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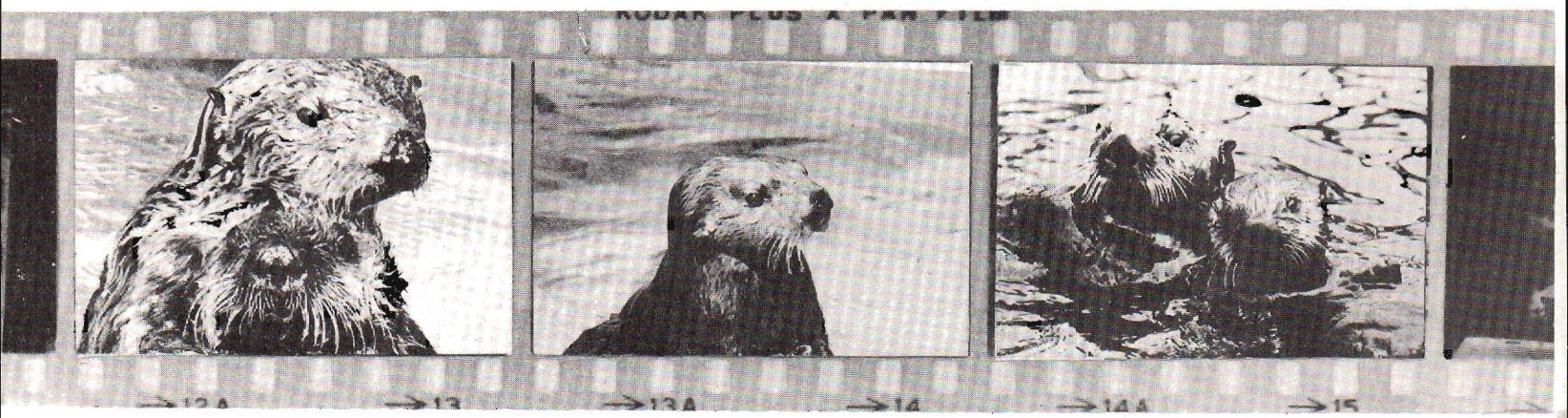
# Sea Otter Saga

## A LONG-BELEAGURED MAMMAL MAKES A COMEBACK FROM NEAR-EXTINCTION



THE RETURN of Vitus Bering's men from their voyage of the discovery of Alaska in 1742 opened the doors to the exploitation of the sea otter populations of North America. Much of the early settlement of Alaska by Russians was a direct result of the search for sea otter pelts.

In 1867, after sea otter populations had been greatly reduced, Alaska was sold to the United States. The few conservation measures that had been adopted by the Russians were dropped and the animals were hunted to near extinction. Not until 1911, when hunting was no longer profitable, was the sea otter finally given protection under the Fur Seal Treaty.

Since that low point sea otter populations have recovered steadily.

Shortly after World War II, it became apparent that some Aleutian populations, notably around Amchitka Island, were at or exceeding the carrying capacity of their ranges. About then, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated studies to provide a basis for management of sea otter populations. These studies showed that there were regular die-offs occurring on Amchitka and the population had declined because of food shortages. Much was learned about the life history and physical requirements of sea otters and several unsuccessful attempts were made to transplant sea otters to other areas.

When Alaska became a state, responsibility for management of resident game species, including sea otters, passed to the newly formed Department of Fish and Game. This Department initiated a sea otter management program based on the Fish and Wildlife Service studies which indicated that certain Aleutian populations would benefit from a reduction in numbers while other areas of unoccupied habitat would not become repopulated for many years without the help of transplants.

This program began with limited experimental harvests totaling 500 animals in 1962 and 1963. The harvests were designed to provide information on harvest techniques, methods of pelt handling, pelt quality, reproduction, growth, food habits and population structure.

Techniques for capturing, handling and transporting live sea otters were developed in 1964 and in the following year a transplant program was initiated. Since then, more than 600 sea otters have been released in Southeastern Alaska, on the Pribilof Islands, and in British Columbia, Washington and Oregon.

Quantities of sea otter pelts had not been available for 60 years, and the present demand and value of such a fur was a matter of speculation. Consequently, in 1967 a more extensive harvest program was developed to determine the demand for sea otter pelts and the feasibility of regular harvests. In that year, 500 were taken. In January, 1968, those pelts and the pelts taken in 1962 and 1963 were sold at auction at the Seattle Fur Exchange. An additional 500 otters were harvested in 1968 and 950 more were taken in 1970. Sales have been held annually.

The harvests were conducted by personnel of the Department of Fish and Game. Numbers taken and locations of harvests were rigidly controlled by a biologist. Aleuts and Eskimos who were either experienced seal hunters or were otherwise familiar with the Aleutians were hired to hunt and skin the sea otters. The salted pelts were brought to Anchorage where a representative of the Governor's Office took over their processing, promotion and sale.

maintain the populations in better condition. Since other populations throughout the state are either below their potential or are expected to expand into areas of low population, harvests from these populations are not desirable at this time.

The state is currently considering the desirability of various other methods of harvest and sale, such as contracting the operation to private enterprise. This probably would mean that a single contractor would conduct the harvest because the venture would not be economically feasible if split between several contractors.

Several factors probably will prevent the opening of public hunting seasons in the near future. The Department of Fish and Game believes it is safe to harvest only in a few specific remote areas and that it must continue to protect the remaining populations, many of which are more accessible. It would be almost impossible to enforce a closure on one population while allowing hunting on another, and expanding sea otter populations could be


Measurements and biological specimens collected from each animal have already increased the knowledge of sea otter life history as well as provided a means of measuring the effects of harvesting on the population. It will take several more years to completely evaluate the mass of data collected, however.

Much has been written about the value of sea otter pelts and prices of $2,000 to $3,000 per pelt often have been quoted. Actually, very few pelts have sold for more than $500 and those were marketed during the period when furs were stylish and sea otters were rare. Even during the last decades of legal hunting, prices averaged between $50 and $300.

Sea otter pelts vary greatly in quality and color. In four recent sales, prices have ranged from $40 to $2,300, with the average fluctuating from a high of $275 in 1969 to a low of $100 in 1971. Harvesting sea otter pelts is expensive and although it seems to be economically feasible, it will never again be the source of easy fortunes that it was 100 years ago.

We now know that sea otter populations of the Rat Islands and the western Andreanof Islands in the western Aleutians can sustain a properly managed annual harvest. Such a harvest can reduce winter mortality and thus endangered by such regulations.

In addition, females are more vulnerable to hunting than males because they tend to remain in protected waters that are easier to reach. Males tend to congregate at a few exposed points which can be hunted only in calm weather. Without proper control, up to 90 per cent of the harvest might be females. It is unlikely that this type of control could be achieved without having a biologist accompany each hunting party. With many parties scattered over several islands, this would not be practical.

Whatever course is taken, it will require strict supervision based on sound biological information. The potential for abuse in the harvest of sea otters has been demonstrated in the past, and we do not want it to happen again.

At present, the sea otter is primarily of aesthetic value. However, these animals are a renewable resource which can be used by man. With sound management, this utilization will maintain populations at healthy and more stable levels and will not conflict with our aesthetic enjoyment of the species. ■

# Alaska FISH & GAME

TALES TRAILS

MAY-JUNE 1971

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME