

Otter population dips after years of recovery

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Posted: 06/30/2009 06:35:31 PM PDT

Updated: 06/30/2009 06:35:54 PM PDT

SANTA CRUZ - The California sea otter, whose numbers have only recently begun to rebound from the devastating fur trade, appears to be struggling again.

For the second year in a row, the otter population has slipped, according to a census released Tuesday by the United States Geological Survey, suggesting to researchers that recovery may be further off and perhaps less certain than once thought.

"We're not out of the woods yet," said USGS research biologist Tim Tinker, who works out of the Santa Cruz field station. "We still have some ways to go before we say this is a species that's not threatened."

The 2009 census indicates that 2,654 southern sea otters live along California's Central Coast. While the numbers represent a stark improvement from the 50 or so living when international law stopped the once rampant hunt for the animal's dense coat in 1911, this year's population is down 3.8 percent from last year's.

"This is more than just statistical noise. The trend has leveled off and actually dipped slightly negative," Tinker said.

Before this year, a rise in the otter's population over the past two decades had given hope that the southern sea otter soon would be removed from the Endangered Species List. The move is less likely now.

Researchers attribute the dip in otter numbers to increased disease and immunity problems, which they trace to ocean pollutants like DDT and other stresses on the animal's health, like a lack of food or changes in their near-shore environment.

USGS scientists, who conduct the annual census alongside the California Department of Fish and Game and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, say research is continuing to pinpoint the most pressing problems for the animal.

The Otter Project, a Monterey research group that fights for sea otter protection, sees Tuesday's census results as a setback in the animal's recovery and a call to action.

"Sea otters need clean water," said Otter Project Executive Director Steve Shimek. "We're mucking it up. As we muck it up, sea otters are not going to do as well."

Shimek says its incumbent upon coastal communities to better protect otter habitat and continue to reduce urban and agricultural runoff into the sea.

This year's census isn't the first to mark a stall in otter population growth. The animal's numbers fell slightly in the late '90s for reasons that are still unclear.

The latest census was conducted in May and covered more than 375 miles of California coastline. The bulk of the animals were found along the Monterey Bay and Big Sur.