Sea otters return, nearshore ecosystems change

The sea otter population was virtually absent from nearshore ecosystems of British Columbia (B.C.) for about 100 years. Their numbers were severely reduced from the maritime fur trade that started in the late 1700s.

Sea otters were reintroduced from 1969-72 using a population that had survived from Alaska. They are now recovering and continuing to extend their distribution as they re-occupy their historical range in B.C.

With recovery of this species have come changes to nearshore ecosystems.

Sea otters feed on many invertebrates including urchins, crabs, clams, and abalone. They do so by diving to dig for burrowing animals or by prying them loose from rocky reefs and out of rock crevices.

Sea otters help kelp forests flourish and enhance eelgrass meadows by preying on kelp-eating invertebrates like urchins or digging for clams. This helps create important habitats for other species.

Kelp forests reduce shoreline erosion and, along with eelgrass meadows, act as carbon sinks. Both habitats may be important in the face of sea level rise and climate change.

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