

# Lewis and Clark: The Elakha Connection

*Why Did Clueless and Lark\* Cross the Continent? To Get Sea Otter Pelts*

by [DAVE HATCH](#) | posted 05.07.03 |

He was the first European to walk and canoe across the North American continent. He was determined to find an overland alternative to the long sea voyage around South America for the British sea otter trade. His efforts to explore the Pacific coast were thwarted by his own countryman.

Alexander Mackenzie crossed 1200 miles of unexplored Canadian territory in 75 days. When Mackenzie finally arrived on the Pacific coast on July 21st, 1793, he paddled into a hornets nest.

While Mackenzie was approaching today's town of Bella Bella, George Vancouver's mapping expedition was sailing away after forcing their way into the native homes, fighting and firing "warning shots" at the people. Mackenzie's native guide scouted the town just after Vancouver left.

He returned with a few residents and reported that a larger group was on their way "to shoot their arrows and hurl their spears at us." Mackenzie fled back across Canada. As they were loading their boat to flee, one of his crew "lighted a bit of touch wood with a burning-glass... which so surprised the natives, that they exchanged the best of their otter skins for it."

This skin and another three sea otter robes returned across Canada with Mackenzie. In 1797, one of the skins came into the hands of the American Philosophical Society and one their members -- Thomas Jefferson. As president, Jefferson was quick to obtain a copy of Mackenzie's book and maps when they were finally published in 1801.

Jefferson appreciated the value of fine furs and was well aware of the ongoing sea otter trade. In fact, ten years prior to Mackenzie's trip he had proposed an American expedition across the continent led by William Clark's father. He tried three times to propel a land expedition across the continent. He even went so far as to personally support John Ledyard's 1786 solo trek across Russia from Europe to reach the NW Coast of America and cross from west to east. The Russian people possessed the capacity and good sense to arrest and detain Ledyard.

By 1802 Jefferson had George Vancouver's published maps which included a description of the lower 100 miles of the Columbia River as well as the location and name of Mount Hood and today's City of Vancouver.

In January 1803 Jefferson sent his secret letter to Congress calling for an expedition to "explore ... to the Western ocean, have conferences with the natives on the subject of commercial intercourse, get admission among them for our traders as others are admitted, agree on convenient deposits for and interchange of articles, and return with the information..."

In the letter Jefferson presents his true motive for developing the fur trade:

*"The Indians ,... have for a considerable time been growing more & more uneasy at*

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*the constant diminution of the territory they occupy ... and the policy has long been gaining strength with them of refusing absolutely all further sale on any conditions,... In order to peaceably counteract this policy of theirs, and to provide an extension of territory ,... two measures are deemed expedient. First, to encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply ... to agriculture and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land & labour will maintain them ... better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless.*

*Secondly to multiply trading houses among them, & place within their reach those things which will contribute more to their domestic comfort than the possession of extensive, but uncultivated wilds. Experience and reflection will develop to them the wisdom of exchanging what they can spare & we want, for what we can spare and they want."*

*--Jefferson's Message to Congress, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1803*

Thomas Jefferson was very specific in his instructions to Captain Meriwether Lewis in June of 1803:

*"Should you reach the Pacific ocean inform yourself of the circumstances which may decide whether the furs of those parts may not be collected as advantageously ... as at Nootka sound, or any other point of that coast; and that trade be consequentially conducted ... more beneficially than by the circumnavigation now practised."*

Nootka Sound was the center of the ongoing sea otter trade.

What we now call the Lewis and Clark Expedition started out in September of 1803 armed with excellent maps of their destination. They also carried nearly five hundred pounds of *"Indian Presents"* including *"small cheap looking glasses, small cheap scizors, tin rings cheap kind ornamented with colour'd glass or mock stone, brass curtain rings sufficiently large for the finger,"* etc.

About 750 days later (a little slower than Mackenzie) this government sponsored trip found the Pacific Ocean. On November 20th 1805, across the Columbia River from today's town of Astoria, the "Corps of Discovery" acquired their first two sea otter robes. The Chinook natives who traded with the Corps did not have a lot of use for curtain rings. The only item they would trade for was Sacajawea's own precious beaded belt.

The Corps was never able to trade for sea otter robes during their winter in Oregon:

*One of the party was draped in three elegant sea otter skins which we much wanted; for these we offered him many articles but he would not dispose of them for any other consideration but blue beads, of these we had only six fathoms left, which being four less than his price for each skin he would not exchange nor would a knife or an equivalent in beads in any other colour answer his purposes."*

*--Lewis' Journal January 17, 1806.*

The Corps did trade for one more two-sea otter robe in a large village just below today's town of Ridgefield, Washington while they were returning east.

Upon his return, Lewis' first letter to Jefferson reports, *"I have brought back with me several skins of the Sea Otter."* Curiously, the large collection of materials delivered to Jefferson did not list sea otter pelts.

One *"handsome dressed sea otter skin"* is included in the 1809 list of the personal effects of Meriwether Lewis after he chose to end his life. There are many later listings of his estate for his creditors, but the sea otter skins mysteriously disappeared in history.

Let's remember the actual purpose of the Lewis and Clark Expedition as we approach the

bicentennial. Elakha and the nations of Oregon's coastal people suffered the full impact of the Thomas Jefferson's policies. The fur trade eliminated Elakha from Oregon shores and federal policies took all the land and "terminated" all the native coastal people of Oregon. Very recently the native coastal nations have restored themselves.

The last sea otter in Oregon was killed one century after Lewis and Clark left Oregon. Perhaps, two centuries after their departure, the native coastal nations will be allowed help Elakha restore themselves.

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\*Robert Frazer began questioning the relative accomplishments of Lewis and Clark in 1807. Families maintaining the tradition use this term as a humorous reference to the pair.

*David R. Hatch is a member of the Confederated Tribes of the [Siletz Indians](#) of Oregon, Ken Hatch's son and Peter Hatch's dad. To pay the bills, he's an Engineer for the City of Portland. He tries to focus his efforts on helping out programs successful in increasing the numbers of American Indian engineers and scientists, but he got side tracked a little when he was asked to serve on the committee that named the Research Vessel Elakha. He is one of the founding members of the Elakha Alliance which is dedicated to restoring the sea otter to Oregon waters in order to restore the near shore ecosystems.*

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