

Recovering the sea otter

Repeated attempts to reverse the disappearance

By Nancy McCarthy
Cannon Beach Gazette

Once upon a time, there were sea otters on the Oregon coast. Thousands of them. Places were named after them: Otter Rock, Otter Point. Their population stretched from northern Japan to Mexico.

"They were really important to the culture, the diet and the life ways of the native peoples that were here, and it had been that way for thousands of years," said Bob Bailey, a board member of Oregon Shores Conservation Coalition and retired director of Oregon's Coastal Management Program.

Bailey spoke about the otters' disappearance and a current effort to bring them back during the Sharing the Coast Conference in Cannon Beach March 2.

Otters were important in sustaining the coastal ecological system that, in turn, supported the people living on the Oregon coast, Bailey said. "They were important culturally as well as ecologically."

But otters also were valuable for their fur, and, from the 1740s through the mid-1800s, Russian, British and American hunters trapped them. "There were 12,000 to 15,000 otters a year being taken off the northwest coast," Bailey said. In all, an estimated 300,000-500,000 sea otters were killed.

By the time John Jacob Astor's



NANCY MCCARTHY/FOR CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Bob Bailey, a board member of Oregon Shores Conservation Coalition and retired director of Oregon's Coastal Management Program.

fur-hunting company showed up in Astoria in 1810, sea otters were already scarce, Bailey said. "In a very short time these animals were turned into an industrial commodity and virtually wiped out."

An effort to bring back the sea otter occurred in 1970 and 1971 when 93 animals were moved from the Aleutian Islands and released at Redfish Rocks, Port Orford and Cape Arago in Oregon.

Although they remained a few years, eventually the population disappeared for reasons still unknown, Bailey said.

However, sea otters still swim on the southern California coast, Washington's Olympic Coast, around Vancouver Island in British Columbia and in southeast Alaska.

In California, the population is steady at 3,100, which is at capac-

ity for the area. They don't swim north or south, possibly because of sharks, Bailey said. Occasionally, a few stray sea otters, probably from British Columbia, are seen on the Columbia River and the north Oregon Coast.

Sea otters are a "keystone species," that significantly affects the structure and function of the ecological environment surrounding them, Bailey said. Because they eat the sea urchins that graze on kelp, the kelp forests — and everything that depends on kelp — thrive when sea otters are around.

"So their effect on the environment is huge," Bailey said.

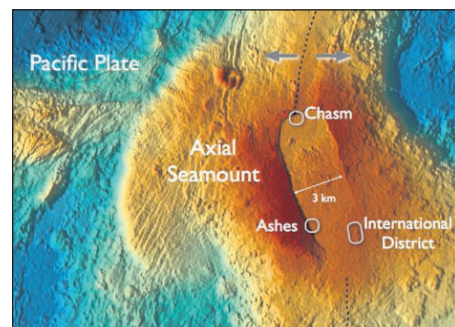
Kelp forests, which are limited in Oregon, capture and store carbon, create nutrients and increase biological productivity by protecting larvae and juveniles from waves. "Just like the forest on land," he added.

"The question is, without sea otters what's the health of the Oregon near shore system?" Bailey asked.

Oregon Shores has joined coastal tribes, researchers and others in organizing the Elakha Alliance to work on returning sea otters to Oregon. But such an effort is fraught with variables, Bailey admitted.

"Returning a species to the wild is not an easy task or a certain task," said Bailey, comparing the project to the three-decade effort to bring the California condor back.

"In the end, nature bats last.... Despite what we think we might do, we may not be able to do anything," Bailey said.



OREGON SHORES CONSERVATION COALITION

Map of Axial Seamount.

The most active volcano in the Northwest

The talk in the "The World of Haystack Rock" series features Bill Chadwick, research professor at Oregon State University's Hatfield Marine Science Center. His presentation, titled "Axial Seamount: The Most Active Volcano in the Pacific Northwest," takes place Wednesday, March 14.

The free lecture is the latest installment of a series held the second Wednesday of each month 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Cannon Beach Library (131 N. Hemlock St.).

Chadwick's research interests include investigating how magma is supplied and stored at active volcanoes, how lava is emplaced during submarine eruptions, and how underwater eruptions affect the chemistry and ecosystems of hydrothermal vent sites.

The final talk this season, taking place April 11, will be "Life in the Coastal Edge," with Katie Voelke, director of the North Coast Land Conservancy.

The "World of Haystack Rock" series is sponsored by the Friends of Haystack Rock. The Friends group supports the Haystack Rock Awareness Program in cooperation with the City of Cannon Beach, promoting the preservation and protection of the intertidal life and birds that inhabit the Marine Garden and the Oregon Islands National Wildlife Refuge at Haystack Rock.

Retired naval officer shares maritime history at museum

The Cannon Beach History Center and Museum welcomes marine archaeologist Chris Dewey on Thursday, March 15, at 4 p.m.

Retired naval officer Dewey teaches archaeology and anthropology at Clatsop Com-

munity College, and President of the Maritime Archaeological Society. Headquartered in Astoria, the society was created to help document and share maritime history with the public.

Dewey will discuss the

tools, techniques, and strategies used to discover and investigate shipwrecks and their histories.

The Cannon Beach History Center and Museum is a private nonprofit that endeavors to make history available to

all by offering donation-based admission. All lectures are free and open to the public. The museum is located at 1387 S. Spruce St. in midtown Cannon Beach. For more information visit www.cbhistory.org.

Polar climate saga comes alive

On March 18 at 1 p.m. producer-director Pamela Theodotou presents "Guliyu," a climate film on the Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center.

"Byrd 1933" will also be shown Monday, March

19, at 4 p.m. at the Cannon Beach History Center and Museum.

Beverages will be served. Suggested donations for both performances are \$5.

For more information, contact 310-804-9753.

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