



# Fact Sheet

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## **SEA OTTERS**

- Sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*), found in the Pacific Ocean, are members of the weasel or mustelid family, making them relatives of minks, wolverines and badgers.
- Holding the title of the thickest fur in the animal kingdom, sea otters have 1 million hairs per square inch. In comparison, humans carry about 100,000 hair follicles on their entire head!
- These furry otters eat 20 to 25 percent of their daily weight – that’s like a 100-pound person eating 25 one-pound hamburgers a day!
- Unlike whales and sea lions, sea otters lack blubber to keep them warm, so they rely on their dense fur and supercharged metabolism to survive frigid waters.
- Their thick fur has two layers – short hairs and long guard hairs – which trap millions of tiny air bubbles to keep them warm.
- Sea otters spend several hours each day meticulously grooming their fur to avoid hypothermia.
- Any damage to a sea otter’s insulating fur from pollution exposes the animal to fatal risks. Naturally, sea otters are extremely vulnerable to oil spills and pollution.
- In 1989, the notorious Exxon Valdez oil spilled 10.8 million gallons of oil into the Prince William Sound in Alaska, killing about 2,000 sea otters immediately. The impact of the spill continued to increase death rates among otters in the years following due to contaminated fur, food, and soil.\*
- Move over monkeys! Sea otters are one of the only other mammals besides primates to use tools. While floating around on its back, a sea otter will vigorously hammer a mussel or clam against a rock on its chest to pry the meal open.
- These marine mammals will store food or a favorite rock in their own natural version of a “pocket” – the loose skin folds at their armpits.
- Four rescued orphaned pups from the Exxon Valdez oil spill were brought to Shedd Aquarium. Animal care specialists successfully rehabilitated these otters and monitored their progress as part of ongoing research about the spill’s long-term impact on the environment.
- One of the four Exxon Valdez otters are still at Shedd – Kenai, who is geriatric and receives specialized care from Shedd’s animal care staff.

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- Shedd Aquarium is one of a few U.S. institutions experienced in nurturing and rehabilitating stranded and orphaned sea otter pups. Shedd is a leading expert in sea otter rehabilitation and continues to work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partnering institutions to provide consultations and services.
- Orphaned at just two months old, Kiana and Mari were sent to Shedd Aquarium from the Alaskan coastline to receive rehabilitation services. These two playful otters continue to thrive at the aquarium, thanks to the special TLC from Shedd's animal care experts.
- Shedd Aquarium currently cares for five sea otters, including one successfully rehabilitated from the oil spill in 1989.

\* Graham, Sarah. "Environmental Effects of Exxon Valdez Spill Still Being Felt", *Scientific American*, Dec. 19, 2003

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*Shedd Aquarium is supported by the people of Chicago and the State of Illinois.  
Shedd Aquarium is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and  
the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums.*