



Sea otters off the west coast of Vancouver Island.

Photos by James Thompson

Study supports return of sea otters to coast

Ecological and ecotourism gains

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

A study of sea otter restoration in British Columbia is giving encouragement to a group that wants to bring sea otters back to the Oregon Coast. A research report in the June 12 issue of the journal Science found that the return of sea otters yields far more in ecological benefits and ecotourism dollars than in costs to commercial fisheries.

The research team led by the University of British Columbia analyzed the rebound in sea otters off the coast of Vancouver Island. The researchers wrote that the return of the keystone species from near-extinction resulted in healthier kelp forests, which in turn could store carbon and spur increased fish populations and catches.

“We found that coastal ecosystems with otters present are almost 40% more productive,” said lead author Edward Gregr, an ecologist at the University of British Columbia. “In the long run, that equates to higher fish catches worth \$9 million (Canadian), carbon storage worth \$2 million and tourism opportunities worth \$42 million per year.”

But the rebound of the undeniably cute marine mammals came with tradeoffs, chiefly by depressing harvests of crabs, clams and urchins valued by commercial fishermen and Native people. Gregr noted the costs and benefits are distributed unequally across fisheries and communities, which creates conflict.

Sea otters are voracious eaters and that makes West Coast crab and sea urchin fishermen nervous. According to the Seattle Aquarium, sea otters consume around 25% of their body weight in food every day to stay warm and survive in the cold Pacific Ocean.

The overall study results heartened Elakha Alliance executive director Bob Bailey. The nonprofit he leads from Albany is dedicated to the return of sea otters along the Oregon Coast.

“We’re optimistic that as the evidence mounts that sea otters are a valuable part of the ecosystem and economy of coastal areas that we’ll be able to move this forward,” Bailey said this week. “It’s not going to happen anytime soon because we have a lot of work to do yet.”

Sea otters were transplanted from Alaska to Oregon in the early 1970s, around the same time as reintroductions in British Columbia and Washington state, but they didn’t stick in Oregon. The Elakha Alliance has begun a feasibility study for bringing them back again and is looking for funding to do an economic impact analysis.

Sea otters were hunted to local extinction off the Pacific Northwest coast as part of the fur trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. The current Washington state population of around 2,000 animals stems from 59 sea otters that were relocated to the Olympic Peninsula coast from Alaska’s Aleutian Islands in 1969 and 1970. Washington’s sea otters are now spread out between



A sea otter in the waters off Vancouver Island.

Point Grenville on the Quinault Reservation and Pillar Point in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Occasionally, one or two Washington sea otters are spotted exploring Oregon waters, but those wandering animals have not stayed.

Bailey said Oregon does not have as much suitable sea otter habitat as Vancouver Island’s wild coastline. The Oregon Coast would probably support many fewer otters than the flourishing population in Canada, but he was still confident the university’s study results have relevance to Oregon.

“The conclusions they came to about potential impacts on some ocean harvesters, as well as the tourism industry, broader ecosystem benefits and so on, we think those are directly applicable to the state of Oregon,” Bailey said.

The modelers involved in the newly published British Columbia study acknowledged that monetary estimates cannot capture all of the costs and benefits, particularly when it comes to coastal indigenous communities. The loss of basic foodstuffs in remote communities — crabs and clams, in this case — could force more reliance on imported food.

“It reduces humans and human values to dollars, and so it is really quite alien to the worldview of Nuu-chah-nulth and other indigenous peoples,” said Eric Angel, program manager for Uu-a-thluk, the fisheries department of the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council. The council represents fourteen related tribes on the west coast of Vancouver Island. In an interview with NPR, Angel asked rhetorically, “Whose worldview gets to define how the problem is even set up in the first place?”

Elakha Alliance outreach director John Goodell, who is also a conservation biologist, said the nonprofit was making a concerted effort to listen to Native voices. The original co-founder of the Elakha Alliance, the late Dave Hatch, belonged to Oregon’s Siletz Tribe. Current Siletz and Coquille tribal members sit on the organization’s board of directors.

Coastal Oregon tribes have supported taking a hard look at reintroduction in hopes of potentially restoring a significant species their ancestors coexisted with for uncounted generations.

Gratitude for dads

Dear Readers: Happy Father’s Day! In this poem, William Wordsworth celebrates being able to see the world through his son’s eyes. He celebrates the childlike wonder that his son has, a playful curiosity that is too often lost in adulthood.

Being a great father includes being empathetic to your child and seeing things from their perspective to meet them where they are. There is nothing more powerful than when a dad gets down on his knees to meet his young son or daughter on eye level. It is through this type of understanding and compassion that a child will develop healthy self-esteem and know that they can do and be anything in this world. The greatest gift a dad can give a child is to believe in them.

“Anecdote for Fathers”
*I have a boy of five years old;
His face is fair and fresh to see;
His limbs are cast in beauty’s mould,
And dearly he loves me.
One morn we strolled on our dry walk,
Our quiet home all full in view,
And held such intermitted talk
As we are wont to do.
My thoughts on former pleasures ran;
I thought of Kilve’s delightful shore,
Our pleasant home when spring began,
A long, long year before.
A day it was when I could bear
Some fond regrets to entertain;
With so much happiness to spare,
I could not feel a pain.
The green earth echoed to the feet
Of lambs that bounded through the glade,
From shade to sunshine, and as fleet
From sunshine back to shade.
Birds warbled round me — and each trace
of inward sadness had its charm;
Kilve, thought I, was a favored place,
And so is Liswyn farm.
My boy beside me tripped, so slim
And graceful in his rustic dress!
And, as we talked, I questioned him,
In very idleness.*

Dear Annie: I am writing to tell you

my story about adopting a child and hope it will help others. Back in the 1980s, my wife and I were considered an “infertile couple.” After years of trying, we were unable to have children. So, with much thought, we decided to adopt.

Adoption was a very long and time-consuming process. One of the requirements was to write a brief history of how you grew up. I wrote about playing catch with my dad in the weeds in the backfields and how he took the family on vacations almost every year.

Back then, our state had what they called “semi-closed” adoptions — only medical information was divulged. When we submitted our stories, our caseworker went through them to redact any identifying information. Those stories, along with other information, were part of our file. Our files were given to the birthmothers. They would go through the stack of files to make their choice of parents for their child. When we submitted the stories, our caseworker told us that it’s just a waiting game, and that it could be another two or three years.

To our surprise, we got the call only two weeks later. A baby boy! We couldn’t believe it! I asked our caseworker why so soon. She confessed that, after she read my story, she thought we would be picked quickly. She explained that birthmothers aren’t looking for mothers; they are looking for fathers. They look for adoptive fathers who had a good relationship with their fathers. I’ve never forgotten that and tried to spend as much time with him and my other sons as I could. Please, dads, spend as much time as you can with your children. It will pay more dividends than you realize. — *Forever Grateful Dad*

Dear Forever Grateful Dad: Thank you for your heartwarming letter. You sound like a wonderful, caring father. Your gratitude for your father is heartwarming, and I believe that same gratitude will continue with all your sons. Bravo! Happy Father’s Day to all the dads out there.

DEAR ANNIE



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