

The Community VOICE



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How cat owners can help save the sea otter



By Elspeth Wood December 7, 2012 12:00 am

The California Sea Otter could possibly be one of the cutest sea creatures in the ocean.

The Sea Otter has always had a special relationship with humans. They are pint-size pranksters that exude charisma. They are extremely intelligent and very curious. The bright shiny eyes, expressive face and soft furry body make the California Sea Otter a local favorite. Sea Otter colonies range from Japan, along the coast of Siberia and the Aleutian chain and down to Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and of course, California.

As few as 2,800 of them call California's waters their home. The California population descends from a single remaining colony of about 50 otters hidden within the crags of Big Sur. They have a very important niche in the beautiful California near-shore ecosystem by keeping kelp forests healthy by eating urchins that can overgraze.

What do cat owners have to do with sea otters, you ask? Recently, the population size of sea otters has been declining in response to changes in environmental conditions. One major reason for this, among others, are parasites called toxoplasma gondii known to breed in cats. Scientists hypothesize some sea otters may be dying because coastal area cat owners flush used, feces-laden cat litter down their toilets, use it as compost, and dump it in storm drains.

Any pollutants on our streets, business lots, farms, vineyards, driveways and yards pour into the ocean after it rains. Some of the major offenders are motor oil, gasoline, paint and painting equipment wash water residue, animal refuse, farm, vineyard, garden and yard pesticides, and soap suds from washing cars in the driveway. The fact is sea otters feed close to the shore, which makes them vulnerable to these pollutants in coastal waters.

According to Christina S. Johnson, a science writer for California Sea Grant, the scientists' best guess is parasite eggs in cat droppings are being washed by sprinklers and rains into coastal-bound storm drains and creeks. Although many different kinds of animals, such as birds and rodents, can serve as intermediate hosts for toxoplasma gondii, cats are the only animals known to shed the parasite's eggs in their droppings.

Not just otters but also people are potentially at risk from the parasite. People eat many of the same shellfish as otters. Also, this cat-parasite link is the reason pregnant women are advised against cleaning cat litter boxes because it can pose a major health risk for the baby and mother. Fortunately, humans, cats and other animals infected with this parasite rarely show any symptoms. Those that do usually already have a weakened or compromised immune system. Sea otters are not so lucky.

Fortunately, there's a silver lining to this story because there is something we can do to help. I am assuming most cat owners are animal lovers and are not aware of the dangers of improper disposal of cat waste. Safely disposing of your fur baby's droppings starts with picking the right litter. Do not use any flushable litter because the sewage treatment might not be able to kill the T. Gondii. Choose a litter that clumps up easily and put the pieces in a plastic bag and seal it for land waste disposal.

The feces are sealed so that it won't go into any water sources. Unfortunately, there is no better way to dispose of cat litter yet. Each city has its own law on cat litter disposal; it is important to find out the local regulations. Here in Sonoma County, we can dispose of our kitty litter in the grey curbside garbage cart that goes to the landfill. Keep the kitty litter out of the green compost bin. If you are not sure about your area, the best place to ask is your local animal shelter.

If we know better, we can do better. As busy humans, there is only so much we can do to help with our environment. But we have to remember it's the little things that add up. We can overcome some of these challenges our local species face. We need to realize, in fact, otters are a very important indicator species for the humans. Therefore, we should take note, because if our oceans are facing new challenges, sea otters likely will show the first indication of trouble.

Elspeth Wood is a student participating in the Hutchins Program at SSU. She was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Creek Stewardship Day

When: Saturday, Dec. 8, 9 a.m.-noon. (It was originally scheduled for Dec. 1 but canceled because of foul weather.)

Where: Falletti Park, off Gravenstein Way (east of the intersection of Old Redwood Highway and Highway 116,

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Details: Help take care of native trees and shrubs along the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel in Cotati by weeding and mulching, and some planting. Tasks will depend on weather and conditions on the ground. Dress for work and weather with old clothes, in layers, with boots or sturdy shoes, and bring rain gear. Heavy rain cancels the event. Bring your own drinking water bottle. Gloves, tools, and some refreshments provided.

Full details: www.CotatiCreekCrittters.info

Contact: jenny@creeks.cotati.info or 792-4422.



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