

Oregon's Elakha

The Sea Otter has played a leading role in Northwest History.

Is it time to bring them back to Oregon's Coast?

by [DAVID R HATCH](#) [posted.01.04.01]

A keystone species of Northwest Coast ecological systems, the Northern Sea Otter is now almost gone. 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. Today Sea Otter ambassadors living in the Oregon Zoo and the Oregon Coast Aquarium are the only examples of this once plentiful species in the state. Writer [David Hatch](#) traces Elakha's threads through history and argues for the development of a restoration plan for returning the Sea Otter to Oregon's coast.

This is a story without a beginning or ending.

For the sake of a beginning we'll start with a queen, actually a Russian Empress named Catherine. At the time she was known as "Her Imperial Majesty Empress Catherine."

In 1725 she sent [Vitus Bering](#) on a five-year journey to find out if in fact her kingdom extended to the Americas that were being invaded from the east by the Europeans. Although Vitus sailed right through a narrow strait separating two continents, the weather was so lousy he never saw the continent just to the east.

Upon Vitus' return the new empress -- Her Imperial Majesty Empress Anna -- sent Vitus Bering on another five year journey to look farther for more answers to the same question.

On this trip Vitus and his crew in their ship the St. Peter, overextended themselves. Many of the crew along with the Captain were not able to survive the winter in the sea we call the Bering Sea shipwrecked on an island just off the coast of Russia, which we call Bering Island.

Those who lived through the winter survived because of the natural curiosity of a beautiful and abundant animal, which was relatively easy to kill. This animal gave them both their food and their clothing. In those parts the animal was called Kalan, here in these parts the animal was called Elakha, but most of us know this animal as the Sea Otter. The survivors returned with over eight hundred pelts. Empress Anna immediately commissioned a full-length cloak.

This trip was almost as successful for the Elakha and my family on the Aleutian Islands as it was for Vitus Bering. The fur of the Elakha provided the motivation for the Russian invasion of the Americas. In their quest for fur, the Russians brought along their unfamiliar diseases and soon learned to enslave the decimated families by taking the young girls; wives, daughters and sisters hostage in order to force the men to hunt for fur, even during the winter storms. After a few years in one spot the otter and people populations were pretty much removed and it was time to move on to the next island.

While the Russians were exploiting their way south, word was spreading of the valuable fur trade. This inspired an extension of the Spanish invasion northward in 1774. Within a year the Spanish were going about their business murdering the Alaskan natives and the sea otter.



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Not to be left out, the English, led by [James Cook](#) showed up in 1778 and started renaming the geographic features so recently named by the Russians and/or the Spanish and trading a night with a daughter for a pewter plate. Just prior to 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."

Just seven years later in 1785 Captain Hanna returned to the area in his ship the "Sea Otter" to initiate 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 Americas. All of these trips were inspired by the exploitation of Elakha.

This rush to exploit provided the initial contact between the invaders and the people of the Oregon Coast. Prior to this contact Elakha was an important part of the peoples lives. The second most common marine mammal bone in our middens were the bones of Elakha.

While [Lewis and Clark](#) were strolling across the continent with their particular Corps of Discovery, the Russians were landing ships loaded with fifteen thousand fresh sea otter pelts. Over and over the pattern of depopulation was being repeated as the Russian invaders continued their way south. By 1810 the Spaniards were killing the enslaved Aleut hunters as poachers in the San Francisco Bay. Fort Ross, just sixty-five miles north of San Francisco, was established in 1812 and stands today as a tourist attraction and monument to the extent of the Russian invasion.

By the time the wagon trains were arriving in Oregon it is estimated that more than a million sea otters had been slain along the Pacific Coast. The sea otter populations were in such poor shape that the Alaskan Territory was no longer of interest to the Russians and it was sold to the United States in 1867. In Oregon the story of Elakha looked like it was coming to an end. The sea otter was about to assume the distinction of being Oregon's first population wiped out by the various invaders.

In 1877 an Englishman named Wallis Nash traveled with his English friends from the new town of Corvallis to a little settlement called Newport. Here he reports:

"I remember well after supper that evening we three Englishmen went into "Bush" Hammond's store to chat and smoke. A smoking wall lamp lighted the place. As the doorbell jingled a couple of Indians came in out of the dark, one carrying slung over his shoulder, some long, dark beast which he jerked on the counter before the store-keeper. Moseley pricked up his ears and came to take notice. From nose tip to tail the animal was about four or four and a half feet long, plainly of the otter type --- the fur dark brown and glossy: but the feet were webbed. "I have never met this before," Moseley said to me. "It is the sea otter of the Pacific." The Indian began to dicker with "Bush" for the hide : the bidding started at two hundred dollars, and Moseley's face fell, for, by slow degrees it went to four hundred, and changed hands at that. The price was too high for him, and he had to content himself with the skeleton, which we arranged to have cleaned by the ants at a neighboring ant-heap in the wood. In due time that skeleton followed him to Oxford, and took its unique place in the Museum of Natural History. Even then these sea otters were rare --- now they are all but extinct."

Wallis Nash returned to Corvallis and helped to start what's now called [Oregon State University](#).

[Chain Out of Whack From Exn.ca](#)

[Sea Otter Essential to West Coast Ecology From Environment Canada](#)

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[Ecotrust](#) has established the Elakha Alliance Fund. All donations to the fund are dedicated specifically to the DNA analysis described in this article.

[The Oregon Coast Aquarium](#)

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[Facts About Sea Otters](#) From the Vancouver Aquarium

[Focus On Sea Otters](#) From the Monterey Bay E-Quarium

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Frank Priest and Joe Biggs killed the last native sea otter reported in Oregon in Newport in 1906. They sold it for \$900.00.

[The Otter Project](#)

In 1910 less than thirty sea otter skins were taken in the entire Pacific Northwest.

In 1910 the [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#) sent a sixteen-year-old Aleut orphan from Alaska to the [Chemawa Indian School](#). This orphan is my grandfather, Nick Hatch.

[Friends of the Sea Otters](#)

In 1910 a local census listed nine surviving Siuslaw people along the Siuslaw River near today's town of Florence. Fifty years earlier two thousand three hundred Siuslaw people were estimated to be living along the river. By 1914 two of the nine were dead and an eleven-year-old orphan was shipped to the Chemawa Indian School. This orphan is my grandmother, Hattie Martin.

In 1911, another census estimated that there were between five hundred and a thousand surviving sea otter in thirteen small colonies between Mexico and the Aleutian Islands. The 1911 Fur Seal Treaty signed by Russia, Japan, Britain and the United States and a 1913 federal law in the United States effectively ended the harvest of sea otter. There were no sea otter in Oregon.

Sixty years pass. The surviving sea otter populations are making a comeback in Alaska and California and the Atomic Energy Commission needs to do some testing. The place chosen for the tests, Amchitka Island, is conveniently just a few islands away from Russia but it happened to be populated by a protected species, Kalan, the sea otter. This situation was resolved in the time-tested way of gathering the natives and shipping the survivors to Oregon and Washington.

In 1970 thirty-one extirpated sea otter were deposited on the Oregon coast near Port Orford and the next year sixty-four more sea otter were added to the population that survived the first year. These animals were observed by young researchers from Oregon State University including Bruce Mate and Ron Jameson. Their study showed the sea otters wanted to go home and did.

Thirty years pass. The sea otter is still missing from the Oregon Coast but the other surviving sea otter populations are holding their own. The two orphaned children who met in Chemawa have six children, ten grandchildren and twelve great grandchildren. Oregon State University has just commissioned their new [Research Vessel Elakha](#).

We have learned much in these thirty years. We know that the [Elakha is a keystone species](#). Losing Elakha resulted in a sea urchin bloom which clear cut our kelp beds and destroyed the homes of animals and fish that relied on the beds. The fish which were trapped in the river fish traps of the original Oregonians are missing. The ocean we see today is not the healthy ocean which belongs here. 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.

Today we know that the northern population of Sea Otter is genetically dissimilar from the southern population. Very recently we acquired the scientific tools to determine which population is most similar to Oregon's Elakha. This will be done with DNA comparisons using DNA extracted from the skeleton collected so long ago by Wallis Nash and from the archaeological record recovered from our middens. Once we know which population was most similar to our Oregon population we will know which direction we need to look if we can ever be serious about restoring the health of our ocean.

Just a year ago, a handful of people knew the word Elakha. Today maybe thousands of people know the word yet the vast majority of Oregonians think we have Sea Otter along our coast.

This will change.

We have wonderful Elakha ambassadors now in the [Oregon Zoo](#) and the [Oregon Coast Aquarium](#). Perhaps the time is right for the citizens of Oregon to learn and work in cooperation with all interested parties to develop a restoration plan for Elakha.

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.

At this time Dave is trying to help find some funding for the DNA research which needs to be done on the scraps of the Oregon sea otter population. He's also trying to put together a coalition of folks interested in developing a well thought out plan for the restoration of the sea otter population in Oregon. The idea is to have all the thinking in place if there is another opportunity in the future to translocate an appropriate population. You [can contact him here](#)

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