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Sensational Sea Lions

Our newest program, designed for high school students, focuses on the California sea lion as a model for genetic diversity. The scientific community has provided a clue to its residence in the genus and species name, *Zalophus californianus*. These animals are very common on the Pacific Coast, from Vancouver Islands in Oregon, to the San Miguel Islands in California. They are brown in color with a sleek body design, webbed feet and whiskers on their nose. Sea Lions are very playful animals in the water. They can be seen “playing” by body surfing in the waves, chasing their own bubbles, along with twisting and spinning in the water.

Sea lions typically inhabit areas that have a combination of sandy area and large rocks that they can “haul” out on. They prefer areas that are isolated and undisturbed. However, due to land development, these areas are harder to find. Many sea lions can be seen hauling out on channel markers, docks, and other man made structures near shore.

Sea lions haul out as a mechanism to control their body temperature. They huddle together in cooler months to increase body temperature. During warmer times of the year they rest in shallow tidal pools.

The diet of a sea lion consists of a variety of fish, squid and octopuses. Some common kinds of fish include salmon, herring, rockfish, hake and anchovies. They typically forage for food alone or in very small groups. If there is a large school of fish it is common to see a large group feeding together.

There are large herds at Pier 39 in San Francisco and Monterey Bay that can be easily seen and heard. The sea lion has a vocalization that is described as a bark and is used during the mating season to warn of predators, and for social interactions.

Despite the growing numbers of California sea lions, there are threats to these animals. They are hunted by Killer whales, N. Pacific Great white shark, and the Bull shark. Sea lions are affected by El Nino, over-fishing, entanglement and land development. During recent years, El Nino has caused a decrease in fish and has led to a decline in pup survival. Over-fishing has caused the sea lion to search out other food sources. Sea lions are easily entangled in lines and nets due to their playful nature. Some animals can be seen in the wild with nets and lines wrapped around their flukes and pectoral fins as they swim. Land development has led to cohabitation of humans and sea lions.

Sea lions are quick learners and can be seen in aquariums performing, showing off their playful nature; while others are trained for a military career searching for mines under water.