

ONCE NEARLY EXTINCT, SEA OTTER THRIVES AGAIN

Remarkable Sea Otter Again Swims And Occupies Former Old Habitat

If you are alert, these days, when you are fishing in southeastern Alaska, you may be rewarded with a glimpse of a unique and remarkable animal, the sea otter.

They are again in this part of Alaska, after a long absence and the story of their demise and eventual reappearance is an intriguing one which takes us back two hundred and twenty six years, to a bleak August 26, 1742.

On this date, a crippled and badly leaking ship, the St. Peter, hove into sight off Petropavlovsk, Kamchatka. Aboard, a haggard crew, survivors of Vitus Bering's expedition, crowded the deck, rejoicing in their deliverance from death.

They had discovered Alaska, subsequently shipwrecking on hostile Bering Island, where they suffered through a winter, subsisting on the flesh of sea animals.

As she limped to safe harbor, the little St. Peter bore a cargo which would determine the history of Alaska: 700 sea otter skins!

Sea otters, it was learned, were abundant along the American coast from the Aleutian Islands to California. Soon Russian adventurers embarked eastward in quest of furs. Voyage after voyage sailed to Alaska and returned laden with rich furs to invest in a lucrative trade with China.

British, Spanish and American interests joined in the slaughter. By 1900 sea otters were almost extinct. In 1911 the International Fur Seal Treaty included a provision protecting the few remaining sea otters.

Since then, sea otter populations have re-established themselves and they are again numerous today in the Aleutian Islands and Prince William Sound. Another herd survives in Monterey Bay, California. However, between their present ranges is a 2000 mile gap, the coasts of southeast Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and Northern California. Formerly this area supported great numbers of sea otters.

This summer, in an ambitious effort to begin filling this gap, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, in cooperation with the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission, moved a plane load of very irritated and protesting sea otters from Amchitka Island in the western Aleutians to southeastern Alaska.

Under the direction of Alaska biologist, John Vania, specially prepared floating nets were set in kelp beds along the Amchitka coast. Otters frequent kelp beds where the seas are usually less violent and where clams, sea urchins and other food is more abundant.

The nets caught careless and curious sea otters alike, at a rate of about 50 per week. Captive otters were held in large tanks and fed octopus and bottom fish. Whenever 50 had been accumulated, they were caged, one otter each in small holding pens and loaded aboard a huge prop jet transport plane.

Soon they were speeding over the Pacific, 2,000 miles to southeast Alaska. Once in southeast

Alaska, at such places as the Sitka or Annette Island airports, the otters were transferred to amphibious aircraft and shuttled immediately to the release sites.

At the conclusion of the project in mid-August, 302 sea otters had been transported and released in southeastern Alaska:

-25 near Cape Spencer, Glacier Bay Monument.

-30 in the Yakobi Island area, near Pelican.

-93 in Khaz Bay, Chichigof Island.

-48 in Sitka Sound.

-55 in Barrier Islands near Metlakatla.

-51 south of Heceta Island near Klawock.

-In addition, 56 have been released with the air of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on the coast of St. Paul Island, the southernmost of the Pribilofs.

A sea otter is easy to recognize, as nothing else looks quite like it. The outstanding characteristic is its mode of swimming: on its back. If you are not too close when you spot it and the otter has not been frightened, it will continue to float on its back and observe you.

The face is comic, large flat nose, small serious eyes, tiny pointed ears and a great bristling moustache of white whiskers. As it eyes you with suspicion it may start to clean itself with its small forepaws. Its fur is dark, dense and of exceedingly fine quality.

Sea otters must keep their fur clean for they depend on it for insulation against the cold sea. Cleaning occupies much of a sea otters time. First its chest is cleaned, for this is where food particles fall.

It grabs a bit of its loose skin between its forepaws and begins to clean it with circular motions -like a person with a cake of soap in his hands. Next, its whiskers and chin, then the top of its head, behind its ears, under arms, etc.-until it has cleaned itself thoroughly.

The large hind flippers are another sea otter trademark. They are usually visible when the otter is on its back. Sometimes they are raised above the water and look like small dark sails. When frightened sea otters usually surface dive, head first, unlike seals which usually duck their heads beneath the surface.

Sea otters have few natural predators. The most immediate danger to the success of the transplant is people. Seal hunters and fishermen who will be in the transplant areas are urged to study the accompanying photographs to avoid mistakenly killing a sea otter for a seal.

Perhaps one day soon, though public cooperation and a little good fortune, our waters will once again be bountiful with otters. If so, a tragic and sadly familiar story in the log of our vanishing wildlife heritage will have been reversed, and we will all have the pleasure of observing and becoming acquainted with the delightful sea otter.

Positive sightings of sea otters provide valuable information for the Fish and Game staff. Reports of such sightings are appreciated. Contact your local Fish and Game office.



The "Old Man of the Sea."



A SEA OTTER in typical pose. Note small eyes and ears, short forepaws.



And, "Ahhh!" rolls over onto his back in the refreshing sea. He has flown over 2,000 miles in

confinement and now luxuriates in his new home.



John Vania, Biologist-in-charge of the Sea Otter Transplant, holds a young sea otter pup. Only one pup is born every two years. Mother otters are very solicitous in caring for their pups.