

# Threatened Alaska Sea Otters Get New Protections

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## ANCHORAGE, Alaska

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated 5,800 square miles in southwest Alaska as critical habitat for threatened Alaskan sea otters. The newly protected waters are in the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands and Alaska Peninsula areas. The designation protects shallow near-shore waters where the otters spend much of their time.

Alaska is home to about 90 percent of the world's remaining sea otter population. While the Pacific Ocean once was thick with otters from Alaska to Baja Mexico, they were all but wiped out by over harvesting between 1742 and 1911. Of the remaining populations, Alaska's is the healthiest - but it has recently been in decline, too. In 2005, fewer than 40,000 sea otters were estimated to be living in the waters of southwestern Alaska, down from 100,000 in the 1970s.

Wednesday's decision comes more than four years after the sea otter was officially listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

"There was a pretty severe decline up to the point they were listed," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Bruce Woods. "Since they were listed it has been kind of a mixed bag. Some populations decline, some have stabilized."

The new designation won't impact private individuals, Woods said. What it will do is force federal entities to weigh their activities with effects on sea otter habitat.

"If you're going out to fish for salmon with your kids, you're fine," Woods said. "If you're a federal entity planning to dredge an entire harbor, we're going to need to talk."

Environmental groups say that the critical habitat move is an important first step in preventing the extinction of sea otters, but it's not the answer.

"We must still do much more to ensure their eventual recovery, including protecting offshore habitat and eliminating the threat of oil development in Bristol Bay," said Rebecca Noblin of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Woods said that the new designation wouldn't impact possible offshore oil development in Bristol Bay.