The influence of wave exposure on the foraging activity of marine otter, *Lontra felina* (Molina, 1782) (Carnivora: Mustelidae) in northern Chile

Mario J. Villegas, Alejandro Aron, Luis A. Ebensperger

Abstract

The marine otter *Lontra felina* has been said to prefer wave-exposed habitats over more protected sites in response to a greater prey abundance in exposed habitat. We examined how the foraging activity of *L. felina* is affected by the regime of wave exposure and prey availability at Isla Choros, northern Chile. Through focal sampling we recorded time spent by otters in foraging, the duration of dives, and the hunting success on a wave-exposed and a wave-protected site on the island. In addition, we quantified the abundance of prey in both habitats. Marine otters spent more time foraging in the wave-protected site compared with the wave-exposed habitat. Successful dives reached 26.9% in the wave-exposed habitats, and 38.2% in the wave-protected habitat. Foraging dives were 18% shorter in wave-exposed as compared with wave-protected habitat. Numerically, available prey did not differ significantly with habitat. Our results are more consistent with the hypothesis that wave-exposed habitats represent a sub-optimal habitat to foraging marine otters. Marine otters' use of wave-exposed patches through northern and central Chile coastal areas probably reflects a low availability of suitable protected areas and greater human disturbance of more protected habitat.