Pioneering Conservation in Alaska

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Alaska’s Natives and wildlife first encountered Western civilization by way of Asia. An aquatic mammal, the sea otter, took center stage in the events that followed. For the better part of three centuries, treatment of the otter marked the tragedies and triumphs of wildlife management and evolving environmental values.

Toward the end of the 1600s Russia’s fur trade reached across Siberia to the Bering Sea. An expedition led by explorers F.A. Popov and Semyon Dezhnev rounded the northeastern extremity of Siberia in 1648, followed by others in the late 1600s. They knew, based on reports from Natives, that northwestern North America could not be far to the east. The Russian government sought to enlarge its territorial control and realize economic gain through expanded fur trade and exacting of tribute from Natives. Shortly before his death in 1725, Czar Peter the Great ordered his Kamchatka expedition to send a ship to search for northwest North America. The resultant 1728 sortie under Captain Vitus Bering, a Danish officer serving in the Russian Navy as commander of the expedition, failed to reach the American mainland. Four years later a ship com-
manded by land surveyor Mikhail S. Gvozdev approached the coast at the present Cape Prince of Wales, following it southward for two days close enough to see Eskimos and their settlements. Unfavorable winds and shallow water prevented a landing, and the crew returned to Kamchatka. They related stories from Siberian Natives of a Russian settlement in “The Big Land” to the east, heard before and to be heard long afterward. Although efforts to confirm the stories never uncovered tangible proof, the consistency and detail of Native accounts suggested that Russians may have settled on the mainland. If so, they probably arrived on some of the four ships lost during the Popov-Dezhnev expedition or from another launched a few years later. Whatever the case, they did not survive to influence subsequent events.

BERING’S ALASKA VOYAGE

The Russian government persisted in its intent to clarify the relative placement of eastern Siberia and northwestern North America. Bering had returned to Russia in 1730 and expressed the belief that he had rounded the tip of Siberia, demonstrating its separation from North America. The government put him in charge of a second major effort to explore the region. Intended to be the greatest geographic expedition ever undertaken, it required years of preparation. As did other such ventures, it called for a wide range of scientific observations. As it turned out, the effort did not succeed in settling the question of physical relationship between the continents. That task lay unfulfilled until the arrival of Captain James Cook who followed the American coast northward to Icy Cape on the Arctic Ocean in 1778. But other adventures and opportunities awaited the Russians when they launched their expedition in June 1741.

Two vessels left Kamchatka, eventually becoming separated. Under Alexei Chirikov, the St. Paul crossed the North Pacific and sighted an island near the later-named Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska. Two crews sent ashore disappeared, possibly captured or killed by Native Americans. Chirikov returned westward along the coast without making landfall and arrived at Kamchatka on October 10, seven of the crew having died of scurvy. Captain Bering’s St. Peter, sailed by Sven Waxell, neared the mainland at Controller Bay and viewed Mt. St. Elias on July 16. Bering fell seriously ill and feared he might not reach Kamchatka before the fall weather; thus he permitted only a brief stop at Kayak Island. On the return trip the St. Peter crossed the Gulf of Alaska and followed the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian Islands westward. In the Shumagin Islands the crew met and traded with Native Americans. In November the ship, its crew sick and dying of scurvy, foundered on the shores of an uninhabited island to be named for the captain. Its crew placed the immobile Bering in an enlarged and unheated fox hole in the bank where a month later he died. Thirty of his
Shipmates also succumbed that winter. Survivors stayed alive in part by eating the flesh of sea otters, which spent much of their time on land and, at first, trustingly approached the visitors.\(^4\)

Bering’s crew included the first person to scientifically examine the sea otter and other Alaskan fauna: Georg Wilhelm Steller (1709–1746). A jay, an eider, a sea eagle, a sea lion, and a sea cow bear the name of this scientist. Also named for Steller are mountains in the Chugach Range and at Katmai National Park and a cove and river on Attu.\(^5\) Of the birds and mammals he studied, the sea cow may have contributed most to Steller’s place in history. Unknown to the outside world prior to 1741 and by far the largest of the world’s manatees, it attained as much as 42 feet in length and at least 7,000 pounds. It had the misfortune of being born without fear of humans, tasting like beef, and residing directly in the path of fur seekers. A large one could feed a 33-man crew for a month, and its skin could cover a *baidara*, or freighting boat, or be made into boots. Hunters killed them using pikes tipped by long blades, pulled them to shore, and butchered them in shallow water at low tide.\(^6\) Steller biographer Leonhard Stejneger related that

\[
\text{already in 1743–4 we find Bassoff and his crew wintering on Bering Island,}
\]

\[
\text{and from that year until 1763 hardly a winter passed without one or more}
\]

\[
\text{parties spending eight or nine months in hunting fur-animals there, during}
\]

\[
\text{which time the crews lived almost exclusively on the meat of the sea-cow.}
\]

\[
\text{But that is not all, for more than half of the expeditions which wintered}
\]

\[
\text{there did so for the express purpose of laying in stores of sea-cow meat for}
\]

\[
\text{their farther journey, which usually lasted two to three years or more.}\(^7\)
\]

The last reliable sighting of a northern sea cow entered the record in 1768. The spectacled cormorant, also observed at Bering Island by Steller, suffered a similar fate. Flightless and nesting along the fur trade route, it helped fill the stewpots. It disappeared around 1852.\(^8\) Sea cows did not occur in Alaska in modern times, though scientists found their 130,000-year-old bones on Amchitka Island, where they and the spectacled cormorants may have been exterminated by aborigines.\(^9\) Excavations on Bering Island turned up entire sea cow skeletons. By bribing Russian workers, Stejneger obtained a skeleton for the Smithsonian in 1882 or 1883.\(^10\)

Not only did Steller hold the distinction of first natural scientist to visit Alaska, he also became one of the renowned botanists of his era. Son of a church cantor in Windsheim, Germany, he acquired a strong interest in natural phenomena at an early age. A bright and diligent student, he won a public scholarship to study theology at Wittenberg. After a fire destroyed most of his hometown and ended his scholarship he enrolled in medical school at the University of Halle, completing the work in 1734. He qualified as a physician but showed
more interest in other natural sciences and had already become an expert in botany.

Peter the Great’s awakening of Russia and drive eastward attracted young scientists and adventurers, as would the American West and Alaska in the 19th Century. Hearing of Russian expeditions to Siberia, Steller traveled to Russia bent on joining one. He received a commission in St. Petersburg and crossed Siberia to meet Bering. Illness of the ship’s surgeon prompted Bering to sign Steller on as a physician and mineral assayer, a disappointment to Steller who had hoped to research and classify wildlife. Arrogant yet brilliant and competent, Steller alienated the crew and received poor cooperation from them.

Steller experienced extreme frustration when Bering, resentful of Steller’s demeanor, nearly prevented him from going ashore at Kayak Island. While on the island he collected a bird that, because of its similarity to the blue jay known to science, he correctly interpreted as proof that the party had reached North America. Bering’s anxiety about returning to Siberia restricted the landing party to ten hours ashore over two days, and only Bering’s illness and the shipwreck enabled Steller to investigate the sea otter and other life on Bering Island. Steller’s discipline and medical expertise proved helpful to the survival of the ship’s crew during the winter of 1741–1742 on Bering Island. However, on the return to Kamchatka, space limitations precluded Steller’s bringing most of his collection. He left behind the only skin of a sea cow ever to be collected.

Steller’s international reputation rested largely on his collections from Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands, where he explored following the return trip from Bering Island. Steller never returned to Alaska or to Europe. Exhaustion and illness overtook him on his way to St. Petersburg and he died in Tyumen, Siberia, at age 37, unaware of the fame that awaited him.11

Steller felt sympathy for wild animals, especially sea otters and sea cows. As a descriptive scientist he expressed little of preservationist attitudes or ecological perspectives. Twenty-six years before the final sea cow sighting he speculated, “These animals are found at all seasons everywhere around [Bering] island in the greatest numbers, so that the whole population of the Eastern shore of Kamchatka would always be able to keep itself more than abundantly supplied from them with fat and meat.”12

What Steller saw happening to the sea otters on Bering Island, on the other hand, turned out to be prophetic for both the otters and Alaska. Crew members gambled constantly, first for money and then for otter skins: “Anyone who had altogether ruined himself tried to recover through the poor sea otters, which were needlessly and thoughtlessly killed merely for their pelts, the meat being thrown away. When this was not enough, some began to steal and stole pelts from the others, whereby hate, quarrels and strife were spread in all the dwellings.” “Little work got done,” and “on the ship, many necessary materials and
objects were ruined, being left in the water—such as compasses and the general journal itself.” Otters grew “wary by constant hunting day and night” and began to disappear. At first they could be found within a mile of the Russian camp; by February, within 15 to 20 miles, and by spring hunters had to travel 35 miles or more. Scarcity of food threatened the crew’s survival “because we killed them [otters] needlessly only on account of their pelts—yes, frequently letting pelt and meat lie if they were not black enough—it came to such a point that we lost hope of being able to build a ship.” Despite Steller’s misgivings the crew managed to put together a boat from the remnants of the St. Peter and sail it to Kamchatka. They brought back something of great interest to the fur traders: several hundred sea otter pelts and reports of their abundance.

News of the otters sparked efforts to exploit them, for they brought high rewards in the markets of China. Small companies formed by merchants hired crews to build and man vessels to sail from Kamchatka to the Commander (Komandorski) and later the Aleutian Islands, taking enough provisions for three years. As a means of advancing its territorial and economic goals, the Russian government gave the companies permits and loans. It reaped large gains by taxing the furs sold in Russia and to China through the official trading post of Kiakhta, on the Mongolian border south of Lake Baikal, during the mid-18th Century.

SEA OTTER HUNTING UNDER THE RUSSIANS

Promyshlenniki, primarily free peasants and tradesmen who trapped sable in Siberia, and Natives or creoles from Kamchatka and Yakutsk, comprised the bulk of the 30- to 50-man fur-seeking crews in the early voyages. Aleuts later joined the crews. Inexperienced in seamanship, the promyshlenniki had to help build their ships and sail them in forbidding weather through uncharted waters. Lacking nails, in the 1740s they bound the hulls together with whale baleen or willows. Each crew member owned a share in an expedition or worked for someone who did. They owed the company for their provisions if they did not bring back enough furs, a fate that befell many. Government officials expected the crew leaders to conduct exploration, gather information, claim land, collect tribute, and incorporate Natives into the state—tasks they did not relish. A cossack representing the government normally accompanied the crew to collect tributes and record information.

Until the mid-1750s expeditions went to the Commander (Bering and Copper) Islands to acquire sea otter and fur seal pelts for return to Kamchatka or to gather meat and skins and over-winter for the voyage to the Aleutians. On the uninhabited Commanders, promyshlenniki did the meat hunting, fox trapping, and sea otter hunting. In the western and central Aleutians, containing no
indigenous foxes and few fur seals, the men attempted to harvest sea otters by shooting and netting them. They lacked experience in skin boats and frightened off the otters by gunfire; thus they quickly became reliant on the Aleuts. Lacking sufficient trade goods to barter for otter skins, they eventually resorted to coercion to mobilize the Aleut hunters. When the local otter supply gave out, they forced Aleuts to move to new hunting territory.16

Natives, primarily Aleuts and Koniag (Alutiiq) Eskimos, carried out sea otter hunts in baidarkas (kayaks) carrying one or two persons. About 21 feet long, 18–20 inches wide, and weighing 30 pounds, baidarkas consisted of driftwood frames tied together by baleen and covered tightly by sea lion skin. Hunters sat low in their crafts, feet straight forward, wearing seal-gut raincoats tied around the opening to keep out water. They used stone-tipped spears mounted on throwing handles. Harold McCracken, who knew some of the hunters in their old age, described the chase:
A party of anywhere from six to twenty or even a hundred or more skin baidarkas would take to sea together for the hunt. . . . Invariably two men went in each little craft, the one in the front hatch using the spear and the one in the back principally concerned with maneuvering the baidarka with his long, double-bladed paddle. Spread out in a line, they would all move out until a sea otter was seen. The hunter who first sighted the animal would raise his paddle into the air as a signal and his canoe would dart forward as quickly as possible to where the animal went down, remaining on the spot while the other baidarkas quickly formed a wide circle around him. Every eye was now alert to catch the reappearance, which would take place eventually. As soon as this happened, the canoe nearest darted forward in the same manner as the first, while everyone shouted to make the animal dive again, giving it the least possible time to fill its lungs with fresh air. The process was repeated; the sea otter’s dives becoming increasingly shorter as the circle gradually closed in. Finally a hunter was sure to be close enough to throw his spear, and these natives were so expert that a sea otter seldom escaped.17

Hunters also caught otters by means of sinew nets stretched over kelp beds and across entrances to coastal caves. They paddled up to otters sleeping in seaweed during heavy seas and clubbed them. After catching an otter at sea they skinned it and stowed the pelt inside the boat. Killer whales occasionally took the dead otters and, according to legend, even the hunters.18

Tlingit Indians in the Southeast also speared otters and sometimes surprised otters on land and clubbed them. Only partially conquered by the Rus-
sians, the Tlingits hunted otters for their own use or for trade to the highest bidders, usually the British or Americans. They resented and frequently opposed Russians and their Aleut and Koniag hunters. In the Southeast, hunting parties organized by Russians used rifles to shoot otters at sea and to protect themselves from the Tlingits. Russians issued rifles only for use south of the fort at Yakutat for fear that their own hunters would turn the guns on the Russians.¹⁹

Treatment of the Natives

Recurring violence between Russians and Alaska Natives marked Russia’s North American adventure. It sprang from many sources: misunderstandings, abuse of women, forced work requirements and tribute payments, resentment of Russian intrusion, rivalries among trading companies, and a history of warfare and slavery among Natives themselves. Either side might initiate an encounter and, within days or weeks, relations might again be peaceful and amiable. Conflict began upon one of the first landings on Attu in 1745. Confusion led to shooting; and, in a separate incident, the abduction of Aleut women by an exploration team culminated in the shooting of about 15 more Aleuts. The surviving guilty parties—a shipwreck on the return trip claimed the cargo and 32 men—received keelhauling as punishment.²⁰ More extreme Russian behavior followed Native attacks that claimed the lives of numerous Russians and sometimes destroyed their ships. In retaliation Russians killed dozens, probably hundreds, of Aleuts and Koniags. The reprisals pacified the Aleuts and Koniags, ending their internecine wars but facilitating Russian domination.

Some Russians behaved kindly toward the Natives, rescuing and educating orphans and slaves. But orders from Empress Catherine and the Siberian governors to treat Natives fairly tended to be ignored in practice. Tribute payments, banned in 1788, continued until 1794.²¹ Promyshlenniki baptized Natives to gain exclusive access to their furs through the status of godfather. Russian clergy, on the other hand, counseled humane treatment of the Natives. First arriving in the mid-1780s, they operated schools, hospitals, and other social services. Both promyshlenniki and clergy tolerated indigenous beliefs and did not actively proselytize. A large percentage of Natives voluntarily converted to Russian Orthodoxy, even before the arrival of the clergy.²²

As they eliminated otters on the islands nearest Kamchatka, the fur seekers moved progressively eastward through the Aleutians to mainland Alaska. After nearly 40 years of expeditions, a few large corporations, more able to finance bigger ships and crews for greater time spans and distances, replaced the small temporary companies. Merchants Gregorii Shelikov and Ivan Golikov organized the most successful company in 1781.²³ An empire builder, Shelikov wanted to create permanent settlements and strengthen Russian territorial claims in
America as far south as California. Most government leaders approved of land claims but did not encourage large population transfers to what they saw as fur-trading outposts. Nevertheless, Shelikov organized a three-ship expedition to Kodiak Island in 1783 to create a settlement from which trading and expansion inland and along the coast could be facilitated. Upon arrival and in violation of imperial prohibition of violence against Natives, Shelikov’s forces attacked and defeated the Koniags. They built a fort and proceeded to establish outposts westward and eastward.

Shelikov pressed Aleuts and Koniags into service while issuing orders to treat them fairly and provide social benefits. He built a school for orphans and sent for more settlers after returning to Siberia in 1786. The deepening enslavement of serfs in Russia made them less available for service in Alaska. A resulting labor shortage caused the company to further impress the Aleuts and Koniags as hunters and fighters while maintaining social services.24

On the eastern Aleutians and Kodiak Island during the 1780s and 1790s, exploitation of Natives grew more systematic. Alexander Baranov, aggressive director of the Shelikov-Golikhov Company beginning in 1790, organized them for large-scale fur acquisition. In contrast to small groups of single-hatch kayaks employed earlier, fleets of up to 600 double-hatched kayaks traveled hundreds of miles in search of sea otters. Hunters left home from May until September or later. Upon return they had to trap foxes and land otters or supply meat for the Russians. Women, children, and elderly men remained as hostages, required to gather provisions, make clothing, and perform other chores. Pay for the Natives consisted of small portions of the fruits of their own labor. Women also served as concubines. Given scant opportunity to lay in winter storage for themselves, Natives often starved. Aleut and Koniag hunters endured dangerous seas and attacks by other Natives, particularly Tlingits in the Southeast. Between 1792 and 1805, 751 Koniags died in service to the Russians; 350 Koniags and Aleuts drowned in 1805. Disease, accidents, and other misfortunes reduced the Kodiak Island population from 5,700 in 1792 to 1,500 in 1834.25 Similarly, an unknown but high percentage of the Aleut population disappeared during the Russian era.26

G.I. Dayidov, a Russian naval officer who visited posts from Kodiak Island to California between 1802 and 1806, recorded the hunting operations of the Russian-American Company. It maintained small posts along the coasts manned by drafted Native hunters directed by one or two Russians. They gathered birds, seals, foxes, and other wildlife for food, clothing, or barter. Kodiak Island had four posts; Afognak two; Ukamok Island, Katmai, and Sutkum one each; Kenai Peninsula two; and Resurrection Bay one. Natives had destroyed the post at Iliamna, as well as the trading post at Yakutat and the main fort at Sitka. Russians had so decimated and intimidated the Aleuts that no such threat remained in the Aleutians.
Russians controlled the Aleuts and Koniag Eskimos and, to some extent, the Chugach Eskimos and Kenaitze Indians, forcing them to do a wide variety of tasks. In 1803 they sent a party of about 1,000 Aleuts, Koniags, Chugaches, and Kenaitzes southward as far as Yakutat to hunt sea otters and return in August. About 400 more went to Tugidak and Ukamok islands for sea otters and fish. Another 100 or so hunted otters and sea lions in Cook Inlet. A similar party went to Katmai village and Sutkum Island. Aged and weak men, about 80 in all, had to hunt birds for their skins. Not infrequently they died by falling off the nesting cliffs in attempts to fill their quotas of 200 to 300 skins each. In September the company allowed them to return to Kodiak and put them to work carrying supplies or trapping foxes. If a man turned in five black or eight red foxes he received a parka made from the bird skins. Old men were also assigned to catch cod, halibut, and salmon. Whale hunters, if successful, received tobacco and beads.

Koniag women spent the year preparing fish, sewing clothing, digging sa-rana and lily roots, and picking berries for the company. Alaska Peninsula Natives, in addition to hunting sea otters, caught land mammals and gathered roots and berries. The company took the older children to be employed as sailors or workers. Kenaitze Indians similarly gathered food, hunted wildlife, and carried beads and other trade goods into the interior to acquire furs, all to benefit the company. Chugach women and girls gathered roots, berries, and bird eggs. During the winter the company levied a quota of five mountain sheep or three marmots for each Chugach. Natives on the north coast of the Alaska Peninsula had formerly hunted sea otters but had disappeared, abandoning their relatives held hostage by the company.

Competition in the Fur Trade

Effective in 1799, the Russian government granted a fur-trading monopoly to the Russian-American Company, creating a mechanism of imperial power similar to the British East India Company. Unable to project military force to North America, the Russians hoped a powerful trading company would reduce conflict among Russian traders and perpetuate Russian influence. Baranov, manager of the Shelikov-Golikov Company and its successor, the Russian-American Company, from 1799 until 1818, sought to extend Russian control southward along the coast. Progressive depletion of sea otters in the Aleutians and the northern Gulf of Alaska added urgency to the drive. He established forts at Yakutat Bay in 1796 and Novo-Arkangelsk (Sitka) in 1799 but encountered multiple barriers. Native depopulation and resistance worsened the chronic labor shortage. Foreign ships cut deeply into the fur trade. Tlingit Indians in Southeast Alaska not only refused to be dominated but actively made war
on the Russians, destroying the Yakutat and Sitka forts. They killed large numbers of Aleut and Koniag hunters who threatened to deplete the sea otters in their waters. Apparently glad to weaken Russian territorial and trading control, British and American traders gave the Tlingits ample supplies of guns and ammunition in exchange for furs. Moreover, the difficulty of importing food from the Russian colonies in eastern Siberia made the Russian-American Company heavily dependent on foreign traders and Native hunters and gatherers.29

Baranov and his company superiors resolved to spread their operations southward to California. Sea otters provided the means to this goal and, in 1808, Baranov established a headquarters at Sitka, recaptured from the Tlingits in 1804. From 1803 to 1812 he engaged Yankee captains to carry out the operation—they furnished supplies and transportation, he rounded up Native hunters, and each contracting party received half the otter skins. Beginning in 1809 he sent his own vessels, preferring not to divide the catch. Both ventures reaped profits: tens of thousands of otters. But Spanish authorities in California refused permission for hunting and took measures to stop it, occasionally imprisoning or killing the hunters. After Mexico gained independence, Russians and Mexicans signed otter-hunting contracts between 1823 and 1841. Soon the Russians found themselves junior partners as Mexicans won more control of the industry.30

To maintain their presence in California, acquire supplies, and pursue the fur trade, Russians built bases north of Bodega Bay (the Russian Colony, later called Fort Ross) and the Farallon Islands, both in 1812. Disappearance of the sea otters, competition from American hunters, and resistance by Spanish and Mexican officials dried up their fur trade profits. In the Farallons, Russians decimated the otters and exterminated the fur seals before vacating the islands about 1833.31 At Fort Ross, attempts to produce ships, grain, and livestock failed economically for reasons of climate, cost of supply, and lack of trained personnel. During the 1830s the colony lost an average of 10,000 rubles annually. Mexican hostility and growing British and American influence to the north forced the realization that Fort Ross could not be sustained. The Russians abandoned it in 1842.32

Most California sea otter pelts left the hunting grounds in non-Russian vessels. Reports of Alaskan sea otters had reached Boston from Cook’s 1776–1780 voyage. British, French, Spanish, and American ships advanced up the Northwest coast in the 1780s to make territorial claims, partly in response to Russian movement into North America. Traders followed them, operating in Alaska after the mid-1780s.33 British and, increasingly, American seamen plied the waters of Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound, undercutting Russian trade by bartering goods for sea otter skins and setting sail for China. Baranov estimated that between the end of the 18th Century and the early 19th Cen-
Century these ships carried away 120,000 sea otter skins. Only two known French expeditions engaged in the trade. Jean Francois La Perouse and his men visited in 1788 and died in a shipwreck in the South Seas. A second expedition by explorer Camille de Roquefeuil contracted with Baranof in 1818. Part of the agreement called for payment of $200 Mexican to the company for each Aleut life lost. A harvest of fewer than 200 otters and the killing of 26 Aleuts by Haida Indians put an end to French interest in the trade.

Sea otters formed an integral part of the newly established China trade of the United States. New England vessels carried goods to the Northwest coast to be traded for furs worth five or six times their cost and exchanged the furs in China for goods to be sold in Boston. Profits for such a three-way trip might reach 500 percent. Between 1788 and 1826 at least 127 ships made the journey. The trade peaked in the two decades after 1790 and fell off sharply as the otters died out.

Sea otters’ characteristics abetted their collapse. The hunting season never ended because the animals needed year-round insulation from the cold water, and their pelts remained prime. Mothers refused to abandon their babies, assuring the deaths of both and a disproportionate harvest of females. From 1799 to 1818 about 300,000 sea otter skins went to China ports, not counting those the Russians took to Kiakhta.

Despite a rule against conveying furs to foreign traders, the Russian-American Company traded furs to Americans because they needed foodstuffs and supplies not otherwise available. In 1805 a Yankee shipment of meat, bread, rice, flour, molasses, and sugar warded off starvation at New Archangel. In exchange for food, utensils, guns, blankets, and other supplies, the Americans preferred to take furs. They could sell the sea otter pelts in China more cheaply than the Russians could, in part because the Russians conducted their trade through distant Kiakhta. In return for furs, Russians and Americans got tea, silk fabrics, and porcelain. American ships, predominantly New Englanders, acquired most sea otters directly from Indians in Southeast Alaska. The aggressive sailors ignored Russian attempts to deter them. Indians received guns and ammunition, utensils, metals, nails, hatchets and knives, beads, rum, and molasses. As the sea otters dwindled and Hudson’s Bay Company gained control over the land fur trade in the Northwest, Americans withdrew from the Alaska-China fur trade.

Well-provisioned American traders and, later, whalers remained active for several decades, competing effectively against the Russians. Hudson’s Bay Company, also able to offer the Natives higher prices and better-quality trade goods for furs than the Russians could, leased most of Southeast Alaska from the Russian-American Company for its trading operations. Hudson’s Bay had begun construction of a trading post on the Stikine River, and in 1834 the Russian
Navy fired on a British vessel attempting to provision it. As part of a settlement, Hudson's Bay rented the Southeast for 2,000 river otter and lynx skins per year for ten years. The parties renewed the agreement until the United States acquired Alaska in 1867.37

In addition to the sea otter trade, Russians bought mink, river otter, and beaver skins from the Tlingits, but they had to pay three to five times what they paid Aleuts and other Natives for furs of similar value. Tanaina Indians of the Kenai Peninsula gathered marten, lynx, bear, river otter, wolverine, beaver, and muskrat skins for the Russians. Koniags, more fully subjugated, trapped on Kodiak Island, and Aleuts in the eastern Aleutians. Russian efforts to set up a fur trade in western Alaska and the lower Yukon valley beginning in 1819 ran into strong competition from Hudson's Bay Company in the upper Yukon Valley.38

Low wages, harsh working conditions, and cruel treatment by superiors discouraged young Russian men from going to North America, a cause of the labor shortage. Moreover, most Russians’ experience and interests lay in agriculture. Work quality suffered in North America: promyshlenniki, creoles, and most Natives did not produce efficiently and commonly took to alcohol.39 Russian clergyman Hieromonk Gideon portrayed the acculturation of 150 or so Aleuts who over-wintered at Sitka during the 1820s:

[T]hey have become accustomed to the Russian way of life, to drinking tea and, more especially, to drinking strong liquor which they like passionately and to which they have become so wantonly addicted, they use every means they can, even illicit means, to satisfy these new needs. Following the example of her husband, who changes his parka of birds’ skin, which was so comfortable and so practical, for an overcoat made of dreadnought or cloth or even for a dress coat—an item of clothing already so ridiculous in Europe—the Aleut wife scorns her [skin clothing] and absolutely must have an Indian dress, and a shawl, etc. which she acquires in ways not difficult to guess. The results of these disturbing changes are sickness and a new generation, weak and corrupted from birth.40

Baranov’s managerial excesses provoked investigations resulting in his replacement and 1819 regulations, again forbidding abduction and other forms of mistreatment of employees and Natives. The 1821 Russian-American Company rules called for a lengthy list of benefits and fair treatment of Russians, creoles, and Natives. They also mandated three-year service by all able-bodied Native men at a minimum of one-fifth the pay of Russians. Notwithstanding the appointment of more enlightened managers, especially Naval officers, the condition of Aleuts and Koniags improved only gradually.41 Numbering 823 at their high point in 1839,42 Russians in North America lacked the strength to resist British and American incursions. Their strategic weakness would ultimately bring about the demise of their enterprise in North America.
Indians on the Northwest coast suffered from the fur trade as a whole, partly as a result of their own shortcomings. Traditionally, Indians of Southeast Alaska and coastal Canada actively engaged in a slave trade, typically featuring captives from southern tribes being sold into the interior. Most warfare had the objective of taking slaves. Primarily women and children, the slaves sold for high prices in trade goods; in 1834 Tlingits paid 2 sea otter or 25 beaver skins for each. Wealthy men might own 20 to 40 slaves who performed a variety of tasks including hunting. When trading vessels arrived, the Indians offered their slaves as prostitutes in return for trade items. Some Euro-American traders took up the slave trade to obtain furs, transporting women from as far away as California and Hawaii. Nonslave Indian women also became prostitutes, and venereal diseases spread. Tobacco, alcohol, and violence by guns added to the degradation and death toll. Smallpox killed nearly half of the approximately 800 Tlingits at Sitka in 1835–1836 and similar numbers elsewhere. Measles further reduced and dispirited the Natives, ending their resistance to Euro-American incursions.43

Diminishing catches of sea otters had persuaded the Russian government to put conservation measures into effect in 1821, including harvest quotas for districts, bans on hunting in depleted areas, attempts to avoid killing females, and rules for reducing unnecessary disturbance of the otters. The measures lasted until the sale of Alaska in 1867. Conservation worked in the Aleutians and the Pribilofs but not along the mainland where non-Russian traders pursued the otters to near-extinction. Between 1842 and 1862 the Russian total catch averaged 1,347 annually, of which Koniag and Chugach hunters caught about one-fourth in the Kurile Islands north of Japan. Many came from other parts of the Siberian coast and, after the 1840s, virtually none from Southeast Alaska.44

A compilation of sales records (Table 1.1) indicated that Russians delivered at least 200,839 sea otters to market in about 129 vessels between 1743 and 1823. Russian, British, American, and French fur seekers took an overall toll of 600,000 to 800,000 sea otters.45

### SEA OTTER HUNTING UNDER AMERICAN RULE

By the time Russian domination ended, few, if any, full-blooded Aleuts existed and their aboriginal subsistence culture had been altered considerably. To purchase Western clothing and other goods and to construct and maintain their Russian Orthodox churches, they needed cash income. Those not harvesting fur seals in the Pribilofs had to rely on sea otter hunting. Otters survived in substantial numbers in the vicinity of Sanak Island in the eastern Aleutians. Parties of 40 to 50 hunters traveled up to 150 miles from Unalaska Island in two-man baidarkas to pursue them. Hunters camped on Sanak Island and
paddled out 15 to 20 miles in all directions to look for otters. Lest they alert the animals, the men had to avoid making fires and leaving food scraps on the beaches. An observer noted that “the sufferings to which the Natives subject themselves every winter on the island, going for many weeks without fires, even for cooking, with the thermometer down to zero in a northerly gale of wind, are better imagined than described.” Of the sea otter he added that “this animal, of all wild animals, seems to be possessed of the greatest aversion to or dread of the presence, or even the proximity, of man.”4 Otter hunting succeeded best immediately before, during, or after storms, which drove otters near or onto the shore. Young Aleuts using rifles acquired from traders patrolled the shores year-round, firing at any otter near enough to hit. Otters seemed unable to disentangle themselves from the nets western Aleuts threw over seaweed or stretched across cave openings. In the fury of storms, otters landed and pushed their heads under seaweed for shelter. Two Aleut brothers clubbed 78 such otters in 1½ hours. A writer who knew them commented that the money from the otters “would have clothed and fed them for the rest of their natural lives; but, like our own coal-oil Johnny, they quickly squandered their wealth, and are poorer now than ever.”47

American regulations restricted the taking of otters to Natives and, after 1878, to whites married to Natives. Nevertheless, in territorial waters whites commonly hunted illegally and seldom got caught. In the 1870s and 1880s hunters employed a wasteful practice of shooting otters at sea. Captain Michael Healy of the U.S. Treasury Department’s revenue cutter Corwin reported that as of 1884, “unprincipled white hunters, tempted by the great value of otter skins, come here and marry the simple girls, force them to accompany them on their hunting trips and do their cooking and work for them, bring two or three children into the world, and then leave their families to get their living as best

Table 1.1. Russian Fur Cargoes From North America, 1743–1823

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Russian Fur Cargoes (1743–1823)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fur seals</td>
<td>2,324,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea otters</td>
<td>200,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue foxes</td>
<td>108,865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red foxes</td>
<td>57,638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beavers</td>
<td>58,729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross foxes</td>
<td>44,904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black &amp; brown foxes</td>
<td>30,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otters</td>
<td>22,807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marten</td>
<td>18,121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mink</td>
<td>5,349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White foxes</td>
<td>5,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bears</td>
<td>2,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynx</td>
<td>1,819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverines</td>
<td>1,234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walrus ivory</td>
<td>99,700lb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whalebone (baleen)</td>
<td>107,896lb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Berkh, V.N., A Chronological History of the Discovery of the Aleutian Islands or the Exploits of Russian Merchants (Kingston: Limestone, 1974), 93.

Note: Figures include otters from Commander Islands but exclude about 17 vessels lacking records of voyage or cargo, in addition to those lost at sea.
they can, while they themselves return to enjoy their earnings with other wives in civilization.” Healy noted that the hunters illegally used breech-loading rifles and set numerous nets along the shore. He warned of the impending extermination of the otters, adding that “as the Aleuts live almost entirely upon the profits derived from the sale of skins, extreme poverty, if not actual starvation, must follow.”48 In the 1880s, white crews using guns increasingly searched for otters offshore in international waters. Ships carried up to 60 pursuit boats, some driven by steam, permitting longer ranges and periods of hunting.49

Compared to a sustainable-yield annual catch of 1,000–2,000 by the Russians between the 1840s and 1867, Americans harvested 12,208 otters in their first four years. The kill rose to nearly 5,000 per year between 1881 and 1890 and by 1909 totaled 107,372.50 Captain C.L. Hooper, commander of the Revenue Marine Bering Sea Patrol, complained in the 1890s that despite regulations, lack of resources made it impossible for agents to protect the sea otter:

Being constantly harassed, clubbed and shot on shore, caught in nets by white men, their hauling-grounds made uninhabitable by the camp fires of the hunters and defiled by fisheries and the decaying bodies of their companions, the sea otter of the Aleutian Islands has not only decreased in numbers, but has actually changed its habits. It no longer comes out on the land to feed, rest, or give birth to its young. A floating raft of kelp serves as its only resting-place, and banks of 30 fathoms of water are its feeding-grounds. Even there it is hunted and harassed by hunting schooners from March until August.51

Natives willingly engaged in the slaughter. Freed from the oppression of the Russian era, Aleut hunters had a new incentive—cash—to kill as many otters as possible. In 1880 they received $80–$100 per skin from traders. The annual catch peaked in the mid-1880s and sank to 724 in 1899. As otters grew scarce, the price of a pelt rose, reaching $1,200 in London. Of this amount, the few successful hunters got up to $400. Money enabled the Natives to buy guns that hastened the decline of otter populations, despite the fact that the law forbade shooting otters. The relatively vast influx of cash disrupted Native lifestyles and left them more deeply impoverished when the money dried up.52

Alcoholic beverages, or the makings thereof, ranked high among the commodities acquired by cash or trade. Through most of its tenure the Russian-American Company prohibited trade in liquor. Moreover, Tlingits in the Southeast refused alcohol lest it weaken them. Late in the 19th Century importation increased despite an 1873 ban by the U.S. government and the initiation of revenue patrols.53 Based on his inspection tour in the mid-1890s, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Charles Hamlin commented that
the smuggling of liquor into Alaska and its illegal sale to whites and Indians continues flagrantly and defiantly. . . . Complaint is also made that it is impossible to secure conviction of offenders against the liquor laws by jury trial because of sympathy with the accused. . . . The natives are passionately fond of liquor, and will do anything to secure it. Many murders are directly traceable to liquor obtained in this way; these cases are rarely brought to the attention of the authorities. Much cruelty, such as wife beating and other crimes, is also caused by the use of liquor.

Hamlin recommended strict licensing and control of substances imported for use in making alcoholic beverages.54

Samuel Applegate, Aleutian Treasury agent and early recorder of Alaskan wildlife, reflected on the human costs of the fur-seeking era:

Hundreds, yes thousands of lives lost in the raging sea under lowering northern skies; hundreds of deaths amid swirling snows and chilling blasts; thousands more caused by the hardships and privations inseparable from the hunter’s and sailor’s life in those high latitudes; hundreds slain in conflicts between native tribes or rival Russians; hundreds more of daring mariners lost in those latter days in reckless pursuit of the precious otter—all these have been sacrificed in addition to money spent and risked, to make up a sum that in these extravagant times does not exceed the wealth of several individuals in the United States.55
Applegate might have added reference to the thousands of Natives who lost their freedom and died from forced labor, violence, or introduced diseases.

Treasury agents and other government officials had long protested the unsustainable killing of sea otters. But the international controversy over the fur seal (Chapter 2) overshadowed the sea otter issue and forestalled action. In 1887 and again in 1897 the Japanese, joined in 1897 by the Russians and Americans, urged a treaty to protect both sea otters and fur seals. British interests in freedom of the seas and Canadian interests in pelagic sealing prevented an agreement. Ongoing attempts at resolution of the fur seal dispute lasted from 1887 well past the turn of the century.

**SEA OTTER PROTECTION AND RECOVERY**

By 1910 sea otters taken in Alaskan waters had fallen to 34. In the 1868–1911 period, Americans harvested a recorded 107,372 otters. Of an estimated original population of 100,000–150,000, only scattered pockets remained. Almost vanished from the earth, sea otters gained firm protection by the 1910 Fur Seal Act and the North Pacific Sealing Convention of 1911. Only Alaska Natives could hunt sea otters, and few did. Further safeguards resulted from the creation of the Aleutian Islands Reserve by William Howard Taft’s last-minute executive order on March 3, 1913. In that same year California gave legal protection to the sea otters known to survive there, mostly in the waters near Monterey. Gradually, otters began to recover in the Aleutians, yet they did not go unmolested. A San Francisco trader made annual trips on the mail boat to Attu during at least the period 1916 through 1928, buying poached otter and fur seal skins to be sold in London, Paris, and Berlin. He bought otters for about $300; they sold in Europe for up to $1,500.

American botanist Walter Eyerdam sighted otters off Afognak Island in 1922 and, ten years later, found them fairly common near Atka and Adak islands in the western Aleutians. Aleuts told him that Japanese poaching vessels, normally commanded by Europeans, visited the islands in search of otters. Eyerdam met the English captain of one such vessel in 1930. Eyerdam suggested that otters be reinstated in the Pribilofs or other favorable localities.

Jurisdiction over the sea otters shifted from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Agriculture in 1915. For the next quarter-century a variety of commercial activities took place in the Aleutians: cod fishing extending from mid-19th-Century Russian operations, accelerated fox farming fostered by the Bureau of Biological Survey (BBS), shore-based whaling out of Aukutan, sulfur mining at Akun between 1914 and 1922, stocking of reindeer on Unalaska and Unimak islands in 1913, and sheep ranching on Unalaska and Umnak. None of these directly affected the sea otters, but requests by Governor
Sea Otters and Scientists

Walter Clark, interested in economic development, resulted in withdrawal of several large islands from refuge status.

Restoration of sea otter populations remained a high priority for the BBS and its successor, the Fish and Wildlife Service, supervising the renamed Aleutians National Wildlife Refuge in 1940. The BBS undertook several scientific expeditions including one led by Olaus J. Murie and Victor B. Scheffer in 1936–1938 that sighted otters off several islands. Based on reports of otter poaching by Japanese, BBS stationed agents on Amchitka from 1937 to 1940. Amchitka, populated by over 1,000 Aleuts in prehistoric times, had been abandoned in 1849 except for temporary visits by fox trappers. It served as a recovery zone for otters. American poachers took some otters in the 1940s; Alaska Game Commission agents seized three pelts and part of another in 1943–1944.1

World War II arrived at the Aleutians in June 1942 when the Japanese seized Attu, Agattu, and Kiska, in part to divert American forces from more strategically vital sectors in the Pacific. Americans launched bombing missions from Dutch Harbor and Umnak but needed more forward positions to reduce the dangers of long flights in bad weather unaided by adequate navigation and communication facilities. They built a field at Adak, landed on Amchitka in January 1943, and laid down a flight strip only 80 miles from Kiska. Army forces recaptured Attu in May at a cost of 549 dead and 1,148 wounded Americans and the deaths of nearly all 2,500 Japanese defenders. Unaware that the Japanese had evacuated Kiska in July, U.S. and Canadian troops invaded in August and suffered 28 dead and 50 wounded by their own firing. Bombers from Amchitka flew about 100 missions to the Kurile Islands, and the U.S. Army prepared runways at Amchitka, Adak, and Shemya for B-29 attacks against Japan, a plan found unnecessary.2

The war changed the Aleutians, if not the sea otters. Attu’s population of 42 Aleuts went to Japan to be kept as prisoners at Otaru, Hokkaido. Despite rations that starved several to death, 25 survived. Most eventually settled on Atka, and none returned to Attu because the Alaska Indian Service did not want to rebuild the village and maintain services on the remote island 550 miles west of Atka. Officials also declined to pay for the rebuilding of Biorka, Kashega, and Makushin, towns whose combined populations totaled 71. Aleuts from all villages except Attu had been moved to temporary shelters in the Southeast during the war. Loss of their homes and cultural artifacts, and acquisition of new wants and values, dissuaded many Aleuts from returning to their former lifestyles after the war.3

GIs on Amchitka dug into all accessible archaeological sites and removed the artifacts, seldom following proper procedures. Some materials found their way into museums; others were dispersed. Accommodation of about 16,000 men on the island necessitated nearly 2,000 Quonset huts and many other
buildings, all left behind. The Navy stayed at Adak, but the military abandoned nearly all other sites. Concretized runways and numerous other facilities remained on several islands, and many unexploded bombs lay on Kiska. Vehicles, other equipment, and large piles of junk remained on several islands. Private firms salvaged vehicles in 1951–1952 and nonferrous metals in 1953. Wartime activities apparently had little, if any, significant effect on the sea otters.

Rats brought in on supply ships survived and preyed on bird eggs. The military had no interest in wildlife protection, but Navy pilot Gil Joynt, a biologist, carried out sea otter surveys while on patrol. After the war the War and Navy departments attempted to gain control of some of the main Aleutian Islands. They won expanded use rights, but the islands remained within the refuge.

By the early 1950s Amchitka’s otter population had reached its upper limits, and small groups existed elsewhere along the Alaskan coasts. Employing scuba diving for the first time there, refuge manager Bob Jones found the key limiting factor in local otter abundance: when the otters consumed the available supply of rock oysters and sea urchins, their numbers dropped off and the oysters and urchins rebounded as part of a natural cycle. Otters in other locations relied on a wide variety of foods including clams, chitons, crabs, octopi, snails, mussels, and, sometimes, fish. Bald eagles, killer whales, and perhaps sharks are the otters’ natural predators.

Apparent overpopulation of Amchitka otters led the Fish and Wildlife Service to try reintroducing them to former habitat, including the Pribilof Islands. But successful movement of otters proved difficult. In March 1951 a team led by Jones captured at least 35 otters on tidal rocks and held them temporarily in shallow mud-bottomed lakes. Within a few days they all died. A second attempt in 1954 compared holding otters in a large wooden tank and on dry grass in a building. All those in the tank died; 3 others survived. In March and April 1955, agents caught 31 and kept them on beds of straw on the way to the Pribilofs for release. Of the 19 survivors freed, some died immediately and none appeared subsequently. During 1955 through 1957, experimenters tried to determine the optimal combination of bedding and water access for caged otters, as well as drugs that would reduce stress. Five animals released at Attu in 1956 did not reappear, and an airline flight delay caused the deaths of 6 of the 8 otters taken to the Pribilofs. Experimentation demonstrated the need for clean water and resting places to prevent contaminants from reducing the insulating quality of the fur. Agents applied these lessons in May 1959 and released 7 otters at Polovina Point in the Pribilofs. Three months later fishermen sighted 5 in the vicinity. Funding from the Atomic Energy Commission as part of the 1965–1971 Amchitka nuclear test program enabled much larger translocations.

In 1958 the 10,400-acre Simeonof Island in the Shumagins became a national wildlife refuge for sea otters. Shortly after statehood the Alaska sea otter
Sea Otters and Scientists

population rebounded from perhaps 2,000 in 1911 to 30,000. The state held management jurisdiction over the otters between 1960 and 1972. Based in part on reports of large-scale starvation of otters caused by overpopulation in the Rat and Andreanof Island groups, the state instituted an experimental, biologically sustainable harvest. Between 1962 and 1971 the program took 2,556 otters from Amchitka, Tanaga, Kanaga, Adak, and Delarof islands. Efforts stemming from nuclear tests at Amchitka Island resulted in the successful transplant between 1965 and 1972 of 708 otters to locations from the Kenai Peninsula to Oregon. Another 341 died in the moving operations, and the 1971 Cannikin hydrogen bomb test killed an estimated 1,000 to 1,350. The 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act ended state control and prohibited all but Native subsistence use of the otters. Within a quarter-century after statehood, aided by translocation and legal protection, the sea otter recovered most of its original numbers and range in the North Pacific.
Toward the end of the 20th Century four significant problems confronted Alaska sea otters. Pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, some Alaska Natives hunted the otters. Regulations prohibited sale of whole pelts but permitted parts to be sold as craft items. Natives hoped to develop an industry selling items incorporating otter fur. A second issue, oil spills, found expression in the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* incident that killed an estimated 3,500–5,500 sea otters. Neither of these threats appeared capable of endangering sea otter populations. A third issue, conflict between otters and commercial fishers over food such as clams and crabs, began to manifest itself in Alaska in the 1980s. While far less pronounced than the California dispute over abalone, it might grow in proportion to human demands or otter population increase. The fourth phenomenon eliminated at least 95 percent of otters over a 500-mile stretch of the western Aleutians during the 1980s and 1990s. Marine scientists suspected that a small number of killer whales, possibly as few as four, had eaten the otters. The predation appeared to result from the precipitous decline of sea lions and seals, a normal food supply for the whales. The loss of sea lions and seals, in turn, seemed to be related to one or more of three conditions: predation, overfishing, and climatic warming.

Further investigation indicated that as few as 27–40 killer whales could have caused the decline of sea lions and as few as 5 could prevent recovery. The loss of great whales to commercial hunting could have forced the killer whales to turn to harbor seals, sea lions, and, finally, sea otters. At the onset of the 21st Century Aleutian sea otters may have become, at least temporarily, victims of an ecological collapse.

Sea otter rehabilitation ranks as a noteworthy environmental success for at least two reasons. First, a mammal species inherently attractive and interesting to humans escaped extinction. It became a subject of nonconsumptive use values, including scientific study and direct and indirect viewing. Millions of people have enjoyed watching video presentations of the engaging creature, and many have sought to encounter it through ecotourism. Nearly all, if asked, would consider its extermination unthinkable and would oppose human activities that threatened its well-being.

Second, sea otters in some locations are a keystone species in their ecosystems. They consume large numbers of sea urchins, which in turn feed upon kelp. The kelp beds, essentially undersea forests, provide food and shelter for a vast complex of marine species. Removal of sea otters in the 19th Century might have caused disruption in the coastal North Pacific Ocean. Recovery of the otters may have helped to right natural balances.

The sea otter’s hours of peril and salvation in Alaska long pre-dated public awareness of its ecological significance, as well as the existence of video mass media. Far removed from visibility, it lacked the high level of public recognition
needed for protective law enforcement. Unmitigated exploitation had reigned until the species nearly disappeared; utilitarian conservation had not been given a chance. Opposition to the otter’s overexploitation, expressed by a small number of scientists and government officials, stemmed in part from appreciation of the species. More important, most parties agreed that an economically valuable resource should not be destroyed. Therefore, when the Senate approved the 1910 law and 1911 treaty to conserve the fur seal, it added vital if belated measures for the sea otter. In doing so, it acknowledged the goal of selected species protection and the management objective of sustainable resource use.

Absence of industrial uses for the Aleutians made possible their designation as a wildlife reserve and enhanced the otter’s chances for survival. Decades after it had passed the danger point, movies and television magnified public support for the animal and transformed it into a beloved creature. Nonconsumptive use values and public participation entered the equation that would determine the future of the sea otter. Preservation of the species became the main concern. Yet the cumulative pressures of human population growth and alteration of the environment, manifested partly in over-fishing and climate warming, cast doubt on the fate of the sea otter and other marine mammals of the North Pacific.