

## Sea otters: Off the 'sins of omission list'?

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Posted: November 25, 2004

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Photo courtesy Peter Hatch

Grand Entry on Aug. 14 at the Nesika Illahee Pow Wow. Tribal Chairman Dee Pigsley is leading Dave Hatch and Lillie Butler of the tribal council. Hatch is wearing a traditional robe made from two sea otter pelts which he believes has not been worn by the Siletz in more than 100 years.

### Elakha Alliance works to bring back species -- Part two

PORTLAND, Ore. - That unmistakable smell of salt water was in the air, and the last golden days of summer turned the Pacific into an expanse of blue. Out beyond the breakers floated what looked like a log with paws sticking up out of the water- a single log. It was a sea otter. The first cited on the Oregon coast in 30 years when an effort to transplant animals in from Alaska back in the 1970s failed.

There was both joy and a disconsolate tone in his voice. "The otters used to be all up and down the coast," said Siletz tribal council member and co-founder of the Elakha Alliance, Dave Hatch, who holds a master's degree in Engineering.

Elakha means sea otter in Chinook jargon, the trade language of the Pacific Northwest during the pre-contact period when thousands of otters lived off the rocky coasts in shallow waters over lush kelp beds. Finally in 1911 after almost two centuries, the hunt for the sea otter was banned. Despite the "500,000 hairs per square inch, or about 50 times more than today's most thickly-maned shampoo models," as Northwest writer Bill Dietrich put it - the 2,000 sea otters that had survived the era were saved. By then, though, the elakha were gone from Oregon.

Hatch looked out to sea, his eyes on the otter. The brim of his cap shaded his 50-something year-old face. "We need the otters back for our near shore environment," he said. "They're what biologists call a keystone species."

Under their protected status, sea otters can only be hunted by Alaska Natives. Still the Siletz tribes and those with whom they are allied, want the otters back to restore balance to a troubled ecosystem. Without the otter, the kelp beds that formerly skirted the coast just offshore have deteriorated under pressure from a booming sea urchin population, a source of food for the otters.

"Every river in Oregon has a local ancient fish weir," said Hatch. "And those fish weirs don't make any sense any more because the fish - salmon and other small fish - that belong in those estuaries aren't there any more."

Ecotrust, a broad-based Portland organization with the mission of building what its calls a Salmon Nation, partners with the Elakha Alliance and is, according to Hatch, "a perfect fit for Elakha because of Ecotrust's focus on helping people establish conservation economies. The environmental groups tend to be hands off, and Native nations are not. The tribes want to be part of the management system just like we've always been."

Member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and Ecotrust Director of the Indigenous Leadership Program, Elizabeth Woody agreed. "We're just very hopeful that we can bring back the richness in the estuaries and the tidal fish weirs. Reintroducing the otters will also change the dynamics of the ocean so that the Coquille tribe can hold the canoe journeys up the coast like they used to. These days, with the kelp beds so depleted, it gets too choppy and the waves break all the way in."

Only clusters of sea otter communities remained after the hunting ban in 1911 and until biologists sited a group of otters off the coast of Carmel, Calif. in 1938, people thought the animals were gone from the lower 48. Eventually, when the Atomic Energy Commission needed a place to relocate otters before detonating atomic bombs on Kamchatka Island in the 1970s, the animals were reintroduced in Washington, Oregon and Vancouver Island, an effort that while meeting some success in Washington and Canada, failed in Oregon.

Enter the Elakha Alliance, an organization formed in 2000 by representatives from coastal tribes, Ecotrust, universities, and the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, along with the zoo and coastal aquarium. The mission of the group is to "prepare the way for the reintroduction of the sea otter to Oregon coastal waters."

During the first year the group won the support of the Siletz tribes and the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, and received a provost's award from Portland State University that paved the way for the beginning of genetic research. In 2001 the Siletz tribes provided \$5,000 and the Oregon Sea Grant put in an additional \$10,000 for scientists at Portland State University to analyze DNA from sea otter bones found in middens along the coast. The first phase of the study has been completed and results indicate Oregon otters were related to California populations, thus potentially explaining

advantageous manner.

Hatch wrote a 2003 article posing the both question and the answer, "Why did Lewis and Clark cross the continent? - To get sea otter pelts." He titled the piece "Clueless and Lark - The Elakha Connection." The sea otter connection.

While the expedition may have been clueless about Indian society, it wasn't about Jefferson's goals. But that was 200 years ago. What Hatch is wondering is if mainstream America is still clueless, or if contemporary Americans are ready to stop committing sins of omission. Certainly the sea otter is as endearing an ambassador as one could hope for. Shining black eyes, whiskers and fur - as Warm Springs tribal member and poet Elizabeth Woody, says is "so soft

it feels like

a breath."

(Continued in part two)

