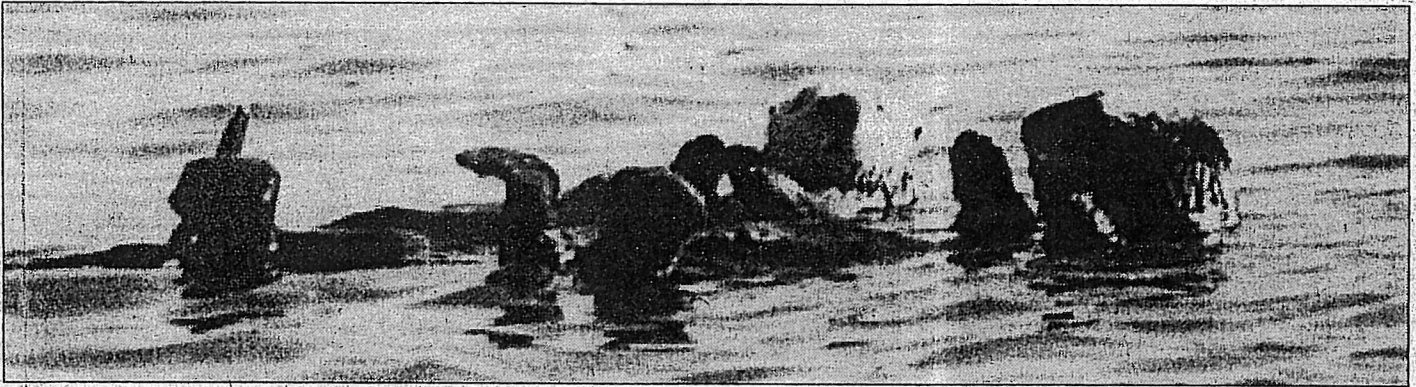


Field Notes CONTINUED



The 4-5 foot long southern sea otter off the California coast may come to Oregon. Photo courtesy Friends of the Sea Otter

The Return of the Sea Otter

By Robin Klein

The adorable sea-otter, hunted to extinction along the U.S. Pacific coast a century ago, may be making a comeback. But it won't be easy. It's not hard to see why the sea otter was killed off by fur traders. Its luscious fur, so thick that one square-inch grows typically 30-50 times the number of hairs on an entire human head, is the thickest of any animal, superior to beaver and river otter pelt. The sea otter's fur insulates the animal (which has no blubber) from cold marine waters by trapping an air layer. Once thriving and abundant — hundreds of thousands of otters swam off Oregon before vanishing by 1906 — zero now remain. More than a million Oregon sea otters were slaughtered.

The southern variety of sea otter, which ranges from Central California south to the Mexican Baja, has been all but completely wiped out. In California, protection efforts have helped the few survivors grow into a small but thriving population. Still, the southern otter is listed as endangered. Some sea otters can also be found off the Olympic coast in Washington, but

they are of the northern variety, native to Alaska where they are planned for listing as a threatened species.

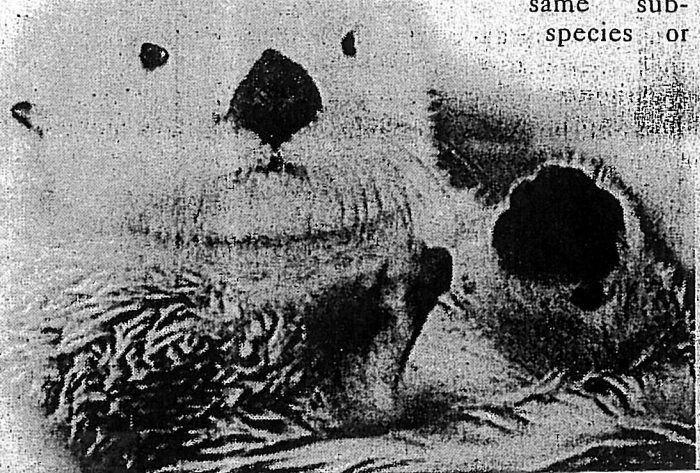
Yet sea otters are still absent along the Oregon coast. And it's questionable whether they would ever make their way back by themselves. But if Dave Hatch of the Siletz Tribes, and EcoTrust of Oregon, have their way, the sea otter will once again frolic along Oregon shores.

Hatch and EcoTrust launched an effort in January aimed at re-introducing the sea otter to Oregon. They formed the Elakha Alliance, which includes representatives of tribes, universities, wildlife agencies, the Oregon Zoo, and the Oregon Coast Aquarium to work on bring-

ing the sea otter back.

But which one? Scientists aren't certain whether Oregon's sea otters were of the southern or northern species. The Alliance recruited Portland State University scientists to collect bone samples of the native Oregon sea otter and compare DNA with the northern species from the Aleutians, and with the southern species from California. To give any re-introduction effort the best chance of succeeding, the Alliance is following guidelines set forth by the World

Conservation Union which calls for re-introduced animals to "preferably be of the same subspecies or



race as those which were extirpated."

Getting the species right is just one of the challenges the alliance faces. Even more difficult may be ensuring a sound ecosystem to sustain an otter population, given the loss of kelp and other damages to Oregon's marine ecology during the last century. Hazards like fishing nets ensnare the otter, while oils spills can destroy the animal's blanket of air, causing them to die of hypothermia.

"The ocean we see today is not the healthy ocean, which belongs here," writes Hatch in a January 2001 article on the *Tidepool* web site. The once extensive kelp beds are missing. All of the sun's energy that used to be converted to food now falls on a desert in an ocean."

In Alaska sea otters have been declining because orcas have turned to eating them. Scientists believe that the whales have taken to otter because of a fish shortage stemming from a collapse of kelp beds. They think the decline of Alaska's sea lions, which feed on sea urchins, has caused a surplus of urchins which overwhelmed the kelp. How do otters fit in here? They like to hang out in kelp beds

and feed on urchins.

The sea otters are critical players in maintaining the balance of healthy coastal ecosystems. The extinction of the otter may have triggered in part the collapse of the very ecosystem that it needs to come back. Which may explain why an attempt to relocate some northern sea otters from Alaska to Oregon in 1970 failed, although an attempt was somewhat successful in establishing the small population in Washington.

"Perhaps those transplanted sea otters were doomed from the moment they were captured," asserts anthropologist R. Lee Lyman of the University of Missouri in *The Oregonian* in March.

Right now the southern sea otter is struggling to survive. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a statement in January forbidding removal of any sea otters from California for re-location because removing them "would likely jeopardize the existence of the southern sea otter." The Service is preparing a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to evaluate new information on the translocation program and expects to complete the EIS and make a final decision by December 2002.

"Over the past 300 years, the sea otter has served as the economic inspiration for European invasion of the Northwest coast, as well as the exploitation and murder of the native people," Hatch says. "Such a plan must wait until the appropriate sea otter population is strong enough, but when the time is right we want to have all the thinking in place to truly welcome Elakha back to Oregon." ■

For more info on southern sea otters, check out Friends of Sea Otters in Monterey, CA: www.seaotters.org For more info on efforts to re-introduce the sea otter to Oregon, see www.tidepool.org.

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Hunted to Death: Fur traders and sea otters

1725 Russian explorer Vitus Bering is shipwrecked on Bering Island in the Bering Sea. Captain and crew survive thanks to sea otter fur. The Empress Anna immediately commissioned a full-length cloak, and the Russian quest for its fur begins.

1774 The Spanish are now murdering the Alaskan natives and the sea otter.

1778 Not to be outdone, the English, led by Capt. Cook finally show up. Just before his return trip to Hawaii, where he managed to get himself murdered by the natives,

Cook noted the potential of the sea otter trade: "The fur of these animals, as mentioned in the Russian accounts, is certainly softer and finer than that of any others we know of; and therefore the discovery of

this part of the continent of North America, where so valuable an article of commerce maybe met with, can not be a matter of indifference."

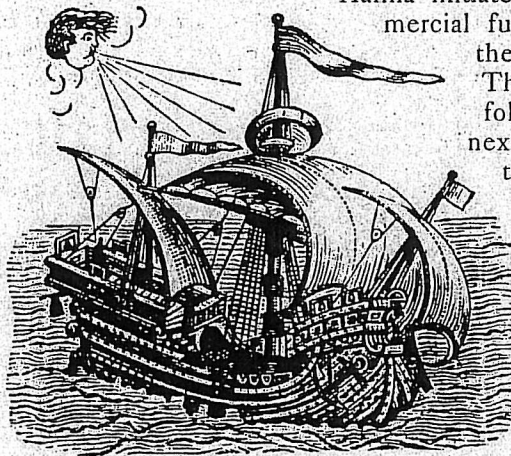
1785 English Capt. Hanna initiates the commercial fur trade for the English. The French followed the next year and the year after that Robert Gray left Boston to represent the

Americans. Russians were landing ships loaded with fifteen thousand fresh sea otter pelts.

1867 The sea otter populations are in such poor shape that the Alaskan Territory was no longer of interest to the Russians and it was sold to the United States. Few remain in Oregon.

1906 Frank Priest and Joe Biggs kill the last native sea otter reported in Oregon in Newport. They sold it for \$900.

—Based on research
by Dave Hatch



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