

# Is that sea otter stealing your lunch -- or making it?

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Hunted to near extinction, sea otters are making a steady comeback along the Pacific coast. Their reintroduction, however, is expected to reduce the numbers of several key species of commercially valuable shellfish dramatically, such as sea urchins and geoducks.

Despite of this potential conflict, Kai Chan, an NSERC-funded researcher at the University of British Columbia, believes there is a way to ensure Canadian First Nations fishers can benefit from the otters' presence.

“Efforts to restore wildlife populations should not be played out in a win-lose framework that pits conservation against the economic interests of the local people,” observes Chan, who will be speaking at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Conference in Boston, which runs from February 14 to 18.

While none of these shellfish were major sources of human food before the sea otters disappeared, they have become important to First Nations fishers over the last few hundred years. Given their fears about losing a big part of their livelihood, some of these fishers have even announced plans to hunt the rebounding otter populations.

Chan, however, believes that the impact of the otters will be multifaceted, for example with economic opportunities for local people in ecotourism.

The interaction between environmental and economic factors is made more complex by additional indirect ecological effects. For example, sea otters promote kelp forest recovery (by eating the urchins that destroy kelp) and thus foster a much richer ecosystem. This should greatly boost alternative fisheries for species such as lingcod, rockfish and herring.

Source: Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council

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