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January 20, 2002

Ought to be otters here: An alliance wants the critters back on Oregon's coast

By **LARRY BACON** 
The Register-Guard

THERE ARE ONLY SIX of them and their names are Adaa, Aialik, Eddie, Hunter, Oz and Thelma.

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They are the total Oregon sea otter population, a species that was once plentiful along the coast but disappeared around the turn of the century, after 150 years of slaughter by hunters from five countries.

But don't expect to find the six critters in the ocean. Adaa, Aialik and Hunter make their home at the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport while Eddie, Oz and Thelma live at the Oregon Zoo in Portland. Oz, who was born at the zoo, is the only Oregon native.

Historical records indicate that the last of Oregon's original population of sea otters was killed in the Newport area in 1906. By that time, the animals had been virtually wiped out in their historic range, which stretched from the Aleutian Islands, west of the Alaska



An effort is under way to reintroduce the sea otter, like this one at the Oregon Zoo, back into its native

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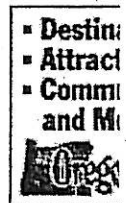
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Islands, west of the Alaska
Peninsula, to Southern
California.

Oregon range.

Photos: **BRIAN DAVIES** / The
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David Hatch, a member of the
Confederated Tribes of the Siletz
Indians, wants to someday re-establish sea otters in Oregon
waters, as has been done in Alaska, British Columbia,
Washington and California.

"It will take a while, but I think they can be brought back," he
says.

Federal agencies tried to relocate Alaskan sea otters to
Oregon's south coast during the 1970s, but the attempt failed.
Some worry that a new relocation effort would end the same
way.

Hatch, a city traffic engineer who lives in Portland, heads an
organization called the Elakha Alliance, formed to work on
bringing sea otters back to the Oregon Coast. "Elakha" is a
Chinook Indian word for sea otter.

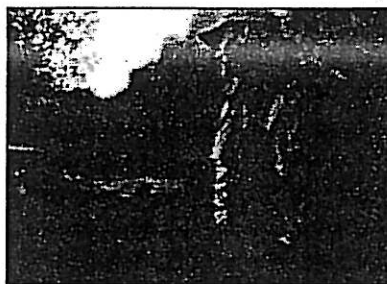
The alliance includes the University of Oregon, Oregon State
University, Portland State University, the Oregon Zoo, the
Oregon Coast Aquarium, the Coquille and Siletz Indian tribes,
the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry and Ecotrust, a
coastal conservation group.

Capt. James Cook, who described otter fur in 1778 as "softer
and finer than any we know of," was the catalyst for the 18th
century North American otter-hunting expeditions that began
with the Russians and eventually lured hunters from Spain,
England, France and the United States.

The otters' highly sought-after
pelts became a status symbol
for members of Oregon's coastal
Indian tribes but also attracted
the influx of international
hunters.

The foreign hunters brought
diseases that devastated the
Indian tribes, and the Russians
enslaved some native otter
hunters from the Aleutian
Islands, where Hatch's ancestors
lived, taking them as far south
as San Francisco Bay.

The historic sea otter population
from the Aleutians south has
been estimated at up to
300,000. Hatch says in the
century before the first wagon



David Hatch is leading a growing
movement to reintroduce the Oregon
sea otter population. "It will take a
while, but I think they can be
brought back."



trains arrived in Oregon, more than a million sea otters had been killed in the northern Pacific Ocean.



When a 1911 international treaty ended sea otter hunting, there were an estimated 500 to 1,000 otters still in their historic range - but none of them in Oregon.

Kim Valentine, a Portland State University graduate student, displays ancient otter jaw bones extracted from coastal middens. The DNA from such bones can help researchers determine which species of otter would do best in a reintroduction program.

The circle of life

It would be good to return sea otters to the Oregon Coast, Hatch says, not only to fill a void in the coastal tribe cultures, but also to restore an important part of the coastal ecology that changed dramatically for the worse after the otters disappeared.

Scientists say the change was profound in some areas.

Sea otters are voracious eaters that consume about 25 percent of their body weight each day, mostly shellfish. A favorite sea otter delicacy is sea urchins, which grow on shallow reefs along the coastline. And the urchins and other shellfish are undersea grazers that consume vast amounts of kelp.

When the sea otters vanished, the sea urchin population boomed and kelp beds went into a sharp decline, especially among rocky reefs such as exist along the southern Oregon Coast, where the state's largest sea otter population once lived.

Deborah Duffield is a professor of biology at PSU who is doing DNA testing of ancient sea otter bones recovered from Indian middens. She describes the ecological decline that occurred after the sea otters were gone as, "Take the sea otters out. Sea urchins come in. Kelp beds go away."

She predicts that a resurgence of kelp beds would increase both the abundance and variety of fish in near-shore areas.

But don't look for a coastline blanketed with kelp if the sea otters return.

Bruce Menge, an Oregon State University marine biologist, says some areas aren't suitable for kelp, and even if the otters came back kelp coverage would remain spotty. There would be larger, more extensive kelp beds, he says, but it wouldn't be a "night and day" kind of change.

Ron Jameson, a Corvallis biologist recently retired from the U.S. Geological Survey, has studied sea otters for more than 30 years.

He says kelp is the foundation of the food chain - the floating plants get their energy from the sun through photosynthesis, then pass it on to creatures that feed on the kelp.

The plants also provide nursery-like areas for fish, he says. The thick vegetation acts as a buffer against ocean turbulence, and small animals that live in the kelp become food for young fish.

A failed experiment

It took only a decade for the transplanted Alaskan sea otters to vanish from Oregon waters.

The federal government moved 93 of the animals from Amchitka Island in the Aleutians chain to Port Orford and Cape Arago, south of Charleston, over a two-year period in 1970 and 1971.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service carried out the operation and - because the otters were being moved to make way for underground nuclear testing on the island - funding was provided by the Atomic Energy Commission.



This drawing, titled "Man at Nootka Sound" (1778) by British artist John Webber, shows a native wearing a three-otter robe, a sign of status and prestige among tribal people.

The transplanted sea otters quickly dwindled, stabilized for a few years, then began a slow decline. The last animal was spotted in 1981.

Why did the relocation attempt fail? Jameson, who helped keep tabs on the otters, has no definite answer.

"It could be that something was just not right," he says. "We did have pups born here. The population looked like it was in good shape. Then it just started to disappear."

Genetics may have had something to do with the failure, Jameson says.

Scientists know there are subtle genetic differences between the California or southern sea otters and the Alaskan or northern subspecies. It could be that southern rather than northern sea otters would have been better suited for Oregon's coastal environment, Jameson says.

It's not beyond the realm of possibility, he adds, that the

transplanted otters had some kind of innate instinct that prompted them to try to head "home." Those that left and were later spotted were found north of the relocation area, he says.

The main goal of Duffield's PSU project is to determine whether the original Oregon sea otters were the southern or northern variety, or a mix of both. She hopes to have an answer later this year, but says her gut feeling is that the original Oregon otters were more closely related to the southern subspecies.

Oregon's coastline is much like California's in that the sea otters would be exposed to more heavy seas than they would be if living among the protected islands off Alaska, Duffield says, so it could be that the southern sea otters evolved to better cope with rough sea conditions.

Otters make a comeback

Although sea otters are absent in Oregon, they have made a comeback in other parts of their historic range.

A small remnant population in the Big Sur area of Northern California built back to a 2001 count of nearly 2,200 animals but had only limited growth over the past decade.

In Washington, the population has grown steadily from 59 Amchitka Island transplants in 1969 and 1970 to 555 animals in 2001.

Jameson says most of the Washington population lives among sheltered reefs and islands off the Olympic Peninsula, an area much less exposed to ocean waves than the previous south coast relocation area in Oregon.

Transplants of sea otters also helped rebuild Alaskan stocks to an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 animals, and the British Columbia population to more than 2,500, mostly off Vancouver Island.

But a 2000 survey showed that the greatest Alaskan sea otter population, in the Aleutian Islands, had declined sharply to about 6,000 animals - a drop of 70 percent since 1992.

Some biologists suspect the decline is because extensive fish harvesting in the Bering Sea has led to fewer seals and sea lions, which are traditional fare for killer whales, and that led killer whales to target sea otters as their main food source.

Jameson says a second Oregon relocation effort likely would have a better chance of succeeding than the first one. He says he would like to see the otters returned as "a missing piece of the puzzle" in Oregon's coastal ecology.

But he sees obstacles.

The project would probably cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, he says, and require sponsorship of a federal agency such as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. And the previous failure would likely cause bureaucrats to think twice about trying again, he says.

Also, with California sea otter stocks static and Aleutian stocks in a tailspin, he says it might be difficult to find enough animals for an Oregon relocation effort.

"I just don't have the feeling there is the stomach for that sort of thing right now within the agencies that would have to be responsible," Jameson says. And he says he has told the Elakha Alliance's Hatch as much.

But Duffield, the PSU biologist, is more optimistic. She says the Oregon relocation plan is an idea that can attract private money. And the fact that Indian tribes, which have a lot of political clout, are behind the project makes it "a different kettle of fish," she says.

Human vs. natural recovery

Hatch has no definite timetable for another effort to bring sea otters back to Oregon.

It will probably happen in his lifetime, he says, but it will be his children rather than him who see the beneficial changes in the ocean ecology.

He's not out beating the bushes for money or government sponsorship at this point.

"We have to define what we are going to do before we ask anybody for money," he says.

That means completing the DNA testing at PSU to determine which subspecies would be best suited for Oregon, and putting together a detailed reintroduction plan, he says.

More important now is a campaign to educate the public about sea otters and about the benefits they would bring to the near-shore ocean ecosystem, Hatch says.

Part of that includes a sea otter curriculum that the alliance is developing for Oregon schoolchildren. He says it upsets him that many people don't know sea otters were once native to Oregon.

Hatch anticipates some resistance to a restoration effort, probably from sea urchin harvesters and possibly from crab fishermen. But he says he hasn't heard any opposition yet and the project is building more and more public interest in the

meantime.

Some biologists, such as Mark Carr at the University of California at Santa Cruz, suggest it might be better to wait and let sea otter populations to the north and the south of Oregon spread across the border and repopulate the state's waters on their own.

Carr contends that forcing otters to adapt to new and unfamiliar surroundings is not only costly but also potentially dangerous to the animals' health, as the first Oregon experiment proved.

Jameson says a half-dozen reliable sightings of sea otters in Oregon waters over the past three years may indicate that a natural rebuilding process has already begun.

The sightings are likely young males from Washington waters that are scouting out new territory, he says.

"Once that happens, you are eventually going to get a viable expanding population," he says.

But Hatch argues that it would take too long for the sea otters to move into Oregon naturally and says it would benefit the species to quickly fill the gap between the existing California and Washington populations.

If otters moved into Oregon naturally, he says, it would be a small population that would be vulnerable to catastrophes such as oil spills.

Humans successfully reintroduced wolves into the Western mountains, he says, and bringing sea otters back to the Oregon Coast could be just as successful.

"It's just meant to be," he says.

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