lions will likely continue near their rookeries while warm

ocean conditions persist. A more typical spring and summer with strong and persistent winds from the north would cool the water and likely improve foraging conditions along the West Coast.

The tropical El Niño just declared by NOAA is one wild card that may affect West Coast ocean conditions over the next year. If the El Niño continues or intensifies through 2015, it would favor winds and ocean currents that support another year of warm conditions along the West Coast.

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**Q: What edible berries are easy for the kids to grow that will add to the landscape?**

**A:** Blueberries and strawberries are a great choice for providing fruit and enhancing the landscape year after year. A formal berry patch is not needed — just mix them into the border where they will have good light exposure, good drainage and ample organic matter for soil quality. You can also grow them in large pots if space is limited. Strawberries can be either ever-bearing or June crops. Most blueberries are self fertile, but if you plant more than one variety that blooms in the same time frame, your crop will be much bigger. Fall color and leaves and stems of the blueberries is an added bonus in the garden.



Nick Benas  
Director of Business Operations for Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, Certified Mental Health First Aid Instructor



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**Q: What is Mental Health First Aid?**

**A:** Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour course that gives people the skills to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The evidence behind the program demonstrates that it does build mental health literacy, helping the public identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness and reduce stigmas.

If interested in being certified Mental Health First Aider, please contact Nick Benas at 503.325.0241 ext.220 [mailto:nickb@clatsopbh.org](mailto:mailto:nickb@clatsopbh.org)



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**Q: My groin pain isn't going away! Why not?**

**A:** Lingering groin and testicular pain often originate in the lumbar and sacroiliac spine. The nerves exiting the low spine provide sensation to the abdomen, groin and testicles. If those nerves are irritated, the pain can wrap around to the front of the body. A proper exam can differentiate the problem from a hernia or other cause. Chiropractic spinal manipulation of the spine usually eliminates the groin pain within a few visits. This will work even if unsuccessful surgery to the low abdomen or groin has occurred. Chiropractic offers a cost-effective, low-risk approach for this nagging problem.