

# Columbia River Sea Lions FAQ

From Sea Lion Defense Brigade

## Salmon and Sea Lions: Questions and Answers

Here in the Pacific NW, we are experiencing a crisis in the wild salmon population on the Columbia river. While there were once, literally, millions of salmon on this river, there are now less than 1% of the historical runs. This is a complex issue, with many factors to consider. There has been enough misinformation around (eg, people still erroneously believe that these animals are not native to the Columbia, or that they are "exploding" in population, or that we "have to do something" to manage sea lions because we have built this dam), so that it is necessary to educate each other about our own ecosystem. Here are some common misconceptions about the sea lions, along with the real facts. (Forgive me for lumping questions together here and there, but there's so much misinfo out there that this could go on for pages otherwise.)

**Q:** Isn't it true that sea lions are not native to the Columbia river? After all, they're called "sea" lions, and not river lions, right? And these ones are called California sea lions. Don't they belong in the SEA, or down in CALIFORNIA? I've never seen them here before... aren't they really an invasive, non-native, exotic species to the Columbia river bio-region.

**A:** Sea lions have always been on the Columbia river. They have co-evolved with salmon over countless generations. The archaeological record shows sea lions to have been on the Columbia river with the salmon for at least ten thousand years. Bones and other evidence demonstrates that, not only have sea lions been in the Columbia for millennia, they were also once here year round, rather than only passing through in the spring, as they do now. The presence of sea lions, far up into the Columbia, has been recorded in the artwork and stories of Native Americans, who have also been in this region for a very long time. The name "California" simply refers to the area of their largest breeding colonies. But in fact, they are native to the riverine systems up and down the west coast.

**Q:** Aren't sea lions are experiencing a "population explosion," and are therefore out of balance with the ecosystem? Aren't there more sea

lions in the river than the ecosystem can sustain? Shouldn't they therefore be killed on the river in order to restore balance?

**A:** Sea lions are almost certainly not as populous now as they were before humans hunted them nearly to extinction, beginning in the early to mid 1800s. Since no one did population censuses back then, we cannot be sure. However, we do know that sea lions were quite numerous on the Columbia prior to the arrival of white settlers and the fishing industry in this region, and that beginning in the 1800s and all the way into the early 1970s, humans involved with the fishing industry hunted sea lions nearly to extinction. When Lewis and Clark came into the region, they were greeted by 20 million salmon in the river. They also remarked on the vast number of seals and sea lions that they saw here, going all the way up to Celilo Falls. After Lewis and Clark, white settlers moved into this region, and began fishing and hunting on the Columbia. By the late 1800s, there were more than 50 canneries on the Columbia, and they packed more than 40 million pounds of salmon per year. Even back then, at least one US Fish and Wildlife official worried aloud that so much unrestrained over-fishing would damage the runs, and so it has. At the same time that they were over-fishing the waters, fur traders were killing sea lions for their skins, their blubber, their meat (which they often used for dog food), and for entertainment. Later, as salmon began to decline due to over-fishing, humans began killing sea lions because they saw them as competing for a scarce resource. After less than a century of this hunting and over-fishing, both populations were nearing extinction.

At the same time that sea lion numbers were dwindling, so were salmon numbers. So obviously, the connection between salmon and sea lions is not a negative curve. The famous "June Hogs," the summer run Chinook, were all but gone by the 1930s due to human predation, not sea lion predation. This run disappeared altogether with the advent of the dams. Sea lions were faring even worse than the salmon. In the 1930s, the number of California sea lions on the entire West coast has been estimated to be as low as 1000 animals. They hovered near extinction until 1972, when the Marine Mammal Protection Act was signed into law, making it illegal to kill sea lions. Since that time, their numbers have seen a remarkable rebound, due to the absence of human predation. So it is likely that there are, in fact, more sea lions on the Columbia now than any of us remember. However, even though there are more sea lion now that we remember, it is likely that there are nevertheless far fewer now than

there were in the past, before the fishing industry and mass hunting came into the region.

**Q:** Aren't sea lions are coming too far into the river, in search of salmon? Is this a new phenomenon, driven by the growing number of sea lions, and the dwindling number of salmon?

**A:** Not only have sea lions always been in the Columbia, they have also always followed the salmon far up the river. Before the dams were built, the sea lions came even farther into the river – all the way up to Celilo Falls.

**Q:** Even though sea lions have always been on the river, isn't it true that their presence is more problematic now than in the past? Doesn't the Bonneville Dam presents an “artificial bottleneck,” where the salmon congregate and present easy prey for the sea lions? The sea lions sit below the dam and gobble up the salmon. This was not a problem in the past, was it? If the salmon have not evolved to handle this situation, shouldn't those sea lions who habitually come to feed at the base of the dam be killed to protect the salmon?

**A:** Although the dam itself is, indeed, an enormous problem for the salmon, and one of the most important factors in the salmon crisis, this is not because of the sea lions eating fish below the dam. On the contrary, there is nothing new or unprecedented about a bottleneck that slows the fish down, making them a target for sea lions. In the past, that bottleneck was Celilo Falls. And indeed, this is where seals and sea lions tended to congregate for the thousands of years before the dam was built. But, again, even with such a bottleneck, and even with a great number of sea lions feeding on the salmon there, the two species lived in balance and harmony with each other. Despite the “natural bottleneck” at Celilo falls, there were around twenty millions salmon in the river at the time of Lewis and Clark. No, the reason that the dams are harmful to salmon has nothing to do with sea lions. Dams are harmful to salmon because they close off thousands of miles of habitat, because they create deep, warm, slow-moving water where salmon have evolved to live in swift, shallow, cold water, and because the dams, themselves, chew up and kill tens of thousands of salmon each year in their turbines.

**Q:** But isn't Sea lion predation is “out of control” and a “significant factor” in the decline of the salmon?

**A:** According to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the NMFS, sea lion predation is responsible for taking between 0.3% and 4.2% of the spring runs, depending upon the size of the run that year. (It's generally

**Q:** Haven't wildlife officials have tried everything else? Isn't it true that they simply have no alternative to the killing? (This is a myth that is widely reported in the mainstream media, and it goes something like this: They have tried hazing, and it did not have any impact. They need to kill sea lions on the river, because there is no other way to protect the salmon.

**A:** As long as salmon fishing is still allowed in the Columbia and in the oceans in which the salmon live for most of their lives, officials have not “tried everything else.” As long as gill nets are allowed on the Columbia, they have not “tried everything else.” And indeed, the goal of this proposal is to reduce sea lion predation from a high of 4% of the run down to 1% of the run. At the same time, they increased fishing limits from 9% of the run in 2007 to 12% in 2008, so that the number of salmon “saved” by killing sea lions would be offset by the increase in the number of salmon killed by fishermen. Then, they raised the quotas again, and again. In 2012, they just extended the fishing season on endangered Chinook salmon, the very fish whom they say they are “saving” by killing sea lions (see <http://www.dfw.state.or.us/news/2012/April/040512b.asp>).

It is not only fishing that is to blame for this crisis. As long as there are dams with poorly designed fish ladders blocking off thousands of miles of habitat, and chewing up fish in the turbines, they cannot reasonably say they have “tried everything.” Regarding the hazing, contrary to media mythology, the sea lions actually have been responding to these measures. Sea lion predation at the dam IS being addressed with non-lethal harassment that is having some effect. If it is not as effective as we might like, well neither are the measures taken to regulate water flow and quality, to restore habitat, and to solve the problem of dams blocking natal streams as effective as we would like. But they ARE addressing predation just like they need to be addressing these other factors. And these other factors are the real threats to salmon recovery.

**Q:** But aren't officials working to find placements for sea lions in zoos or other accommodations? Surely they will try everything they can before resorting to killing sea lions, right? If they cannot find placements, only then will they resort to “humane euthanasia,” right?

**A:** There have been few firm commitments from any facilities to accept even a fraction of these animals. A few sea lions were placed in zoos and aquariums early on, but zoos are breeding sea lion pups and selling them to each other, preferring the docile, tame pups to the wild ones who know what freedom tastes like and who want to taste it again. Spaces are limited and finite, so that it is unlikely that many more will be found this year, and spaces are not expected to open up for next year either. Most of the sea lions will not be “relocated.” Rather than trapping the animals, officials have granted permission for shooters to kill the sea lions in the water. They are planning to close the area to any observers during this time, since the spectacle is sure to be bloody and difficult to justify. They do not want any witnesses. Sea lions are sure to be wounded, and to suffer if this plan is allowed to proceed. There is nothing “humane” about what has been proposed, and this is not “euthanasia.” This is killing. This is shooting to death gregarious, amiable animals for what amounts to no reason at all. There is no scientific evidence to support the assertion that killing these animals will help the salmon in any way whatsoever.

**[UPDATE: In SPRING OF 2012, SLDB MONITORS DISCOVERED WHAT APPEARED TO BE AN AD HOC SHOOTING GALLERY SET UP TO BEGIN SHOOTING THE SEA LIONS. This information was immediately shared with the legal team defending these animals, and at the last minute the courts declared that, at least during the course of the sea lion trial, THEY CANNOT SHOOT THE SEA LIONS. THEY WILL HAVE TO TRAP THEM. THAT MEANS THAT THEY WILL HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME KILLING THE NUMBER THEY HAD WANTED TO KILL THIS YEAR.]**

**Q:** But didn't a scientific panel of experts determined that this was the only sensible course of action? Who are we to question them? We might not like it, but obviously, if the experts are saying that this is the only way, then why would they lie?

**A:** Actually, almost all of the members of the Pinniped-Fishery Interaction Task Force were heavily tied to the sport, commercial, and/or tribal fishing industry. (And, in the case of former Oregon Zoo director Tony Veccio , people in the animal entertainment industry

whose exhibits might gain from the removal of sea lions.) The one and only member of the panel to vote against the proposal was also one of the only members whose personal and financial self-interests were not served by killing or “capturing” sea lions.

**Q:** Aren't those who are against killing sea lions simply being unreasonable? They are allowing themselves to be swayed by emotional reasoning, right? Aren't they only defending sea lions because the sea lions are “cuter” than the salmon? Don't rational, hard, scientific facts support killing sea lions, in order to save the salmon?

**A:** In fact, the good, hard, scientific evidence does not support killing sea lions. Quite the contrary. There is no indication that killing sea lions would help the salmon situation. There is no scientific support whatsoever to the suggestion that removing a natural predator is beneficial to any ecosystem or any of the inhabitants of that ecosystem. In addition, there is a great deal of irrationality and emotional vitriol going on in support of killing sea lions. Those whose livelihoods and entertainment depend upon the fishing industry are fast and loose with propaganda. But it is both irrational and unreasonable to demand that sea lions be killed to “save” salmon when all the evidence suggests that sea lions are not the detrimental factor to the salmon, and the government itself has admitted that they cannot reliably estimate a reduction in predation or consequent increase to fish survival from removing 85 sea lions each year. The proposal to harm sea lions arose out of politics and financial interests, not out of any real scientific evidence; there is no such evidence.

**Q:** Saving salmon depends upon removing sea lions, right? Even if the sea lions are cute, haven't scientists said that there is just no other way to save the salmon? Must we choose between salmon and sea lions? If we are to save the salmon, don't we just need to make the hard decision to kill the sea lions?

**A: No.** This is a false choice. Salmon and sea lions have co-evolved for thousands of years, as part of a healthy ecosystem. In point of fact, salmon make up only about 10 to 30 percent of a sea lion's diet, according to the Columbia River Inter Tribal Fish Commission. That means that between 70 and 90 percent of their diet consists of other things, often things that would otherwise have presented an even bigger threat to salmon. Sea lions eat lampreys, pike minnows, and

other species that would otherwise either prey on salmon, or would out-compete salmon for food. Therefore, like all large predators, sea lions provide a vital service to the ecosystem, keeping this bio-region in balance. Removing sea lions could mean an increase in lamprey and pike minnow, throwing that system out of balance. Removing a natural predator has **never** been beneficial to any ecosystem, and has never been an effective means of saving a prey species. There are many other factors in the decline of the salmon, which need to be addressed. Killing sea lions does not address any of the true factors that are causing the salmon to move toward extinction. Thus, killing sea lions would only serve as a time- and resource-wasting smokescreen. It is projected that the lethal removal of sea lions from the Columbia will cost in excess of \$450,000 **per year** for this program.

That means that millions of dollars will be wasted over the course of this program. These are resources better spent elsewhere – perhaps on redesigning fish passage through the dams. While sea lions are being scapegoated for the decline of the salmon population, time, energy, and resources that could have been spent addressing the real culprits in the crisis will be squandered. In spite of the enormous expenditure of taxpayer funds that this program is projected to cost, there is no indication that it will be successful by any measure. Similar programs in the past, for example the sanctioned killing of harbor seals in the river prior to 1972, were not successful, and did not result in any benefit. Even wildlife officials are dubious that killing sea lions will have any positive benefit for the salmon. They cannot provide any numbers regarding the impact they expect to have with this plan, and they concede that the sea lions that are killed will only be replaced by other predators to fill this vacant niche – either other California sea lions, or other species. This proposal harms both sea lions AND salmon, because it would mean suffering for sea lions, and it would divert attention and energy away from any real solutions to the salmon crisis, and scapegoating sea lions would distract from the real culprits.

**Q:** Aren't sea lions becoming overly aggressive? Don't we have to remove any wild animals who have lost their fear of humans, and are therefore dangerous? Aren't they jumping into boats attacking people?

**A:** It is humans, and not sea lions, who are demonstrating that they are overly aggressive. Fishermen, who are in the sea lions' natural habitat, taking all of the sea lions' natural prey, are also shooting sea lions. Several dead sea lions washed ashore last year with bullet wounds in them, and others were spotted as they swam in the river or lay on the docks bleeding from bullet wounds. (Still others are injured by fishing tackle, or by becoming entangled in nets.) A Rainier man was cited recently after he shot a sea lion in the river, but most are not caught or sanctioned for this. Humans killed so many sea lions prior to 1972 that they nearly drove them to extinction. No sea lion has ever killed a human on the Columbia in all of recorded history. Now, humans want permission to shoot and kill even more sea lions. This does not sound like aggressive sea lions, it sounds like aggressive people. While sea lions are amiable and gregarious, and therefore do not seem to resent human company as much as some species, they have not “lost their fear of humans.”

On the contrary, humans have lost their sense of reason around sea lions. Sea lions are, in fact, wild animals, and deserve the appropriate respect that should be afforded to any wild animal. But any stroll along the docks where they haul out will show that humans are quite willing to walk right up to 500 lb sea lions, happily snapping pictures or shooing them off the docks. Even so, bites by sea lions are extremely rare. According to most sources, there have been fewer than a dozen “attacks” by sea lions on the west coast in the past century. A human is more likely to be killed by a squid, or a neighbor's dog, than by a sea lion. In fact, a human is many, many times more likely to be killed by another human than by a sea lion. While sea lions are generally quite tolerant of humans coming into their territory and eating their fish, the same cannot be said for humans. Any time a wild animal comes near human habitations, it seems that wildlife managers want to kill the animal, to “protect” the humans. While sea lions have been known to try to haul out into peoples' boats, they do this to warm themselves, and not to “attack” humans. Sea lions are not going around “attacking” people. This is pure propaganda, driven by hysteria. Often, this appeal to fear is made by the very people who claim that those who oppose the plan to kill sea lions are “just being overly emotional.”

**Q:** Don't we need to try anything? Why not at least give this a shot? It might not work to save the salmon, but it won't hurt anything to at least try, will it?

**A:** We are, indeed, at a point where we must make the tough choices that will be necessary to save the salmon. We must address the factors that are really causing the salmon to decline, and must not waste time and resources going after false “solutions.” Breaching some dams and redesigning fish passage through others will not be easy, but it is what we must do if we really care about the salmon. Curbing human predation will also not be easy, as the fishing industry is an important facet of the NW economy. However, if we care about salmon as much as we say we do, then it is time to stop the gill nets, time to severely limit fishing on this river and in the ocean to give the wild salmon a chance to recover. But, far from “not hurting anything to try,” the proposal to kill sea lions would cause a great deal of harm. First, it would harm sea lions. Sea lions are intelligent animals capable of experiencing pain if we inflict it upon them. Killing them causes a great deal of pain, suffering, and harm to those sea lions that are targeted. Last year, we witnessed this first hand from the bank when a sad drama unfolded before our eyes.

A group of sea lions had been playing together in the water all day, singing back and forth. In the early afternoon, some of the sea lions hauled out into the traps, and were caught there. They remained in the traps for hours, with one sea lion outside the traps, calling and calling to the ones inside. They called frantically to each other the entire time that the sea lions were in the traps. When the State came around to haul the trapped animals to their deaths, one sea lion remained outside the traps. We named him Solo. He sat on the rocks facing where the traps had been, calling and calling, forlornly, throughout the night. In the morning, he was still there. He refused to leave the rocks, even to eat or drink, and merely sat there crying. It was very obvious to those who were there to witness this, that he had a broken heart. He stayed in that spot until the next round of trapping, when he disappeared. We fear that, when the traps came back, he may have climbed inside looking for evidence of his lost friends. In any event, with the next round of killings, Solo disappeared and has not been seen since. The killing program also harms salmon, by focusing energy and resources on measures that will not address the real problems. It is also likely that the killing of sea lions could cause harm to the entire ecosystem, since so many natural and important predators have already been removed or greatly reduced, throwing the system out of balance. Biologists and other scientists are increasingly discovering that large predators play a surprising, and

extremely important role in every bio-region in the world, and removing them has almost always caused unexpected and often irreversible havoc.

Finally, this program harms the people who have come to know and care about individual sea lions on the river. Many people who live along this river enjoy the wildlife here, and would feel great pain at the idea of any of these animals being killed. Some people like to dismiss this part of the argument. In fact, I sat in a courtroom while officials with US government and Tribal agencies laughed aloud at the idea of anyone caring about these animals as individuals, and being personally harmed by their deaths. I guess it would be harder to imagine, if I had not spent the past 12 years with the sea lions. I have had them swim up to the docks, suddenly burst from the water next to me, and lay their huge, wet heads in my lap. The ones I know personally \*recognize\* me. If you love your dog, imagine someone deciding to kill your dog and all the dogs like her. That is how it feels to me, every time an animal is caught in these traps. Perhaps this sounds "too emotional" for those who would disagree. Maybe, but it's no more emotional than the screams to "kill all them worthless beasts!" And, unlike the emotional hype on the other side, we also have a lot of facts, studies, and truth in our pockets.

**Q:** Well, even if the sea lions are not to blame for the salmon crisis, aren't they killing off all of the breeding stock to our very important and endangered sturgeon population?

**A:** The California sea lions who are targeted under this plan are not to blame here, either. The NMFS itself has determined that it is not California sea lions who are preying on the sturgeon. According to the NMFS, 98 percent of the predation of sturgeon is by Steller sea lions, not California sea lions. Steller sea lions are, themselves, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, so they cannot be killed, and will not be addressed under this plan. If you have seen a sea lion eating a sturgeon in the river, rest assured that it is almost certainly a Steller sea lion, and not one of the California sea lions being targeted with this proposal. So killing these animals will do nothing to stop predation on sturgeon. Further, Steller sea lions are actually quite responsive to hazing on the river, so there is no reason to resort to "lethal removal" plans to address this situation. Finally, all the caveats that apply to sea lions eating salmon also apply to them eating sturgeon: The species have co-evolved together, and the

presence of the one on the river was never a detriment to the presence of the other. It is human intervention, and not marine mammals, who have caused the problems with the salmon, and it is only by addressing and un-winding these interventions that we can really save the salmon... or ourselves.

Dozens of sea lions have now died in the "lethal removal" program on the Columbia. The States of Oregon and Washington say they will kill hundreds. Every one of these animals is an intelligent, curious, gregarious animal whose only crime is eating. And every one of them loved their lives as much as we love ours.

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