

Vancouver Island first nations band plans to kill sea otters for their pelts

It's an 'aboriginal right' to shoot the 'cute' animals for ceremonial clothing, spokesman says

Aboriginals on the west coast of Vancouver Island are planning to kill one per cent of sea otters per year for ceremonial reasons.

Staff of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council and the federal fisheries department have together created a draft sea otter management plan that has been submitted to native leaders for support prior to formal approval by Ottawa.

Decimated on the B.C. coast during the European fur trade of the late 1700s and early 1800s, sea otters were successfully reintroduced from Alaska between 1969 and 1972.

In 2007, the federal Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada downlisted the marine mammal's status to "special concern" from "threatened."

The committee estimated sea otters have repopulated 25 to 33 per cent of their historic range in B.C., but cautioned "numbers are small" at less than 3,500 and "require careful monitoring."

Roger Dunlop, regional fisheries biologist for the tribal council, expects the hunt to generate some controversy. "Sea otters are very cute. There will potentially be some outcry at any harvest at all. But this is an aboriginal right and the harvests won't harm the population."

In an interview Tuesday, he said the draft management plan would allow Nuu-Chah-Nulth hunters to annually shoot one per cent of the 2,000 otters found in their territory from Port San Juan north to Brooks Peninsula.

Hunters would target adult male otters and would receive training on the proper skinning of the animals. Chiefs traditionally wore sea otter pelts as a sign of rank.

Dunlop said the harvest rate is conservative, taking into account the size and rate of growth of the population, and considers other potential causes of death, such as illegal hunting, collisions with ships and entanglement in nets.

He noted there remains some concern in native and non-native communities about sea otters competing for shellfish, including urchins, crab and clams, but he emphasized that is not the reason behind the proposed kill. He added there is no thought of selling the skins on a commercial basis.

Peter Hamilton, founding director of the animal-rights group Liferforce, argued against the kill on the grounds the current population remains at risk from oil spills and that sea otters fulfil an important role by eating urchins and allowing biologically diverse kelp beds to flourish.

Close to 3,000 sea otters are thought to have died in the Exxon Valdez supertanker spill of about 40 million litres of crude oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound in March 1989.

Hamilton said he feared that shooting otters could result in injuries and suffering, adding that natives should discontinue the traditional practice as they have the taking of slaves. "It's a barbaric past and the blood must not be on the hands of present generations."

Sierra Club B.C. and Western Canada Wilderness Committee said they support natives' right to the hunt, provided it is carefully monitored and the otter populations can support it. Living Oceans Society recognizes the rights of aboriginals to make decisions about natural resources in their area, but "would prefer" they forgo the killing of sea otters.

Federal fisheries officials could not be found on Tuesday for comment.

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