this value when and if it becomes appropriate.

Mortality. Comment: Several groups questioned the use of calculating the estimated average annual mortality due to subsistence harvest on the basis of a 30 year data set. Some groups believed the estimate of struck and lost was too high. Response: The Service agrees that using the most recent 5-year period to calculate average annual mortality is an approach which more accurately reflects current harvest trends and levels; the value was recalculated using new information from Russian colleagues obtained since publication of the draft stock assessment. While the available information on struck and lost rates is somewhat dated (collected during the late 1960's-early 1970's), it is the only sound scientific information collected to date. The Service believes it is appropriate to use these data until such time as newer scientifically rigorous data can be obtained.

Status of stock. *Comment:* Several groups objected to the draft stock assessment's categorization of the Pacific walrus stock as "strategic." *Response:* Using the new, updated, and adjusted information discussed above and presented in the final stock assessment, the Service has concluded the stock is "non-strategic."

## Northern Sea Otter in Alaska

Single species focus. *Comment:* The stock assessment inappropriately focused on a single species. It should have included Alaska Natives in its focus. *Response:* The stock assessment was developed based on the MMPA requirements and guidance developed for all stock assessments which focused on the status, incidental fisheries take, and other human take of marine mammal species.

Multiple stocks vs. single stock. Comment: The Service was inconsistent on the treatment of single versus multiple stocks. Several commenters suggested that sea otters should be treated as multiple stocks, while others agreed with a single Alaska stock. Response: The Service will continue to consider splitting the Alaska stock of sea otters into multiple stocks if the scientific data supports such a split.

Minimum population estimate. *Comment:* Several commenters suggested that the minimum population estimate was too low since they believed that sea otter populations in Alaska have been growing rapidly. Others concurred with the minimum population estimate. *Response:* The Service is aware of the uncertainty of the population abundance of Alaska sea otters. This is based on the fact that

survey results are dated and variable. The stock assessment followed the guidelines and used the best available information to calculate the minimum population estimate, not the total estimated population. Additional language was added to clarify the variability of survey results. Additionally, the table in the stock assessment was updated to include more recent data that had become available.

Potential Biological Removal. *Comment:* Commenters suggested that the Potential Biological Removal level should not be determined because of the uncertainty associated with the minimum population estimate and the lack of current survey information. *Response:* See "Minimum population estimate" discussion above.

Maximum productivity rate. *Comment:* Several commenters suggested that the maximum productivity rate was too high, while another believed it to be accurate. *Response:* After reviewing public comments and the comments of the Alaska Scientific Review Group, the maximum productivity rate was increased to 20 percent based on information in the scientific literature.

Incidental take. *Comment:* Comments were received describing the incidental take of sea otters by commercial fisheries as insignificant, while another commenter suggested that our incidental take data was inadequate to evaluate commercial fishery interactions. *Response:* The best available information was used by the Service. If more information becomes available, future stock assessments will be modified accordingly.

Native harvest. Comment: One commenter believed that too much information was provided on Native harvest while another suggested expanding the section to describe geographic patterns of Native harvest. Response: Because the focus of the stock assessment was to be commercial fisheries incidental take, other human-caused mortality was generally described. In the case of human-caused mortality to sea otters, this includes Native harvest.

Other human-caused mortality. *Comment:* The comment was received that the section on human-caused mortality should be expanded to include historic information. *Response:* This section was expanded.

## Southern Sea Otter in California

Annual human-caused mortality. *Comment:* Sentiment was expressed that the Service needs to clarify that southern sea otter mortality attributable

to drowning in lobster pots is unknown, but may be a significant contributor to the lack of population growth at San Nicolas Island. It was further stated that this information should be included in the "Fisheries Information" section of the stock assessment. *Response:* The Service agrees; comments were incorporated into the final stock assessment.

Potential Biological Removal (PBR). Comment: Comment was received that the stock assessment should clarify that the NMFS will defer to the opinion of the Service regarding PBR for this species, and that the option of the Service is that incidental take should remain at zero. Response: This comment was noted but not incorporated into the final stock assessment. The section on PBR has been expanded and retains the clarification that the 1994 amendments to the MMPA do not pertain to the southern sea otter. No take is allowed.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing, recovery plan, and translocation effort. Comment: Comments were received that the final stock assessment should: (1) Note the date and reason for listing this stock as threatened under the ESA; (2) indicate that a recovery plan has been developed and is being revised; (3) explain that the Service has attempted to establish a reserve population at San Nicolas Island, California; (4) discuss Public Law 99-625 and the closely associated Management Zone to prohibit range expansion and protect fishery resources; (5) indicate that a number of otters have entered the Management Zone and have died, or may have died, as a consequence of efforts to capture and remove them; and (6) discuss that an uncertain number of sea otters may have been killed in recent years by small oil spills and unusual diseases. Response: These comments were incorporated into the final stock assessment.

Maximum productivity rate. Comment: Comment was received that  $R_{(\max)}$  for the southern sea otter appeared to be closer to 4 percent or 5 percent rather than the 6 percent rate used in the stock assessment and that this should be explained. Response: The 6 percent rate continues to be used in the final stock assessment. The Service believes that adequate data is presented in the "Current and Maximum Net Productivity Rates" section to justify use of the 6 percent rate.

Comment: One commenter believed that the Service should note that before 1985, when such fisheries were prohibited, the take of southern sea otters was far above the estimates of PBR. Therefore, if restrictions on gill nets were lifted, then the southern sea