

Important Areas (IAs) were identified for sea otters, Northern fur seals and Steller sea lions in 2006 through interviewing subject field experts and considering relevant literature during the process of establishing Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas (EBSAs) in PNCIMA.<sup>1</sup>

**Sea Otters**

By 1929, sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*) had been hunted to extinction in BC. They were reintroduced between 1969 and 1972.<sup>1</sup> As of 2004, the BC sea otter population included a minimum of 500 animals on the central BC coast and 2,700 along the west coast of Vancouver Island. As the population increases in size, so too will its geographic range of occupation.<sup>2</sup> Sea otters are designated as being of Special Concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and under the *Species At Risk Act* (SARA).<sup>2,3</sup>

Sea otters are considered a nearshore species, typically occurring within one to two km from shore in waters less than 40 m deep. They are non-migratory and individuals occupy small overlapping home ranges in the order of tens of kilometres of shoreline. Sea otters feed on invertebrates such as sea urchins, bivalves, snails, chitons, crabs and sea stars in depths of 30 m or less. Kelp beds are important resting and foraging habitat for sea otters.<sup>2</sup>

Sea otters occur within PNCIMA in two areas. As of 2004, these areas were along the north and northwest coast of Vancouver Island and on the central BC coast from the Goose Island Group to Milbanke Sound. All shallow water habitats found within PNCIMA can be considered potential sea otter habitat, however.<sup>1</sup>

**Pinnipeds**

Five species of pinnipeds are found within PNCIMA: Steller and California sea lions, Northern fur seals, Northern elephant seals, and Pacific harbour seals. Steller sea lions and harbour seals occur year round and breed within PNCIMA. All other species are seasonal migrants, although individuals may also remain year round. Habitat requirements for pinnipeds are land sites such as isolated regions, islets or rocks with water access and refuge from adverse weather conditions that allow for hauling out, breeding and rearing.<sup>2</sup>

The location of pinniped haulouts differs among species and is affected by the size of foraging grounds available around each haulout area.<sup>1</sup> Information available at present does not support identification of IAs for California sea lions, harbour seals or elephant seals.<sup>4</sup>

**Northern Fur Seal**

The north Pacific population of Northern fur seals (*Callorhinus ursinus*) was estimated at 888,000 individuals in 2005. Currently, the Northern fur seal is designated as Threatened by COSEWIC, but is not listed under SARA.<sup>2,3</sup>

The Northern fur seal is a pelagic species, spending only a short period of time on land for breeding purposes, typically in the Bering Sea, during summer. At other times, they are widely dispersed throughout the North Pacific, within 20 to 150 km of shore. It is believed that half of the population may pass along the BC coast during its annual migration, particularly along the west coast of Vancouver Island and Haida Gwaii.<sup>2</sup>



(l to r) Northern fur seal, sea otter, (below) Steller sea lion.  
Photos: Mueller

The northern area of Hecate Strait is considered an important feeding area for a dense aggregation of fur seals, along with a second feeding area between the overlapping waters surrounding the Scott Islands and Queen Charlotte Sound.<sup>1</sup>

**Steller Sea Lion**



As of 2005, the Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*) population was estimated at 18,400 to 19,700 within BC. The Steller sea lion is currently designated as being of Special Concern by COSEWIC and under SARA.<sup>2,3</sup>

Steller sea lions require land sites for breeding rookeries, year-round haulouts and winter haulouts.<sup>2</sup> Steller sea lion haulouts and breeding rookeries are generally within 60 km from a shoreline and are located throughout PNCIMA.

There are only four known rookeries in BC waters, all of which are within PNCIMA. The waters surrounding the Scott Islands is an area of significant tidal mixing where high productivity supports the largest Steller sea lion breeding rookery in BC.<sup>5</sup> Cape St. James off the southern tip of Haida Gwaii is known for its Haida eddies, where plankton is highly concentrated and is the main resource for the second largest rookery. The four rookeries and their surrounding waters (20 km radii) were all identified as IAs.<sup>1</sup>

There are approximately 25 year-round haulout sites in BC, 16 of them falling within PNCIMA. These 16 sites and the surrounding waters used for foraging (50 km radii) were also identified as IAs for this species.<sup>1</sup>

Material presented is drawn from the following literature reviews, which include primary references:  
 1 Clarke, C.L. and Jamieson, G.S. 2006. Identification of ecologically and biologically significant areas in the Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area: Phase I – identification of important areas. Can. Tech. Rep. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 2678: vi + 89 p.  
 2 Heise, K., Ford, J. and Olesiuk, P. 2007. Appendix J: Marine mammals and turtles. In Ecosystem overview: Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area (PNCIMA). Edited by Lucas, B.G., Verrin, S. and Brown, R. Can. Tech. Rep. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 2667: iv + 35 p.  
 3 The Species at Risk Act (SARA) was created to protect species under threat of extinction. Species are assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), then by the federal government, based upon scientific information and consultations, to determine whether those species receive legal protection under SARA.  
 4 Cathryn Clarke Murray, EBSA Phase I and II reports co-author. Personal communication, February 2009.  
 5 Clarke, C.L. and Jamieson, G.S. 2006. Identification of ecologically and biologically significant areas in the Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area: Phase II – final report. Can. Tech. Rep. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 2686: v + 25 p.

