

Returning sea otters to Oregon, Northern California coasts

February 2, 2025



The Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians (CTSI) has been awarded a three-year, \$1.56 million grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to support tribal efforts to return sea otters to the Oregon and Northern California coasts.

The grant is through the America the Beautiful Challenge, a partnership between the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Defense, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and NFWF.

The competitive grant awards were made possible with funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, other federal conservation programs, and private sources. The project is entitled Bringing Xvlh-t'vsh Home: Indigenous-led Planning for Sea Otters' Return to the Oregon and Northern California Coast.

“I am pleased that after years of collaboration with the Elakha Alliance and others, we will now be able to take steps with other tribal nations and partner organizations to return this culturally important species to their ancient home,” Tribal Chairman Delores Pigsley said. “This funding will enable us to build capacity and expertise to lead or participate in sea otter reintroduction and management and to elevate the role of coastal Indian tribes in marine stewardship.”

The grant will support additional planning and technical capacity within CTSI as well as the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians (CTCLUSI); the Yurok Tribe; the Tolowa Dee-ni’ Nation (TDN); and other regional partners and collaborators. The tribes and partners will produce a plan for reintroducing sea otters to the Oregon and Northern California coasts.

The project will also focus on building support for sea otter reintroduction from coastal tribes, ocean stakeholders and coastal communities in the region; completing key scientific studies; and conducting socio-economic assessments of potential reintroduction sites in the region.

“Indian people of coastal Oregon and Northern California referred to sea otters by many different words,” Pigsley said. “These many names reflect their presence and importance to our people. We now know that they enabled rich marine and estuarine ecosystems that provided food and materials our ancestors needed for life. This grant will help us to bring these relatives home.”

Sea otters have long been recognized as a keystone species that promotes the biological productivity and ecological resilience of nearshore and estuarine ecosystems. Sea otters were once plentiful from Alaska south to Baja but have been absent from Oregon for more than a century due to the maritime fur trade, according to Pigsley.

With kelp forests declining at an alarming rate due to ocean warming and over-predation by sea urchins, sea otter reintroduction is considered part of a long-term solution to restore and maintain healthy nearshore ecosystems in Oregon. In estuaries, sea otters protect eelgrass habitat by keeping populations of small crabs, including invasive green crabs, under control.

Background

The sea otter has been listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act since 1977. They were nearly hunted to extinction for their fur throughout the 1700s and 1800s.

Southern sea otters consume more than 150 different species, including mussels, crabs and clams. The reintroduction of the otters could also result in restrictions or prohibitions on some fishing gear to protect the otters from becoming caught or hurt, according to the news release.

Scientists from the agency concluded in a feasibility study that the benefits of their reintroduction outweigh the potential negative impacts to fishing and shellfish harvesting. As a keystone species, their return would enhance the health of kelp and seagrass ecosystems and the fish that depend on them, potentially increasing some fish populations. Growing kelp and seagrass forests is also helpful for reducing ocean acidification and for trapping climate change causing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

In 2024, leaders of two federally recognized Oregon coastal Indian tribes called upon U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland to “take all appropriate actions” to direct the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to return sea otters to the Oregon coast within the next five years.

The Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians sent letters to Haaland. CTCLUSI Council Chair Bradley Kneaper and CTSI Council Delores Pigsley cited in their letters the cultural ties between coastal Indian people and sea otters extending back thousands of years.

“Without sea otters, instead of productive kelp forests, our rocky seafloor is covered in ‘urchin barrens,’ biological deserts of purple sea urchins that have devoured these kelp forests and all that they provide to the ecosystem,” Kneaper and Pigsley said in their letters. “We feel strongly that the time has come to bring Xulh-t’ush back to Oregon and call on Secretary Haaland to direct the USFWS to prioritize returning sea otters to the Oregon coast, set a timeline, prepare a plan, and take other steps necessary to pursue this act of environmental and cultural reconciliation.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service held eight open houses along the Oregon coast in June 2023 to share a proposal for reintroducing southern sea otters — one of three subspecies of sea otter — to the Pacific Coast from San Francisco and up through northern Oregon.