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Student Resource: Otter History Homework

What is the History of the Sea Otter?

Until the 1700s sea otters were found from Japan to the Kurile Islands, in Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands, in Alaska southward to Baja California. For centuries native hunters, such as the Aleuts, hunted otters. During this time, there were approximately 150,000 to 300,000 sea otters worldwide. But that was soon to change.



Word spread about the rich otter fur and other ships set sail for the region. Soon afterward, sailors journeyed to the inhabited Aleutian Islands. Aleutian sea otters were used to being hunted by the Native peoples and remained in the water until the threat had passed. The Russians forced the Aleuts to capture otters in their small, fast, highly maneuverable boats called *haidarkas*. This was the beginning of what became known as The Great Hunt—an otter industry born in Alaska.

There were several great markets for the otter fur besides China. The fur was sold in England, European countries and the United States. Spain was in the market, too, but only for the meat. But, by 1830, the exploitation of the otter industry had all but wiped out the otter population. In 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the U.S., which stepped up its hunt for otters. By the turn of the century, sea otters had almost been exterminated, leaving only about a dozen colonies containing no more than 1000 -2000 otters. To protect these remaining populations, the U.S., Russia, Great Britain and Japan signed the Fur Seal Treaty in 1911. By then, 123 ships had reported killing 198,284 sea otters.



Distribution of sea otters prior to the initiation of the fur harvest in 1741.
Width of the shaded area is not to scale relative to sea otter habitat.

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What has happened to sea otter populations since 1911?



Sea otter populations that survived the fur harvest and provided the nucleus for recovery of the species.



Current distribution of sea otters including locations of successful translocations

Free of the threat of commercial harvesting, the sea otter populations began to recover and recolonized a large part of their former range between Prince William Sound, Alaska west to the Kuril Islands. Unfortunately by the 1950s the populations along the Pacific coast from Prince William Sound to Baja California disappeared, except for one tiny population in California.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game reintroduced sea otters into former habitat in Alaska, Canada, Washington and Oregon in collaboration with other State and Provincial wildlife management agencies. In 1972, management was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. By mid-1970, the otter population had jumped from 2,000 in 1911 to 110,000–160,000. In 1987, otters were reintroduced to San Nicholas Island in southern California. Due to these efforts, sea otter populations in southeast Alaska, British Columbia and Washington are currently stable or increasing. Sea otters are well established in Glacier Bay. In 10 surveys conducted in 2004 the average count was 66 individuals with a mean group size of 8. Most sea otters are found in the Lower Bay, south of Sandy Cove with concentrations in the vicinity of Sita Reef and Boulder Island. Large portions of Glacier Bay remain unoccupied by sea otters, although their distribution ranges are gradually increasing as they move into new areas.

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What are the Breeding Habits of Sea Otters?

Alaska sea otters typically bear their pups in late spring — one pup per breeding cycle. But, depending on the availability of food, breeding may occur every other cycle. Pups weigh only a few pounds at birth, typically 3-5 pounds (1.4-2.3 kg) and are light brown. They live on top of their mothers, literally, until they are weaned. That's where they eat, sleep and how they travel, although otters usually don't roam far, unless they've run out of food.

What Poses a Threat to an Otter's Existence?

Many sea otters live 15–20 years. Orcas and great white sharks are their main predators however, newborns otters can be preyed upon by bald eagles.

The greatest threat to the sea otter remains humans. It has been estimated that the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill caused the deaths of more than 2500 sea otters are also caught in fishing nets, hunted for subsistence by Alaskan Natives.

Homework Directions: Read the article on Page 1-2 and then answer the questions below.

Part One: Summarize the article on a **separate sheet of paper**. Use the sentence starters below to keep you organized and on track. Remember in a summary, there is **no opinion**. Just state the facts from the article. Make sure to give **specific details** from the article.

- The purpose of this article was
- The article informed me of...
- The importance of this article is...
- In conclusion, ...

Key Vocabulary

a) **ecosystem:** interactions of living things (biotic) and their nonliving (abiotic) world.

b) **Fish and Wildlife Management:** a government agency that regulates endangered species.

c) **subsistence:** supporting oneself (food).

Part Two:

What other words could you use here? Use a dictionary for help!

a) "the Aleuts to capture otters in their small, fast, highly **maneuverable** boats called *haidarkas*."

Other word(s) for **maneuverable**: _____

b) ". By the turn of the century, sea otters had almost been **exterminated**..."

Other word(s) for **exterminated**: _____

c) "But, by 1830, the **exploitation** of the otter industry had all but wiped out the otter population.."

Other word(s) for **exploitation**: _____

Part Three: Answer these questions below using complete sentences.

1) What other organism in nature do you see having the same type of ecological role in their environment?

Describe its ecological role.

2) Why do you think sea otters are important in the kelp forest?

3) Why may there still be a decline in otter populations, even though they have been protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973?

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Part One Graphic Organizer

