

SWIMMING ON YOUR BACK



Text and lyrics from “Swimming On Your Back”
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Produced by the Ocean Alaska Science and
Learning Center, National Park Service



Oh sea otter,
swimming on your back
Oh sea otter,
you really know how to relax

Sea otters are the largest member of the weasel family, a group that includes wolverines, minks, ermines, and river otters. They are the only members of this group that live their entire lives in the ocean. Their range once extended from Baja California north through Alaska and westward all the way to Northern Japan. They don't currently occupy their entire historic range, but today, they are found in the coastal waters of central California, Washington, British Columbia, Alaska, Russia and Northern Japan.





The water's cold along the coast,
but your fur coat
keeps you warm as toast
Oh sea otter, swimming on your back

Sea otters are the only marine mammal that does not have a thick layer of blubber to help insulate them from the cold waters of the north Pacific Ocean. Instead, they rely on their fur to keep them warm. Sea otters have the densest fur of any animal known, with as many as one million hairs in a single square inch! So even though they look all wet when swimming around the ocean, their skin beneath stays dry.

Born to swim in the ocean,
you were born to splash and play
Oh baby sea otter,
stay with your mama all day

Most sea otter pups are born in the springtime and weigh just 3 to 5 pounds at birth. They ride along on their mother's chest while she swims on her back. Their fur is so dense, fluffy and buoyant that they cannot dive on their own.





She'll feed you and she'll take good care,
she'll even wash and dry your hair
Oh sea otter, stay with your mama all day

Sea otter pups are dependent on their mothers for the first six months of their lives. The mother nurses them and cleans and grooms their fur, sometimes even blowing her own breath into their fur to help dry it and infuse it with a layer of warm air. Eventually, she teaches the pup to gather its own food.

Little sea otter,
eating all day long
Clams and mussels, abalone,
the list goes on and on

Sea otters have amazing appetites! Along with their fur, keeping their bellies full helps keep them warm. They eat a wide variety of mostly shellfish, and can eat up to one third of their own body weight each day. That means a 60 pound sea otter might eat 20 lbs of fresh seafood every day, day after day. That would roughly compare to an average 8 year old kid eating 18 large pizzas a day!





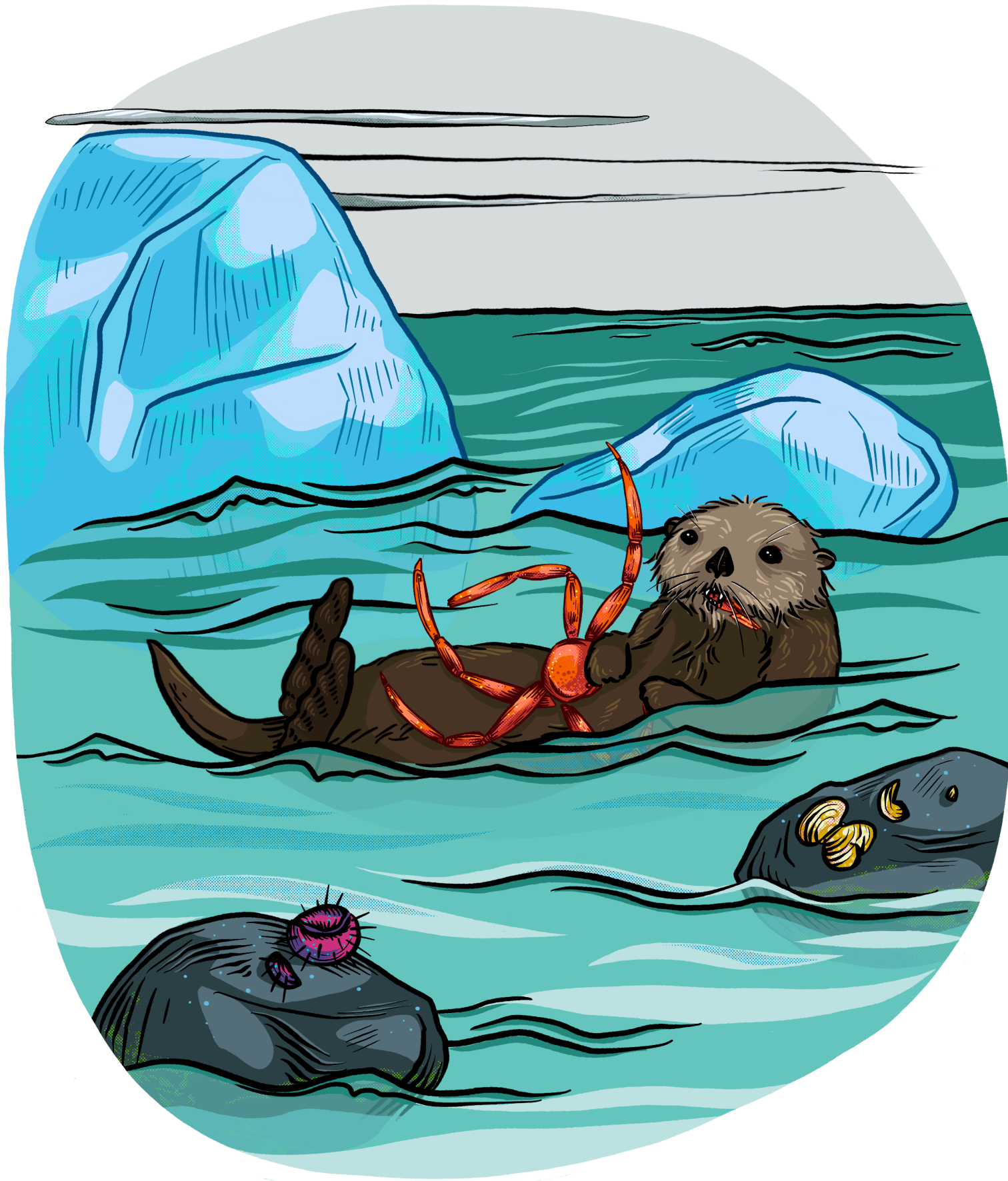
You eat until your belly's full,
then you lay back in your great big pool
Little sea otter, eating all day long

This enormous appetite means that sea otters have a big impact on the areas where they live, removing huge quantities of prey. This outsized impact has led ecologists to label them a “keystone species,” meaning that their presence or absence can profoundly change the surrounding ecosystem. For example, they keep sea urchins, creatures that graze on kelp, in check. This helps create and enrich kelp forests that support a wide variety of marine life along many coastal areas.

Oh sea otter your home is in the waves
Diving rolling, doing the backstroke
splashing all day
Oh sea otter, the tide rolls out and in
And you just lay there floating along with
your great big otter grin

Sea otters spend almost their entire lives at sea, occasionally hauling out to rest on land, offshore rocks, or icebergs. But everything they do in order to survive can take place at sea, including feeding, grooming, resting, breeding, giving birth, and nursing their young.





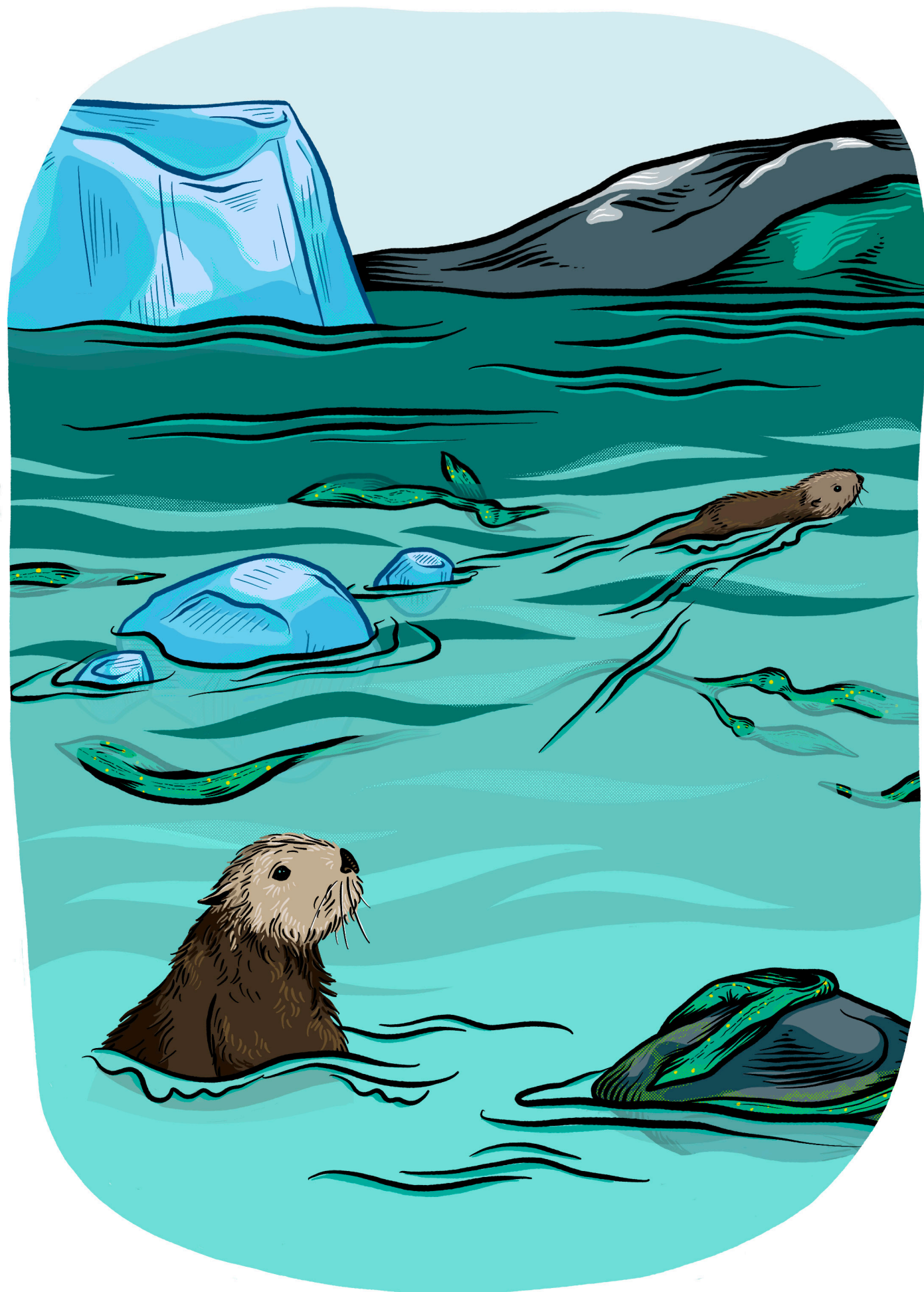
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Oh sea otter,
you really know how to relax

Sea otters were well known to Alaska Natives, particularly the Aleut, Alutiiq, and Tlingit who lived along the coast. They were hunted for their luxurious fur, which was used for making clothing. Otters were believed in some Alaska Native cultures to have originated from humans, and, as such, deserved special respect and treatment from hunters.

The water's cold along the coast,
but your fur coat
keeps you warm as toast
Oh sea otter, swimming on your back

When Russian explorers arrived in Alaska in the mid-1700s, they also took note of sea otters for their luxurious furs and began a targeted harvest, selling most of the furs on the Chinese market. They relied almost entirely on Alaska Natives for their expertise in pursuing and hunting sea otters from kayaks. So many animals were taken that the sea otter was nearly wiped out by the end of the 1800s.





Little sea otter,
how big and strong you've grown
Now it's time to leave your mama
and strike out on your own

Sea otters were protected by an international treaty in 1911 that banned further hunting of them. Their recovery in the North Pacific has been slow over the past 100 years, with some help from efforts to transplant populations into areas where they were no longer found. While they have not re-occupied all of their former range, their population is considered healthy and is growing rapidly in some areas.

You dive beneath the ocean swell
because your mama
taught you oh so well
Little sea otter,
how big and strong you've grown

Sea otters are highly intelligent and are one of few animals known to use tools as aids in their foraging. They have been observed using rocks underwater to dislodge prey such as abalone and they also are known to place rocks on their chest to use as a hard surface for banging and cracking open shells. Use of tools is more common in some populations of otters, suggesting that this behavior is learned and passed along from otter to otter, most likely from mother to pup.





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Sea otter populations continue to expand in some areas, re-occupying parts of their former range. Their population has grown especially fast in Southeast Alaska in recent years. While many people take delight at the sight of a sea otter, not everyone is happy to welcome them back. Their role as a keystone species can have a positive impact on the development of kelp forests, but they are also known to greatly reduce local populations of shellfish. This causes conflict with humans, some of whom have come to rely upon commercial shellfish harvests that blossomed in the absence of otters.

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Sea otters are one of the best examples of successful wildlife conservation at work. Nearly extinct at the start of the 20th century, they have recovered in some regions under the protection of laws and with some active efforts to relocate and reintroduce populations. They remain listed as endangered in some parts of their range, but there is no question that, for now, they have been brought back from the brink of extinction. It took nearly one hundred years, but sea otters prove that with long-term, sustained protection, wild populations of animals can thrive in today's world.



