



MYSTIC AQUARIUM

California Sea Lion (*Zalophus californianus*)



Size: The male California sea lion can grow to over 7 feet in length and weigh over 900 pounds, while females can reach over 6 feet in length and weigh up to 250 pounds.

Appearance: California sea lions exhibit sexual dimorphism, where there are clear visual differences between adult male and females. Adult females and juvenile males have slender bodies while adult males have bulkier bodies with a distinct crest on their heads and a crown of hair around their neck. They have long broad front flippers with small claws compared to the hind flippers which have less webbed digits and short claws at the end of the digits. Coloration can range from a blond or tan to a dark brown.

Range/Distribution: California sea lions range from as far north as British Columbia, Canada to as far south as Baja California, Mexico

Habitat: California sea lions frequent rocky and sandy beaches of coastal islands and mainland shorelines. They are often seen at marinas, boat docks, jetties and buoys.

Prey: The diet of California sea lions consists of a variety of fishes and invertebrates such as squids and octopuses.

Predators: Humans, orcas and sharks the three major predators of California sea lions.

Mating Behaviors: Male California sea lions will reach sexual maturity at 4 or 5 years of age but will not usually breed until they are 9 or 10 years of age. Females first breed at 4 or 5 years. In spring California sea lions gather at the breeding areas called “rookeries”. Bulls stake out and defend territories. Females come ashore and form “female groups”, remaining with one bull or moving from territory to territory. Shortly after their arrival females give birth to a single pup. 2 weeks after giving birth, mating for next year’s pup occurs. At birth the chestnut-brown pups are 2.5 feet long and weigh about 13 pounds. Females will leave their young pup to feed, returning only to nurse her pup. A mother can distinguish her pup from the large crowd through vocalization and smell. During the mother’s absence, pups gather in groups called “pup-pods” and spend time sleeping, playing, and exploring the rookery. Within a month they are playing in tide pools, developing their swimming skills.

Conservation Status: Least Concern

Threats: In the past, California sea lions have been hunted for food and bounties were placed by commercial fisheries as they were perceived as competition for sea food. Under the protection of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the California sea lion population has increased and the total global population (US and Mexico) is probably around 355,000 individuals.

Currently, it is thought the population is reaching capacity in the US which would increase competition for resources among populations as well as increase interactions with humans.

Despite a healthy population size, California sea lions have felt pressures of human interactions and natural phenomena. Conflicts with fisheries, marine debris, habitat destruction, chemical pollution, disease and weather phenomena have all had negative effects on these animals.

Fun Facts:

- A group of California sea lions is called a rookery or colony.
- A group of California sea lions in the water is referred to as a raft
- A California sea lion can swim up to 25 miles per hour
- The maximum diving depth record of a California sea lion is 1,760 feet and they can dive for as long as 12 minutes.
- A male California sea lion is called a bull while a female is referred to as a cow.
- The Galapagos sea lion, a subspecies of the California sea lion, may number as many as 10,600 animals. The Japanese sea lion, another subspecies of the California sea lion, is thought to have gone extinct in the 1950's.