THE OUTLOOK
Margaret Owings

SINCE FEBRUARY 22, 1970, WHEN SENATOR GRUNSKY INTRODUCED S.B. 442 INTO THE STATE LEGISLATURE, WE HAVE STOOD FIRM. THIS BILL (see page 6) EVEN AFTER AMENDMENT, PROPOSED MANAGEMENT THAT WOULD DANGEROUSLY INVADE THE PROTECTED STATUS OF THIS RARE ANIMAL. IT AIMED TO SERVE A SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP, AN ABALONE INDUSTRY NOW DECLINED TO (around) 8 BOATS, TWO MEN EACH, FULL-TIME OUT OF MORRO BAY. BUT THE PROPOSED SOLUTION TO MANIPULATE OTTERS WOULD NOT RECLAIM AN INDUSTRY DYING FROM ITS OWN OVER-HARVEST. WE OPPOSED THE BILL WITHOUT INTERRUPTION, BECAUSE IN ATTEMPTING TO SOLVE THE FISHERMEN’S PROBLEM, IT WOULD FAIL — WHILE AT THE SAME TIME, IT WOULD CAUSE SERIOUS LOSS OF LIFE AMONG THE OTTERS. DR. BURNETTE BEOEUF TESTIFIED AT THE HEARING: “THE SEA OTTER COLONY OFF THE COAST OF CALIFORNIA IS SMALL. THE COLONY IS ALSO UNIQUE. THE CALIFORNIA OTTERS DIFFER IN SEVERAL IMPORTANT BEHAVIORS FROM THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN ALASKA. TO TAMPER WITH A SMALL COLONY OF A UNIQUE AND ENDANGERED SPECIES IS FOOLHARDY.”

THANKS TO THE SEA OTTER’S FRIENDS, THOUSANDS OF LETTERS REACHED THE LEGISLATORS. THESE EXPRESSIONS ALONG WITH A PETITION, FINE PRESS COVERAGE, TELEVISION AND A DEDICATED GROUP OF SCIENTISTS, SHELVED THE BILL AFTER THE APRIL 6 HEARING IN SACRAMENTO. IN LATE APRIL, SENATOR GRUNSKY ANNOUNCED HE HAD GIVEN UP, FOR THIS YEAR, HIS CONTROVERSIAL BILL TO CONTROL SEA OTTERS.

WE HAVE LEARNED A GREAT DEAL THIS SPRING — BUT WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED RESTS UPON THE BREADTH OF OUR OWN INSIGHT. IF WE WISH TO PRESERVE A DIVERSITY OF MARINE LIFE, WE CANNOT RELEGATE IT TO THE AGGRESSIVE IMPELSES OF MEN WHO THINK ONLY OF WHAT IT CAN YIELD TO THEMSELVES.

The sea otter is a unique evolutionary development which places it in a delicate category for survival. Having no subcutaneous fat, it relies upon a blanket of air, trapped among the fibers of the fur for insulation and buoyancy. Thus oil spills along the coast can be fatal to the otter, coating the fur, destroying warmth and causing chill and death.

COMMENTS ON THE OIL THREAT
Dr. John H. Phillips, Director, Hopkins Marine Station of Stanford University, Pacific Grove

The new threat to the otter is related to the oil tanker traffic along the California coast — and the development of the Alaskan oil fields will contribute to this traffic. The otter in its restricted range (with the proposed Senate Bill 442 insisting that it remain within the Sea Otter Refuge for protection) increases the risk of extinction from a tanker accident. The tanker, Connecticut, that was in danger of sinking off our coast, opposite the Sea Otter Refuge, exemplifies the danger. If we are to increase the chance for survival of the otter, it is essential that the otter be given protection outside of the Refuge and hopefully that we may be able to start new colonies in the relatively unpolluted northern end of the State.
THE COMMERCIAL ABALONE FISHERY
Judson E. Vandevere

During the first quarter of this century, abalones were heavily taken for drying, canning, and fresh processing in a number of areas, including Point Lobos. The resource has been over-harvested by the industry during three periods in the last century. The present scarcity of abalones is statewide. Our thousand-otter herd, which ventures into only a part of the commercial abalone area, is blamed for this third historic decline in the resource.

The Department of Fish and Game began recording the poundage of abalones landed by commercial divers in 1916. Of the more than sixty years of landings prior to 1916, all we know is that they exceeded 4.1 million pounds per year by 1879.

Chinese fishermen, who originated the industry in the 1850’s, pressed into Baja and the Channel Islands after stripping all sizes of abalones from the shallow waters of the California mainland shore. These men lost their livelihood in 1900 when local ordinances prohibited commercial abalone fishing in shallow waters.

During the second period of heavy commercial stripping, when abalones were taken in deeper water, yearly landings became increasingly large, reaching a peak in 1929 when over 3.4 million pounds were landed in Monterey by Japanese divers. At first the catch came from Point Lobos and south Monterey Bay, but by 1929 the boats needed to travel as far south as Lopez Point because of diminishing yields closer to Monterey.

Diver Roy Hattori says the area north of the Carmel River was closed to commercial taking only after it had been stripped by hard-hat divers using hand-pump compressors.

In 1929 the area between Cambria and Pt. Buchon was opened at the request of the industry, and some caucasian divers began working out of Morro Bay, having learned the secret techniques of the Japanese by watching them through binoculars.

The Department of Fish and Game attributed the second collapse of the industry to adverse water conditions (undertow, etc.) in 1939 and on bad weather in 1937 and 1938, but even fewer abalones were landed in the succeeding three years. Commercial landings at Monterey from 1918 through 1941 had exceeded 42.0 million pounds.

The third and current period began after the resource enjoyed almost a closed season during World War II. Yearly landings climbed rapidly, reaching a peak of over 5.0 million pounds in 1957 and again nearly 5.0 million pounds in 1966.

It now appears that the industry is experiencing its third major decline, statewide, from over-fishing. Last year only 3.4 million pounds were landed. The lawful taking of abalones has failed to enhance the resource or to maintain a sustained yield.
Nearly one hundred years ago a three year government exploration party in Alaska reported not seeing one sea otter alive, and presumably this valuable fur bearer was extinct. By some miracle this did not prove to be the case. This animal was given a second chance which came in the form of an International Fur Agreement. Today, between 30,000 and 40,000 sea otters are estimated in the Aleutian Islands, and slightly more than 1,000 are counted off the California coast. Is this not the time for the human race to congratulate itself on restoring a rare species to abundant life?

The recent sale of 600 fresh sea otter pelts at high prices in Seattle leads one to the fear that history may repeat itself, for it was the tremendous monetary value of the sea otter’s fur that almost led to his extinction. The fur sale in itself is not the only reason to fly storm signals. It is useful to review rather briefly the short but violent history of the near extinction of the North Pacific sea otter, Enhydra lutris, for this may give us a plan to avoid repetition of the pattern.

History records that survivors of Vitus Bering’s last voyage in 1741, were the first to view this remarkable fur bearer. When these men finally returned to the Kamchatka Peninsula they brought with them, to the port of Petropavlovsk, many sea otter pelts. The news spread quickly. A year later, 1,364 miles away at the trading post of Kiatka, Chinese merchants were offering 80 – 100 rubles, the equivalent of $60 – $75 in that year, for a prime sea otter pelt. The fur trade at this post alone soon amounted to 4,000,000 rubles a year. Siberian traders also bought pelts from the fur hunters, making a profit of at least 400%. The Russian government lost no time in financing more expeditions and building ships.

The professional fur hunters of East Siberia, were a reckless and barbaric race of man, known as “Promishleniki”. They committed shocking acts in their pursuit of the sea otter. The Russian Government was shrewd in capitalizing on their greed, exploiting them fully by offering opportunities to join the voyages.

The islands to which these ships sailed were populated by the Aleuts, a Stone Age people, little progressed from the races which lived in Europe 400,000 years before Christ. The Russian strategy was simple. They won the natives over by gifts and vodka in return for sea otter furs. The Aleuts rode the wild seas in two-man kayaks, or baidarkas, and the fur hunters organized them into armadas numbering as many as 500 or more craft. When an island had produced all the sea otter pelts thought to exist, the Promishleniki thought nothing of murdering the populations.

When the value of sea otter pelts became widely known, the Russian-American Trading Co. was established and by 1764, each ship was bringing back an average haul of pelts worth a quarter of a million dollars. It was Alexander Baranov who brought the fur operation to its most efficient peak, organizing fur hunting not only in the Aleutians but along the California coast. Between 1790 and 1817, he ran the Russian-American Trading Co. and built posts from Alaska south to the Bay of Monterey. In 1797 Baranov took 2,000 pelts out of the Inland Passage. Five years later, the Tlingit Indians at the Sitka Post murdered all of his men. At that time, the value of the Sitka trade was 17,000 pelts worth 1.2 million rubles. Four years before the Aleutian hunting grounds were abandoned for a lack of otters, Baranov’s business over a three year period had totalled 5,000,000 rubles. In 1810, John Jacob Astor made a trade agreement with Baranov, but Prince William Sound, formerly producing 3,000 pelts a year, now yielded 50 skins for Astor.

Baranov’s rule ended in 1817 after trading 200,000 pelts worth approximately $50 million. Over the 75 year period of hunting 750,000 skins were estimated as taken with an equal number possibly lost in ship-wrecked vessels. In 1826 the whole Unalaska district produced only 15 pelts, and by 1867 when the Russian Government sold Alaska to the United States, the sea otter trade, estimated as greater than all the gold taken out of Mexico by the Spanish, was finished.

Is the sea otter again to face possible extinction? There is a disturbing apathy on the part of the public. Although the island of Amchitka was set aside as a sea otter restoration area in the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, twice the Atomic Energy Commission has set off nuclear devices there. Increasing oil spills and pollution in the waters threaten the otters and pressures by the Abalone Industry are triggering legislation to lessen the protected status of the otter after nearly 67 years. These factors, plus the introduction of sea otter furs into the fashion market, could add up to a pattern repeating itself unless we insist upon strong measures to prevent it.
THE CALIFORNIA SEA OTTER PETITION
Claire C. Pentony

"We the undersigned — oppose the “taking of the sea otter outside the sea otter refuge — under a permit or by the Dept. of Fish & Game.”

We believe in a balanced ecology which the sea otter and abalone have long shared. We place higher value on the presence of the sea otter along our shores than on the $ sign of the commercial abalone industry.”

This petition was presented at the Senate Hearing, April 6 and carried 14,884 signatures. Since then, tardy petitions have arrived carrying a total of 15,232 signatures. Although Senator Grunsky amended S.B. 442, deleting the word “take” six days before the hearing in Sacramento, the public saw through the ambiguous new wording of the amendment and were not lulled into ceasing their opposition to the bill. These names were gathered in less than 3 weeks. Thousands more signatures could have been collected, had time permitted. The public responded with a strong commitment to the preservation of the otter.

SIERRA CLUB RESOLUTION
April 13, 1970

"The Sierra Club opposes the intent of S.B. 442, currently pending before the Calif. State Senate, which would authorize the transplantation of sea otters found outside of the Calif. Sea Otter Refuge. The tolerances of sea otters to re-establishment in cold Pacific Northwest water has not been sufficiently studied, and mass transplantation may well result in the needless destruction of hundreds of these rare animals.

We further recommend that a technical commission be appointed to conduct an in-depth study of all marine resources along the Coast, including environmental hazards as well as measures to protect a balanced ecology in which both the sea otter and the abalone will be enhanced and preserved. This study should be carried out by an institution of recognized competence and impartiality to resist pressures originating from narrow view points.”

Richard Condit
representatives in government who are not capable of being educated, let's replace them at the next election.

In the past, farsighted citizens and sportsmen groups ended uncontrolled market hunting for deer, ducks and Pismo Clams. It's time to take a long hard look at the failure of present abalone harvesting practices to maintain a sustained breeding population of abalone both inside and outside of the range of the sea otter. We can’t blame the otter for the decline of the abalone resource along the coast of San Diego, Laguna Beach, Palos Verdes, Malibu, Santa Barbara, Catalina and the Channel Islands. He doesn’t live there. It is clear to all thinking sportsmen that the abalone is disappearing from the combined impact of overharvest and the other activities of "technological man". Plants and animals alike are delicately balanced in a complex web of life. It would be a sad mistake to sacrifice a resource such as the sea otter in a vain attempt to save another resource, the abalone.

OUR POSITION ON THE TRANSLOCATION OF SEA OTTERS
William F. Bryan

We prefer to allow the sea otter to determine its range naturally and not be limited by artificial boundaries. We acknowledge that there is a present threat to the sea otter as well as to the total marine environment from pollution. We further recognize that the threat to this species from pollution could be reduced if the otter ranged over a larger area.

If a viable breeding colony of otters can be established in a favorable area within the State of California, we favor such a move. We believe, however, that manipulation of a fragile population (approximately 1000 animals) without adequate scientific information is dangerous.

A CENSUS OF SEA OTTERS

Fish and Game biologists, Mel Odemar and Kenneth Wilson reported an aerial census of sea otters along the Central California coast on May 6-7, 1970.

They announced a count of 1,040, the greatest number of sea otters yet observed in California. This number registers 26 more otters than the previous high count in June 1969.

Weather and light conditions were good, winds were light and on the first day, a high fog eliminated the glare. Censusing was conducted during the morning hours when the otter aggregations are largest due to decreased feeding activity. Increased numbers of animals were observed south of the Refuge (a count of 165) while north of the Refuge (a count of 214) indicated no visible increase since a year ago. The greatest concentration of pups was seen from the vicinity of Cape San Martin to Salmon Creek, a distance of about 12 miles. At this time of year, there is a seasonal decrease of the annual Kelp, Nereocystis causing otters to be more easily visible from the air.
OTTER MAIL

We have received hundreds of letters. Here are excerpts from a few.

"My whole life, I have considered the sea otter a good omen."  
Christina Heckman, Hollywood

"How sad that man is causing the death of the oceans and yet blames the sea otter for destroying an industry which only serves the affluent to begin with."

Valeria G. DaCosta, San Francisco

"Speaking of otters – I’m on their side. I once ordered abalone at the Cliff House. It tasted like cut-up garden hose."

Fred Smith, Denbigh, Virginia

"It is this family’s opinion, these sea otters belong to the State of California, to ourselves and to our children and are a resource and responsibility not to be taken lightly. There are values other than the dollar and the right to exist of other species must be preserved now."

The Dan Saxon Palmer family, Los Angeles

"Please try to save those otters! I know those fishermen are trying to blame those abalones on the otters! My teacher said that they are getting the abalone females before they have babies."

Ernis Chivira, 5th Grade, Los Angeles

"It seems unbelievable that interest could be so blind to sea otter fragility, and the slow miraculous recovery, they would exhibit their cupidity and callousness to statewide values."

Roland Case Ross, Los Angeles

(Upon seeing my first sea otter) "Right in front of us was a large sea otter. Others became apparent in the giant kelp. My friend thought I had lost my mind, so excited was I at finally seeing this animal which, since early childhood, represented all that I thought worthwhile."

Richard Felger, Tucson, Arizona

"According to Mr. James Messersmith, Sr., Marine Biologist for Fish & Game – if this bill is passed, the Department would manage the otters – meaning, some would be transported to the State of Washington, some would be moved to other areas of California, some would be collected for zoos for study – and approximately 5% would be killed annually."

Mr. and Mrs. Tony Trabert, Santa Monica

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