

# The SEA OTTER:

## A 'Furry' Cute Sea Creature

by Annie Prud'homme  
Généreux

The Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*) is a member of the weasel family and is probably the cutest animal to inhabit our Pacific shores. Sea Otters are furry, spend a lot of time somersaulting to clean their fur, and swim on their backs on the surface of the ocean. When resting, they often hold each other's paws and drift together, a behaviour called "rafting". You can watch a video of two sea otters rafting at this website:

[www.vanaqua.org/  
home/otters.html](http://www.vanaqua.org/home/otters.html)

Sea Otters eat a lot of hard-shelled invertebrates such as crabs, sea urchins, and mussels. To open hard shells, a Sea Otter may pound its prey with both paws against a rock on its chest. While floating on the surface, mothers often place their lone pup on their chest to nurse them. Because much otter behaviour is so like human behaviour, we humans find them utterly irresistible.

As any human who has touched the Pacific Ocean in British Columbia knows, the water is COLD! One way the otter keeps warm is by eating a lot. In fact, the average Sea Otter consumes an amount of food equal to one quarter of its body weight every day. That would be like a 10 year-old consuming 120 chocolate bars each day!

Most marine mammals keep warm by growing a thick layer of fat to protect them from cold, but Sea Otters wrap themselves in a warm fur coat.



Sea Otters can float very easily and look very playful in the water. Source US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sea Otter fur is the densest (thickest) of any mammal. Someone with a lot of patience once counted up to 164,662 hairs for every square centimetre of otter fur. A cat's fur has only about 16,500 hairs per square centimetre – so otter fur is about ten times thicker than cat fur. The human head has about 100,000 hairs. That means that if you put your thumb on the pelt of a Sea Otter, there is more hair under your finger than there is on your entire head!

To keep an otter warm the fur must be kept clean. Sea Otters therefore devote a great deal of their day to preening and brushing their fur. They blow air into the fur to act as insulation against the cold. They also brush



Sea Otters 'holding paws' or "rafting". Photo by joemess (flickr.com/photos/16046854@N00/316194679)



oil on their skin and fur as a water repellent. The result is that water never touches skin, and the otter stays warm and dry.

Sea Otters are particularly likely to be hurt by oil spills (boating accidents that result in some of the boat's fuel spilling into the ocean), because this heavy oil interferes with the fur's insulating properties. When such an accident occurs, Sea Otters can get very sick from the cold.

In the past centuries, the thick sea otter fur attracted the attention of humans. In British Columbia, Sea Otters were hunted to extinction for their pelts. Forty years ago, a group of Alaska Sea Otters were brought south to BC to repopulate the area. They are currently thriving off the central coast of BC. Indeed just recently, in Kuyuquot Sound on the northern west coast of Vancouver Island almost 100 otters were seen "lounging around in a bed of kelp, rolling in the swell".

**Dr. Annie Prud'homme Génereux** is the Head of Life Sciences at Quest University Canada in Squamish, BC. She hopes to meet a Sea Otter each time she SCUBA dive. She has only ever met their freshwater cousins, the river otters.



Sea Otters swimming in the kelp. Photo by Mike Baird (bairdphotos.com).

You can watch live Sea Otters with the otter-cam at the Vancouver Aquarium at the following address:

**[www.vanaqua.org/ottercam/](http://www.vanaqua.org/ottercam/)**

You can find more information on Sea Otters at the following web sites:

**[www.vanaqua.org/education/aquafacts/seaotters.html](http://www.vanaqua.org/education/aquafacts/seaotters.html)**

**[animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/sea-otter.html](http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/sea-otter.html)**



A Sea Otter. Photo by Mike Baird (bairdphotos.com).