

Chcleset Bay

Ref. No.:

305

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ECOLOGICAL RESERVES COLLECTION
GOVERNMENT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
VICTORIA, B. C.
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ASSESSMENT OF THE B. C. SEA OTTER TRANSPLANTS

Executive Summary

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Report to the B. C. Captain Cook Bi-Centennial Committee

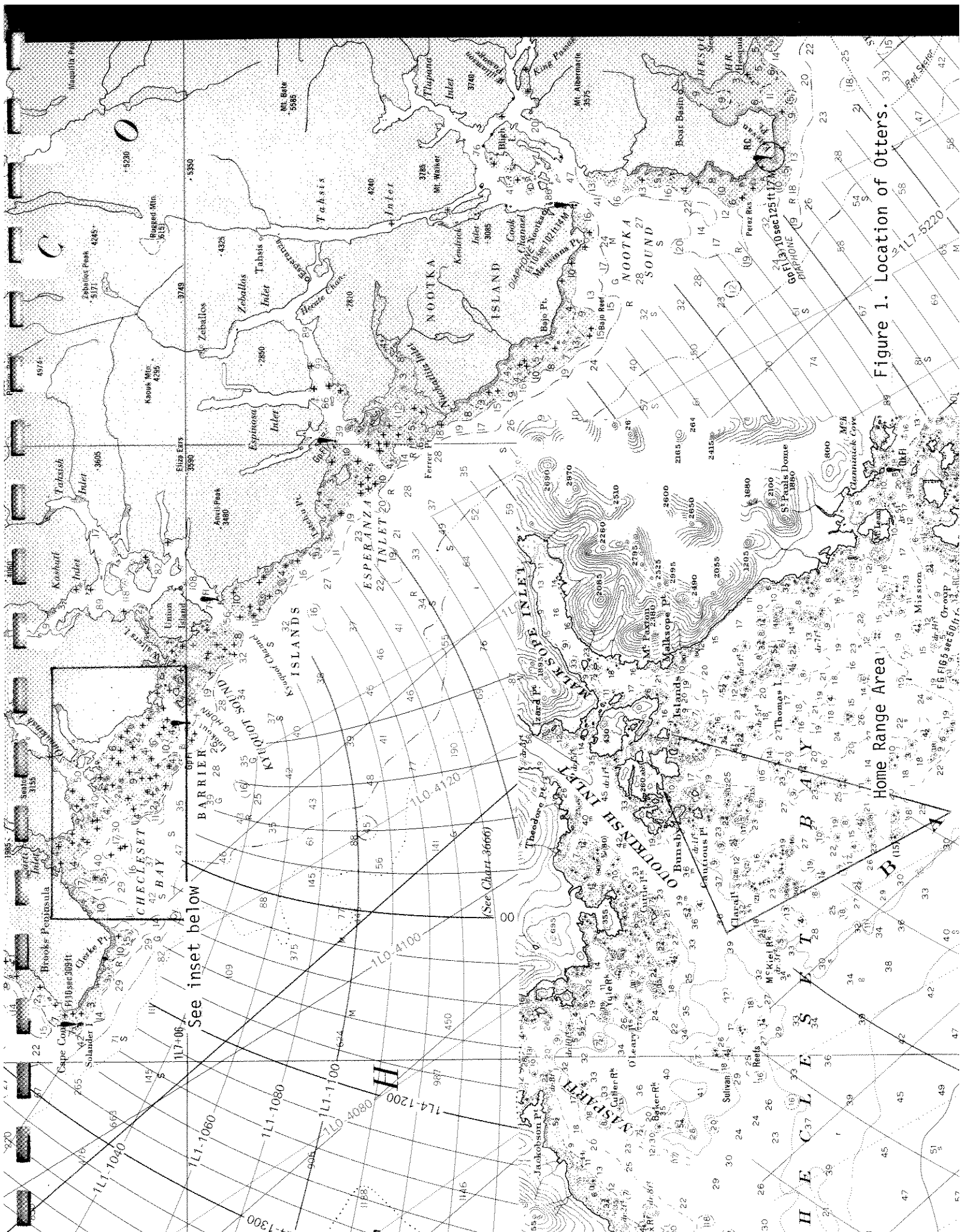


Figure 1. Location of Otters.

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INTRODUCTION

This Executive Summary condenses information reported in detail under the reference, "R. Morris, B. Emerson, D. Ellis, 1978. Assessment of the B. C. Sea Otter Transplants. University of Victoria 'John Strickland' Data Reports, Volume 2."

The sea otter is a species well worth saving for the future. It is attractive, and many aspects of its activities and appearance delight observers. It eats voraciously to maintain its body metabolism in the cold sea, and this has the advantage of controlling sea urchin population explosions now decimating potentially harvestable kelp beds. It also feeds on abalone, which support a small fishery, and thus is in competition with people for this resource.

- urchin fishery?

In 1969, 1970 and 1972 three transplants of sea otters from Alaska were made to the Bunsby Islands, Checleset Bay, north of Kyuquot Village on the west coast of Vancouver Island (See Figure 1). Our project in 1978 was the first detailed assessment of the success of the transplants following an aerial count in 1977.

how many?

An application to the B. C. Government to make the area of the otter transplants an Ecological Reserve has been made, and in this is the opportunity to provide complete protection to the sea otter as an endangered species in B. C. and to their habitat. California and Alaska populations are protected by reserves or refuges. Ecological Reserve status should be granted as soon as possible.

The sea otter is a distinct species from the river otter, and the two do not interbreed. The sea otter cannot be conserved by management of the river otter.

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The B. C. Captain Cook Bi-centennial Committee provided funds to support the transplant assessment in recognition that Captain Cook was the first western European to discover the stocks of "sea beaver". As a result of his discovery, the otter was subsequently hunted to extinction on the B. C. coast, and almost eliminated elsewhere around the Pacific Rim. Small surviving stocks in Alaska have now been managed back to levels of several thousand ^{130,000}, and were the source of the transplants to British Columbia. A much smaller stock in California also survived, and is being slowly managed back to higher numbers. The same success can be achieved in British Columbia.

2000

THE PROGRAMME

The programme was designed to make an inventory of sea otters surviving transplants from Alaska in 1969, 1970 and 1972. Particularly, the inventory was to determine the location of any concentrations of the otters, and whether breeding was occurring. In addition, the inventory was to determine the age structure of the population and the sex-ratio--both important information for future management. Information was also sought on the food supply presently available to the otters, whether the abundant, original supply had been reduced significantly, and the nature of the otters' general response to the Vancouver Island habitat.

Funds and support were obtained from the B. C. Captain Cook Bi-centennial Committee, the B. C. Ecological Reserves Division, the University of Victoria, the B. C. Marine Resources Branch, the Canada Department of Fisheries and Environment, and the B. C. Fish and ^{wildlife} Game Branch. As a result, two scientists were maintained on site at a shore base through June and July, and received logistical and observational support by specialist mammalogists and other biologists at intervals. A list of participating scientists and agencies is provided as an appendix to this summary.

The location of the programme was on Checleset Bay at the Bunsby Islands, between Kyuquot Village and the Brooks Peninsula some ^{90 km} 55 miles north of Nootka Sound. The locations are shown on the chart (See Figure 1).

RESULTS

The inventory recorded counts of 30-55 otters often deployed in two rafts approximately two miles ^{3/4m} apart, and some two to three miles offshore amongst outlying reefs. Many of these otters also aggregated each night into a sleeping raft in the lee of a sheltering islet (Gull Island) about a mile offshore. Pups were seen repeatedly, with a maximum number of seven recorded on several occasions. These were young of the year, still dependent on their mothers for food and care. They could be recognised as such by their light brown fluffy fur, or pelage, and by their screaming calls when left on the surface by their feeding mothers.

A series of photographs with captions follow. They demonstrate the nature of the habitat and the manner in which the otters utilise the area.

Plate 1. A raft of sleeping sea otters 1ies wrapped up in kelp as an aid to prevent drifting during the night.

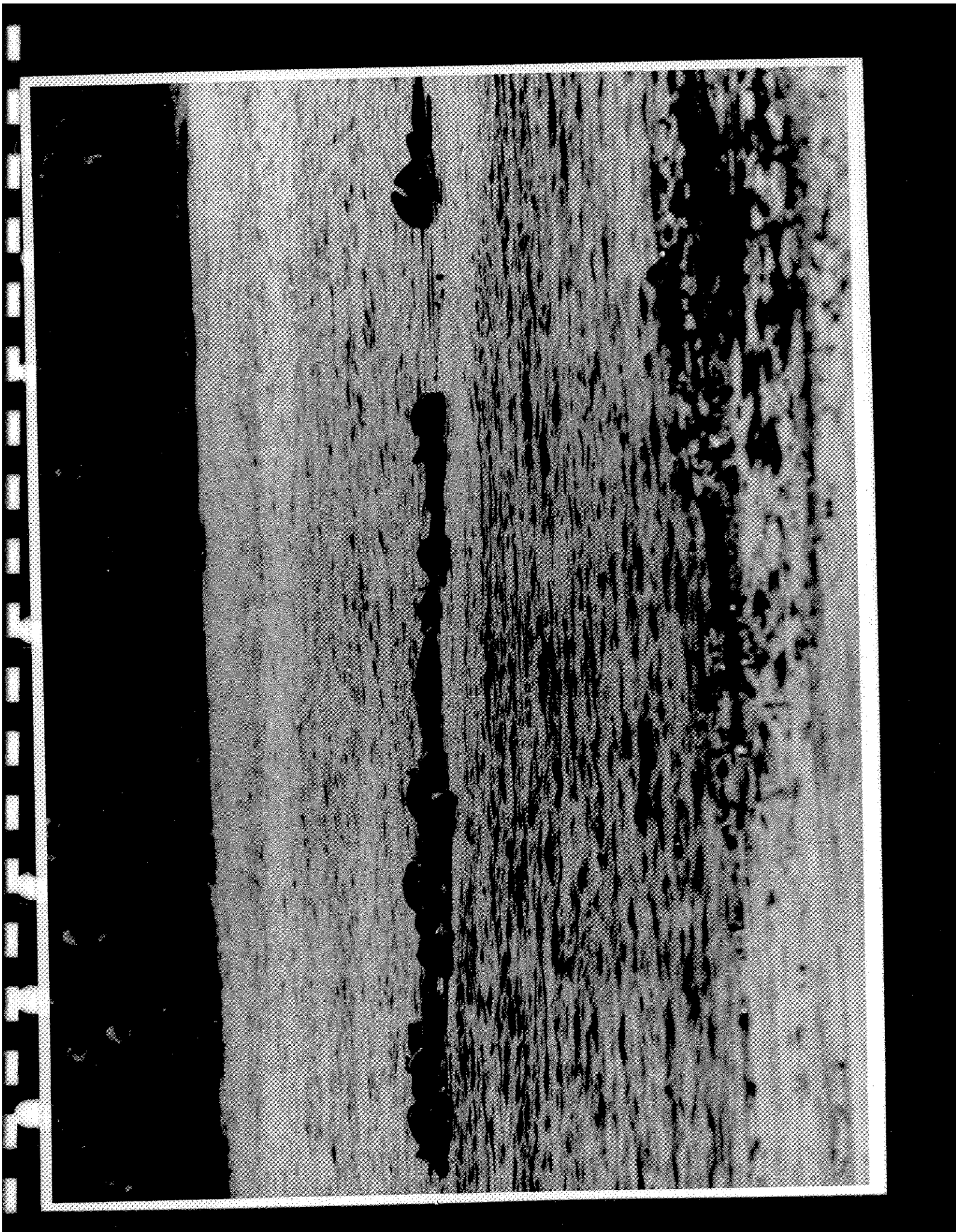


Plate 2. Two sea otters are in the process of waking up at dawn. One is wrapped in kelp still, while the other is grooming its face with its paws. Its hind legs can clearly be seen crossed in a typical posture while inactive.

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[Faint handwritten text]



Plate 3. A mother otter supports her pup, with a male alongside, in a relatively unusual threesome. Normally males keep distant from nursing mothers, but as the pup gains independence from the mother, she may engage in mating activities again.



Plate 4. An abandoned pup, found sick and waterlogged and screaming for its mother, sleeps. In spite of attempts to dry and feed it and return it to its mother, it died of pneumonia 24 hours later.



modified?

Plate 5. The sea otter transplant area is close to industrially logged forest, and unless protection is provided, the area will be exposed to substantially increased boat traffic, creeping pollution, progressively more intensive abalone and kelp harvesting, and other insidious environmental disturbances. In the foreground is a Steller's sea lion. The shoreline, reefs, and open waters of Checleset Bay support a huge variety of marine life besides the sea otters including one of the last remaining stands of native oyster.

