

Tribe Supports Elakha – Sea Otter

The Siletz Tribal Council approved a resolution in January to become a member of the newly formed Elakha Alliance, and appointed "Tribal Council member JoAnn Miller, the Cultural Resources director, and the Natural Resources manager" to represent the tribe in this alliance.

The Council also decided to support efforts to develop a plan to re-introduce the Elakha and the eventual restoration of the Elakha to the Oregon Coast.

The following article traces the history of the sea otter and is written by tribal member David Hatch.

Elakha

by David R. Hatch

This is a story without a beginning or an 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 and were shipwrecked on an island just off the coast of Russia that 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 more than 800 pelts. Empress Anna was overwhelmed and 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.

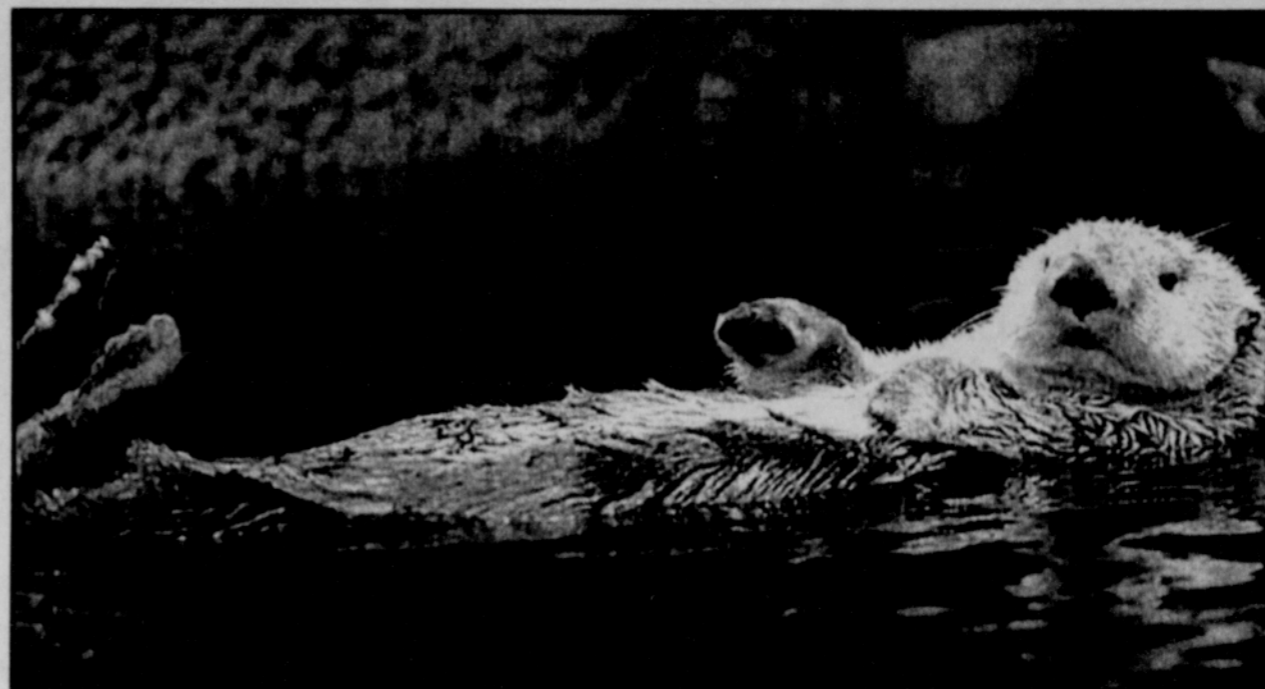
While the Russians were exploiting their way south, word spread of the valuable fur trade. This inspired an extension of the Spanish invasion northward in 1774. Within a year, the Spanish were going about their business murdering the Alaskan Natives and the sea otter.

Not to be left out, the English, led by James Cook, showed up in 1778. They 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 may be met with, cannot be a matter of indifference."

Just seven years later in 1785, Capt. 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 people's lives. The second most common marine mammal bone in our middens were the bones of Elakha.



Sea Otter - Elakha

While Lewis and Clark were strolling across the continent with their particular Corps of Discovery, the Russians were landing ships loaded with 15,000 fresh sea otter pelts. Over and over, the pattern of depopulation was repeated as Russian invaders hopped from island to island. By 1810, the Spaniards were killing the Aleut hunters enslaved by the Russians as poachers in San Francisco Bay. Fort Ross, just 65 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 arrived in Oregon, it is estimated that more than 1 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 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 (OSU).

Frank Priest and Joe Biggs killed the last native sea otter reported in Oregon in Newport in 1906. They sold it for \$900. In 1910, fewer than 30 sea otter skins were taken in the entire Pacific Northwest.

In 1910, the Bureau of Indian Affairs sent a 16-year-old Aleut orphan from Alaska to the Chemawa Indian School. This orphan is my grandfather, Nick Hatch.

In 1910, a local census listed nine surviving Siuslaw people along the Siuslaw River near today's town of Florence. Fifty years earlier, 2,300 Siuslaw people were estimated to be living along the river. By 1914, two of the nine were dead and an 11-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 500 and 1,000 surviving sea otter in 13 small colonies between Mexico and the Aleutian Islands. The 1911 Fur Seal Treaty signed by Russia, Japan, Britain, and the United States

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