



## *If it eats salmon.....*

It's not a beaver! Contrary to popular belief, beavers eat plant material, and not fish. However, another local aquatic mammal loves a tasty salmon as much or more than we do. The North American River Otter can be found across almost all of North America, anywhere with easy access to an abundant source of clean, fresh water. This includes ponds, lakes, rivers, and streams---even the ocean, when it's near a source of fresh water. Because of this, the River Otter is often mistaken for its cousin, the Sea Otter. River Otters are also sometimes confused with other mammals that spend time in and near waterways such as nutria, muskrats, and beavers. North American River Otters and Sea Otters are the only otters (of 13 species worldwide) that are native to the United States and Canada. The North American River Otter is the otter that lives in the Pacific Northwest, even the ones you see along the coast. Sea Otters, which can still be seen in British Columbia, Alaska, and California, were hunted to extinction along the Washington coast.

One reason that it is important for us to protect otters is because all species of otters are considered to be *indicator species*. An indicator species is a species that is sensitive to changes/contaminants in their habitat so that their health level indicates the general health of the environment in which they live and also indicates the general health of the surrounding species. This means that if the otter population in a given area is flourishing, then we know that it is a healthy, diverse habitat that will support all sorts of other critters. It is also important to protect otters for other reasons too: they are highly intelligent, very curious, and one of the very few other species that seems to actively enjoy play as adults.

In many parts of the US, the North American River Otter was in danger of extinction (and some populations were completely wiped out) from over-hunting, pollution (i.e.DDT), and habitat loss. Many states participated in reintroduction programs, and the river otter is experiencing a population come-back.

If you want to see one of these bright, fun-loving, giant furry Slinkies, the easiest thing is to go to the Seattle Aquarium or Forest Park Zoo. But, if you want to observe one in the wild, one of the places where you can consistently see them is from Chuckanut Drive. They can frequently be seen there playing near and along the shoreline.

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Some fast facts about the North American River Otter:

- They are generally 3-5 feet long and weigh from 10 to 33 pounds.
- Their feet are webbed between all the toes, and very strong, with strong claws. The webbing makes swimming much more efficient, and the claws are used for

- holding on to prey, climbing (yes-they *do* climb, sometimes even up trees!), and moving rocks and things to find food.
- Unlike most aquatic mammals, otters do not have a fat layer to keep them warm in cold water, so their fur must do the job instead. Otters have to groom their fur frequently in order to keep it clean enough to hold the air pockets that insulate them. Keeping a river otter warm requires it to have almost 58,000 hairs per square centimeter! They also have two layers of fur (like a husky), coarser guard-hairs that keep water out, and finer under-hairs that keep air in.
  - They eat fish, mollusks, crustaceans, reptiles, amphibians, birds, insects, and small mammals.
  - North American River Otters are very social animals. They tend to travel in family groups consisting of a female and her pups, often joining another female who also has pups. North American River Otters do not tend to pair-bond, but males will help to raise the pups if given the opportunity. Though females will often not let any other animals (including other otters) near the pups until they are about three months old, these otters do not do well alone for long periods of time.

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