

Sunflower Sea Star one step closer to Endangered Species Act Protection

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Following a petition by the Center for Biological Diversity, the National Marine Fisheries Service announced that imperiled sunflower sea stars may warrant protection under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Since 2013, 90% of the Pacific population of these sea stars has been lost to the gruesome and disfiguring sea star wasting disease. The disease outbreak is being driven by climate change, with warmer oceans making the effects more severe and deadly.

“To see these spectacular creatures shriveled and disfigured paints a sad picture of how global warming is exacerbating disease and other harms in our oceans,” said Miyoko Sakashita, ocean program director at the Center. “This is an important step toward protecting this beautiful species and the kelp forests it lives in.”

Sunflower sea stars — who have up to 24 arms, can be a meter wide, and come in a variety of bright colors — live along shorelines from Southern California to southern Alaska. They’re voracious predators whose consumption of sea urchins helps prevent the overgrazing of kelp forests, maintaining coastal ecosystems.

The sea star wasting disease outbreak is considered one of the largest marine epidemics, causing massive sea star mortality along the West Coast. The disease is a gruesome killer, causing lesions, contortions, lost limbs, disintegration and death. Sunflower sea stars have never recovered from being wiped out by the disease and are now classified as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Ocean acidification is also a threat to the species.

Following the decision, the government will open a public comment period on sunflower sea star protection. The Endangered Species Act requires the National Marine Fisheries Service to decide whether to list the species by August 2022. A listing could trigger an additional review of shoreline armoring and other coastal development projects that might push the species toward extinction.