

Results of the 2009 Survey of the Reintroduced Sea Otter Population in Washington State

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The 2009 Washington sea otter survey was conducted from 13-17 July 2009 and included the inshore area from the South Jetty at to mouth of the Columbia River on the outer Washington coast to Pillar Point in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Biologists and volunteers from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, Makah Nation, Quinalt Indian Nation, The Seattle Aquarium, and the Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium participated in the survey. Counting conditions this year were not very good with visibility ranging from good to no visibility for the ground observer component and poor to only fair conditions for the aerial component. Due to poor survey conditions it was not possible to develop a total count for this year's survey. This is the first time since annual surveys of the Washington sea otter population using current protocols were started in 1989 that inclement weather has precluded getting at least one usable counts for the entire range. Therefore, we will just give a survey overview with some general impressions on distribution and numbers at locations where some limited counts were made.

Results

Due to fog and low clouds during all survey days, no complete survey was completed and a total count for 2009 was not possible. However, based on the limited information obtained this year it appears population distribution has remained relatively unchanged from 2008. In 2002, the survey segment south of La Push accounted for about the same percentage of the total population as the survey segment north of La Push segment, 49% and 51% respectively. However, since 2003 the distribution of sea otters along the Washington coast has shifted in favor of the southern segment with 54% south of La Push and 46% north of La Push; in 2004 the distribution was 55% south of La Push and 45% north of La Push; in 2005 the distribution was 54% south of La Push and 46% north of La Push; in 2006 the distribution was 61% south of L Push and 39% north of La Push; and in 2007 the distribution was 68% south and 32% north. For our last survey in 2008, 60% of the Washington sea otter population was distributed south of La Push and 40% was north of La Push.

Partial survey counts for 2009 showed that the single largest concentration of sea otters continued to be located at Destruction Island with 461 otters counted on the 7/14/09 flight. Consistent with recent surveys of Destruction Island, the 7/14/09 flight found a large

male group (402 otters) using the northeast reef and eastern kelp bed areas for resting, while a reproducing female raft (51 otters with 8 pups) was present on the west end of the island. Counts made at other locations in the southern portion of the range indicate that females may be regularly moving between rafting areas located at Destruction Island, Diamond Rock/North Rock (off the mouth of the Hoh River), inshore of Perkins Reef (Rocks 443), and Giants Graveyard. This year, for the first time, we had a team of ground counters at Pt. Grenville. They observed one animal on 15 July just offshore from the point.

Some ground counts were completed north of La Push, and most were within the range of numbers observed in past years. However, fog was a problem at all ground counting locations as well with some days so foggy you could not even see the ocean. During good observation conditions, peak counts were 28 otters including 4 pups at Sand Point; 47 otters including 4 pups were counted at Cape Alava; 107 otters including 22 pups were counted at Duk Pt. reef (just s. of Seafield Creek); 9 otters including 2 pups were counted inshore from Father and Son Rocks; and 20 otters including 2 pups were counted at Anderson Point. The area in Makah Bay just north of Anderson Point has been a consistent location for females with pups in recent years, and is the northernmost group of breeding females in the population we know about. Although ground counters were able to complete some counts, fog was an issue at most sites during the survey and the 2009 survey was incomplete.

For informational purposes, Figures 1 and 2 from the 2008 survey report have been included with this survey summary.

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Figure 1 . Growth of Washington sea otter population, showing 3-yr running average of counts, 1989-2008

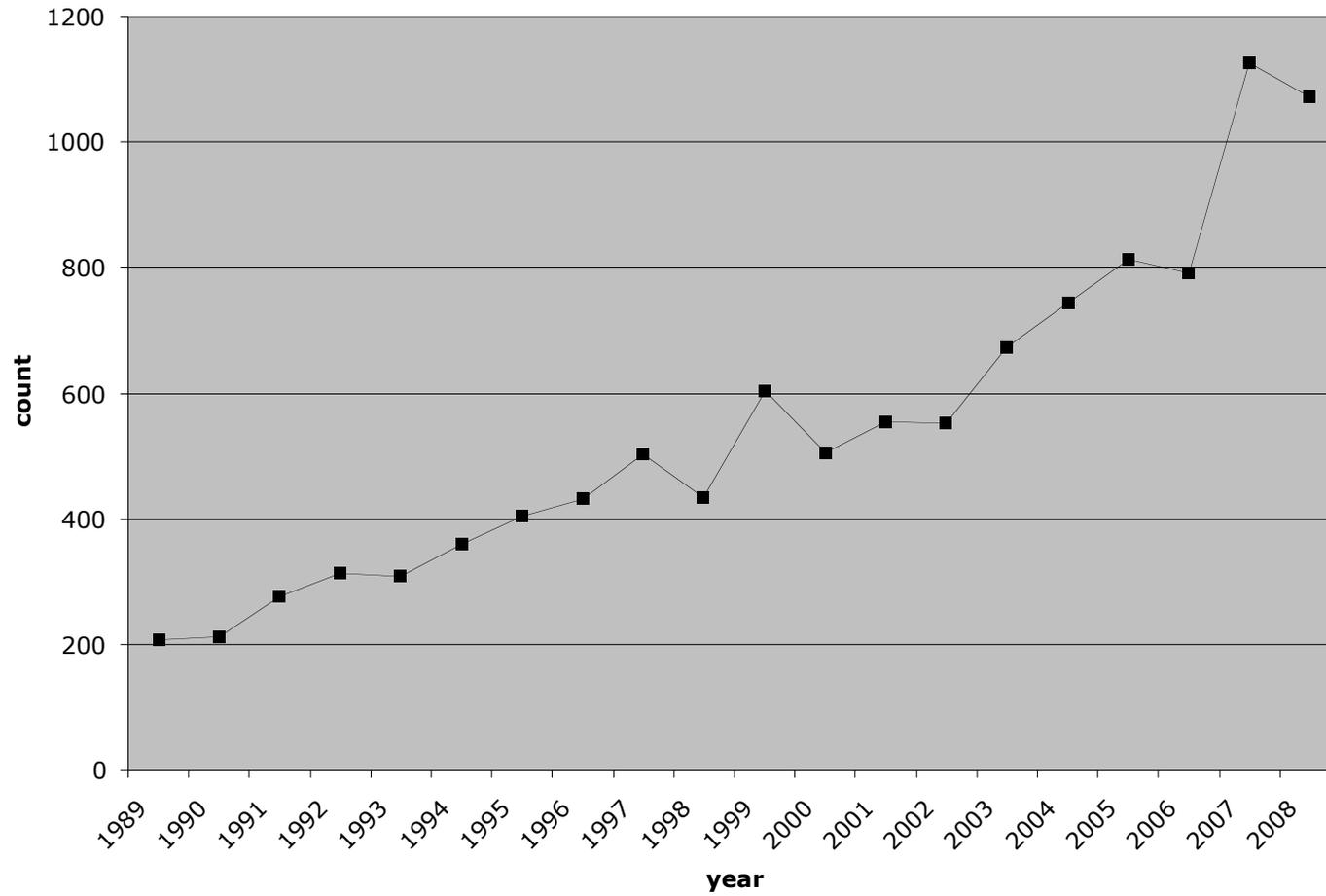


Figure 2. Distribution of sea otters in Washington as a percentage of total population count within north and south segments, 1989-2008.

