

# OREGON'S ELAKHA

## Sea Otter has a Rich History on the Coast

*The sea otter has played a leading role in Northwest History. The last known sea otter killed in Oregon was in 1906.*

### THE SEA OTTER, continued from page

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.

Not to be left out, the English, led by James Cook showed up in 1779 and started renaming the geographic features so recently named by the Russians and the Spanish. Just prior to his return trip to Hawaii, where he was killed 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 the 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.

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 in-

### Key Species No Longer

— The Sea Otters that used to flourish on the Oregon Coast no longer exist. These bones and this hide were collected by Siletz Tribal member Dave Hatch in his pursuit of knowledge about this one-time keystone species. Otter pelts led to the invasion of the Americas because of their rich, thick fur. The loss of the otters on the Oregon Coast drastically changed the ecosystem of a century ago.

vaders continued their way south. By 1810, the Spaniards were killing the enslaved Aleut hunters as poachers in the 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 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 storekeeper. 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 hundreds, and changed hands at that. The price was too high for him and he had to content himself with the skeleton, which he arranged to have cleaned by the ants at a neighboring ant-heap. Even then these Sea Otters were rare — not they are all but extinct.

Wallis Nash returned to Corvallis and helped to start what's now called Oregon State University.

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, less than 30 Sea Otter skins were taken in

the entire Pacific Northwest.

Also 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.

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 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, 31 extirpated Sea Otter were deposited on the Oregon coast near Port Orford and the next year 64 more Sea Otters were added to the population that survived the first year. Young researchers from Oregon State University including Bruce Mate and Ron Jameson observed these animals. 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, 10 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. Oregon State University has just commissioned their new Research Vessel Elakha.

We have learned much in these 30 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 or 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 time is right for the citizens of Oregon to learn and work in cooperation with all interested parties to develop restoration plan for Elakha. ■



Photos by Justin Phillips

### DAVID HATCH, continued from front page

Sea Otters spend the majority of their lives in the tidal zone. The committee named the boat Elakha, which means Sea Otter.

"She's a 54 footer; a beautiful boat," Hatch said. "OSU has a tradition of giving their vessels Native American names."

That's when Hatch met up with Elizabeth Woody, a Warm Springs and Navajo Native. Together they began the process of trying to educate people about the plight of the Sea Otter on Oregon's Coast. Hatch also got involved with the Elakha Alliance, an organization that advocates the preservation of Sea Otters.

"Most people in Oregon think we still have otters, but the last Sea Otter in Oregon was killed in 1906," He said. "A lot of people see river otters and think they're Sea Otters."

What's the difference between a Sea Otter and a River Otter?

"A Sea Otter is quite a bit bigger," Hatch said. "And its diet is more specialized. This is very important to the ecosystem because the otters control the herbivores and urchins that feed on the kelp. Kelp is very important in the production of oxygen."

"The otter was also very important to the Natives living here pre-contact," Hatch said.

"Otter skins were used as a sign of wealth, in the form of the three otter skin robe. To give you an idea of how much one of these robes were, when Lewis and Clark came through, they tried to trade for one, but didn't have nearly enough wealth."

"The Natives also considered the otter to be their relatives, like the salmon," Hatch said.

"The ocean and river system my father grew up with is not there anymore. He got to see an ecosystem I never got to see," Hatch said. "...But maybe my son will get to see." ■



"Otter skins were used as a sign of wealth, in the form of the three otter skin robe. To give you an idea of how much one of these robes were, when Lewis and Clark came through, they tried to trade for one, but didn't have nearly enough wealth." — Dave Hatch