

**Western Ecological Research Center** <http://www.werc.usgs.gov>

## Santa Cruz Field Station

The Year of the Ocean (1998) focused attention on the earth's declining oceans. The sea otter is the keystone species for the nearshore marine environment. Sea otter populations are in decline both in California and Alaska, and the California population is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The lead scientist and staff at the Santa Cruz Field Station conduct research on marine and coastal ecosystems, with special emphasis on the threatened southern sea otter. Science expertise includes behavior and population biology of marine vertebrates, the ecology of marine and coastal ecosystems, inventory and survey techniques, and applied statistics.

Research on sea otters is mandated by the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. For California, this research is the responsibility of the USGS Western Ecological Research Center. The research program is headquartered at the Santa Cruz Field Station, whose offices are on the campus of the University of California at Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz provides access to California sea otters for field studies and university collaboration. An additional research facility is located at Piedras Blancas in San Luis Obispo County.

The main clients are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Minerals Management Service, California Department of Fish and Game, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary (OCNMS), Olympic National Park, other scientists, and various conservation nongovernment organizations, most notably the Friends of the Sea Otter. The sea otter program also coordinates closely with the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission.

Current research projects include population biology and behavior of California and Washington sea otters, including monitoring their status and trends and studying deaths caused by entanglement in fishing equipment, and predation of sea otters in marine ecosystems. In research funded by the U.S. Navy, scientists at the Santa



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Cruz Field Station are studying contaminants in coastal ecosystems of the Aleutian archipelago. A fellowship from the Pew charitable trust funds a study on marine reserve design for the Bering Sea ecosystem. A collaborative effort by USGS, USFWS, OCNMS, WDFW, with funding from USFWS, begins in summer 2001 to assess contaminant loads of Washington sea otters.

### Lead Scientist

**James A. Estes, Ph.D.**, Research Ecologist

- Population analysis
- Historical ecology
- Community ecology
- Marine conservation ecology

### For more information, contact:

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