Otters!

In the hands of an Aleut, the baidarka was a most efficient craft. It was paddled over the water at what all European navigators later considered an astounding rate, able to make ten miles an hour. No one but a skilled Aleut who had grown up in a baidarka could manage with any satisfaction the skin-covered shell.

(Adele Ogden: The California Sea Otter Trade.)

Danish sea captain Vitus Jonassen Bering discovered the economic worth of the Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*) while working for the Russian Czar, Peter the Great. Bering died on that voyage but his crew took 900 Sea Otter pelts back to Russia with them, many making their way into the Chinese fur market. The exceptional quality and beauty of the sea otter’s fur soon made it the most sought after pel in Chinese trade, a status symbol for the Mandarins. They wore it as belts, capes, and trim on silk robes, and in every aspect the fur took on the name ‘soft gold.’ Each pelt brought 80 to 100 rubles, equal to the average annual salary of a laborer working for a fur company in the North Pacific. A year’s pay for a single kill—the Fur Rush had begun!

As elsewhere and thanks to the fur trade, the way of life of Native Alaskans in the North Pacific was forever changed. Little did they know just how far from home that change would carry them.

The Native Alaskans or Aleuts were master kayak-hunters. The hunting of sea otters was a well-practiced tradition for them, but they did so in a respectful and sustainable manner, considering the otter to be a ‘brother.’

The Russian-American Company in a quest for profit indentured Aleuts for the sole purpose of hunting sea otters for sale on Chinese markets. The Company forced the Aleuts to hunt without regard for the future of the sea mammals or for the hunters themselves. From 1803 to 1805 over 17,000 sea otter pelts were taken in California waters alone.

**Bloodthirsty Trade**

At times American trade ships aided the Russian-American Company in their bloodthirsty campaign. American merchants supplied the ships and the Company supplied the labor. The joint venture produced the highest known catch of otter in one year when 9,356 pelts were taken.

What does this have to do with our bioregion? The Company hunted the Santa Barbara Channel and Channel Islands, in the process driving the local otter population to the point of extinction. In the 35 years that the Russian American Company operated in California, over 100,000 pelts were taken. The California sea otter all but disappeared from the West Coast by the 1820s.
A party of hunters, with their canoes and women were left on the island of Santa Barbara to take otter. During the three days they were left here, the hunters took about sixty prime sea otter skins. … The hunters of this ship during her absence had taken 1,600 sea otter skins and were still doing well. Many furs were also obtained from the Spanish Missions in Lower California.

(Adele Ogden: The California Sea Otter Trade.)

Chumash paddlers also knew the Sea Otter. Pelts were used for clothing, bed coverings, for ceremonial garments and occasionally the otters were eaten. And it was a valuable trade item, used for barter with inland tribes. But although they were skilled hunters the Chumash could not rival the Aleuts in their baidarkas. The Chumash used nets, traps and clubs while the Aleuts used harpoons from nimble kayaks.

The Chumash did also use baby otters as bait for parents in the following way: when a mother dived for food leaving a baby on the surface, a canoeist would catch the baby and loop a length of line around its foot. Attached to the line were hooks. The paddler would retire a short distance and then pull the line. The baby’s cry would bring the mother, who was then either caught on the hooks or easily killed as she was trying to free her offspring. Although the method seems disagreeable today, the point is that it was time-consuming, with a moderate to low success rate. Not many otters were taken.

By the time the Alaskan paddlers reached the Channel Islands, the Chumash were also being forced to hunt otters for the Spanish. They were beaten if they didn’t comply, the result being that over time a duel of wits developed between Aleut and Chumash. The Spanish were also quick to kill any Aleut found hunting otter in local waters. They were vulnerable to being capsized and were simply left to drown.

Japan, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States ended the slaughter of marine mammals, including otters and fur seals in 1911 by signing the Northern Fur Seal Treaty. This was strengthened in California in 1913, and in 1941 a sea otter refuge was established after the first otter was spotted near Monterey Bay in 1938. Today’s California sea otter population hovers around the 2,000 mark, with most found near Monterey. Consider it a great privilege if you spot one in Santa Barbara waters.

The Species

The Sea Otter is a member of the weasel family, which includes skunks, minks, sables, ermines, wolverines, and badgers. The smallest of marine mammals, they breathe air, feed milk to their young, are warm blooded, and have hair. Unlike marine mammals that rely on blubber for insulation, the otter has very little body fat, relying instead on thick fur for insulation from the cold water. For this reason they also have to consume large quantities of food to shore up their energy levels.
As with all insulation, density of the insulating substance blocks out the cold, in this case otter fur. A single square inch of Sea Otter hide might contain up to a million hairs! This makes it the densest fur in the world. By comparison, a human head carries around 100,000 hairs in total.

Otters can swim up to five miles per hour but they spend most of their time floating on their backs. They use rocks or other tools to crack open their favorite shellfish—abalone, sea urchin or crab. An adult may eat up to 15 pounds of food per day or a quarter of its weight.

Sadly their diet has put them in conflict with modern-day fisherman in the Santa Barbara Channel because fisherman and the public also value abalone as a source of food and income. The plunder of otters resulted in unprecedented levels of sea urchin and a consequent increase in abalone, which proved a boon to the fishing industry. This dichotomy has produced another tale of human-environmental conflict.

Furthermore when sea otters are present, sea urchins will not travel far from cover to feed. They wait for food to drift to their shelter. But in the absence of otters the urchins become more mobile, especially seeking out kelp in our waters. Over time this has had a great impact on kelp beds, affecting many of the creatures that live in these ecosystems.

The otter-human conflict is ongoing. In November 2010 the Santa Barbara Independent reported that Sea Otter advocates had won a victory when the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) settled a lawsuit against the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service over the 1987 creation of a “no otter zone” in the ocean, south of Point Conception.

The “no otter zone” was an unhappy compromise between environmentalists and the fishing industry at the time, the remaining population of otters being relocated to San Nicolas Island, but the exercise proved to be a failure and the EDC claimed that the USFWS did not reexamine the policy in light of it being so.

The settlement requires that the USFWS complete an environmental report on the failure of the zone by September 2011, and then provide a final report with the aim of ending the rule by December 2012. This seems reasonable and opens the way for negotiations but fishermen fear that an otter comeback could destroy their livelihood and culture by preying on the abalone.

The fishermen claim that the relocation to San Nicolas was a ruse, with environmentalists and the USFWS using the guise of an experiment to meet their own aims. Some feel that the otters should have been left to make their own way southward from the refuge near Monterey, rather than being reintroduced. The fishing industry also claims that the relocation violated the Marine Mammal Protection Act and other legislation. It says that fishery resources have been lost and that jobs, taxes, and traditions have been negatively impacted. They further claim that the non-profit organizations are simply using the plight of the otter as a fundraising rally, with little or no money benefitting the otters.
Environmentalists will argue that donations help them win lawsuits, which result in mandated reintroduction of otters to their historic habitat.

The tussle shows how environmental issues often place the desires of humans against the needs of nature. Finding answers is not always easy—very often what seems right to some, is wrong to others. The story highlights that stakeholders need to work together to find solutions that provide both necessary protection for the environment, while considering bona fide, reasonable human needs.

The otter versus fishermen story is a seemingly perverse twist on a tale that began with sensitive hunter-gatherers being forced to exterminate the very creature they loved and relied upon. Today’s fishermen don’t want them back.

Citations listed in the Reference section of the website.

Educator’s Discussion Questions:

1. How might we approach the problem in the Santa Barbara Channel? Fishermen fear that otters could clean them out, but this is the otter’s traditional home, and it was once cleaned out of otters.
2. What would the process of negotiation and discussion between environmentalist’s and the fishing industry look like? What are some of the questions that might need answers?
3. How could scientists go about researching the actual impact sea otters have on sea urchin and abalone? In what way would these results help or inform the controversy?