

Sin of omission - Lewis and Clark, sea otters and the Pacific empire

© Indian Country Today November 03, 2004. *All Rights Reserved*

Posted: November 03, 2004

by: [Jean Johnson](#) / Indian Country Today

[Click to Enlarge](#)



Photo by Jean Johnson
'Elakha Alliance Logo' by Lisa Brown of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. The logo depicts the containment of the sea urchin by Elakha, the sea otter.

Part one

PORTLAND, Ore. - Sea otters are the ultimate couch potatoes. Little whiskery critters munching away flat on their backs in the blue Pacific. At least that's how they often appear to modern audiences checking out National Geographic specials.

But the sea otter's fate has been anything but happy. The animals were the first of the Pacific Northwest's resources to be looted by incoming Europeans, and unlike the salmon runs, the sea otters have not made a comeback - at least not much of one. In fact, many people alive today have forgotten the sea otters were ever here. Taxpayers across the nation spend millions to bring Northwest salmon back and the fish are in the public debate constantly. The sea otter - *elakha* in Chinook jargon, however, goes largely unmentioned and unfunded. A sin of omission.

Sea otters living along the Oregon and Washington coasts during the centuries surrounding the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804 - '06, were prized by Indians and Europeans alike for their fur. The difference was, though, that while the Indians were home, the Europeans were trying to find one.

First the Russians and the Spanish, then the English, and finally the Americans came looking for wealth, jockeying over empires. Initially the rainy Northwest coast seemed uninteresting, but once explorers discovered the fabulous wealth in sea otter pelts, the extractive economy that has marked the region ever since, began.

Sea otters have "rich, darkly-colored glossy fur with shimmery silvery undertones," in historian Carlos Schwantes' words. So dense and exquisite that many of the era found sea otter pelts "among the most attractive natural objects 'excepting a beautiful woman and a lovely infant,'" Schwantes observed in his book, "The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History."

The Chinese agreed and then some. First the Russians took pelts, and then the English. After Captain James Cook sold sea otter furs to China in the 1770s and discovered the fantastic prices they brought, it was all he could do to get his ship back home to England. Seeing the fortune they could make, his sailors came just short of all out mutiny.

Prior to contact, Indians along the coast stitched capes and wove fur robes from sea otter pelts - clothing for revered members of the tribes. What they didn't expect, was that another people would also want the furs, and want them badly enough to hunt them almost right out of existence.

The heyday of the maritime fur trade in sea otters - as distinguished from the inland trade that decimated the beavers - went from the 1790s through to 1812. The Russians, though, started the first sea otter hunts as early as the mid-1700s. The slaughter of the animals continued clear through the 19th century and into the 20th when an international treaty in 1911 finally banned the killing.

Sea otters are small compared to seals and sea lions. About three feet long with a tail that adds another foot and weighing from 40 to 100 pounds. The animals live out their lives in shallow coastal waters over kelp beds. While the sea otters formerly spent part of their existence on land, since the intense hunting, they have rarely been seen ashore. Their range originally ran in a continuous arc around the Pacific Rim from the Japanese islands to the Aleutians in the north, and then down along Alaska and south to the Baja Peninsula in Mexico. Only a few isolated communities were left after the fur trade was halted.

Historian Norman Graebner knows why. As Graebner put it in his book of the same name, the sea otters were hunted out ruthlessly because the nation was intent on building "an empire on the Pacific" focused on finding trade routes - and trade opportunities with the immense and lucrative Asian market.

Siletz tribal council member and engineer for the City of Portland who holds a master's degree from Oregon State University, Dave Hatch agrees with Graebner. Hatch spoke at the 89th Ecological Society of America conference in Portland, Ore. last August. Citing from Jefferson's message to Congress in 1803 and instructions the president gave to Meriwether Lewis that same year, Hatch explained that Jefferson was not only intent on displacing Native peoples but also taking advantage of the fur trade.

"To provide an extension of territory, encourage them to abandon hunting," Jefferson wrote. He also told Lewis and Clark to look for more direct trade routes - the famed Northwest Passage leaders hoped would connect eastern capital to the natural resource bonanzas in the West. Jefferson, of course, also told Lewis and Clark to collect the region's fur in the most

1970s with northern sea otter subspecies.

Armed with that information, the Elakha Alliance has proceeded with a public education program. Hatch is a regular speaker and writer for environmentally-based organizations and publications in the region. And alliance members are working with Ecotrust to create a middle school curriculum that focuses on the sea otter as a keystone species for the Oregon coast. Plans for a book are on the table as well.

The appearance of the first sea otter in Oregon in decades this last summer has the potential of fueling the Elakha Alliance's mission. "After 100 years we finally have a wild otter willing to stay here," Woody said. "You know after 100 years it was just amazing. There's something kind of magical about actually having a sea otter floating out there on the Oregon coast. Plus, sea otters are so cute that this animal might be a spark that gets people to start thinking differently."

Hatch continued, "The sighting of the one animal is encouraging. We hope that's just the beginning and want to see a national marine sanctuary established so that whether the sea otters come back by themselves or via a transplant program, they will have a refuge, a place where the kelp beds have been restored and natural ecosystems are starting to function more like they are intended to."

Woody concurred, "If we can get the sea otters reestablished, we'll have to protect them. They eat a lot of food, and that's why some fishermen don't like them. But you know humans create a scarcity mentality rather than an abundance mentality. The tribes always thought of how generous the earth was to us. Then, if we expressed our gratitude for what we received, it was returned," she said. "It's a very high spiritual stance to feel cared for and know you're always going to have what you need. We've lost that with the way everything's been commoditized and over-exploited. The sea otter is one of the joyful creatures, a creative being that could help bring society back to a saner place if people are willing to listen."

Woody and Hatch and their colleagues in the Elakha Alliance make no bones about it. They want sea otters to resume their rightful place on the Oregon coast. They want the animals taken off the "sin of omission list" and moved into the middle of the discussion. They want the elakha to come home.

