



Sea Otter Hides

What is “Significantly Altered”

Background

Alaska Native peoples have traditionally hunted sea otters for generations and this activity continues today under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and its implementing regulations. The Act’s intent is to conserve marine mammals, and generally prohibits the take of marine mammals. Due to the special relationship that Alaska Native peoples have with the marine environment, including the use of marine mammals for subsistence and handicrafts, the Act allows for the non-wasteful harvest of sea otters by coastal-dwelling Alaska Native peoples. When an Alaska Native person harvests a sea otter, the hide and skull must be tagged by a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service representative within 30 days of harvest. This allows harvest numbers to be monitored and provides important biological information about the health of the sea otter population.

The implementing regulations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act allows Alaska Native peoples to give, trade, or sell sea otter hides or parts to other Alaska Native peoples. The regulations also allow Alaska Native people to create authentic “significantly altered” Native handicrafts and clothing and sell them to non-Native people. The term “significantly altered” has been confusing to Alaska Native hunters and artists for many years.

In November 2013, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service issued guidance to help clarify this term.

Guidance

A sea otter will be considered “significantly altered” when it is no longer recognizable as a whole sea otter hide, and has been made into a handicraft or article of clothing as is identified below:

1. A tanned, dried, cured, or preserved sea otter hide, devoid of the head, feet, and tail (i.e., blocked) that is substantially changed by any of the following, but is not limited to: weaving, carving, stitching, sewing, lacing, beading, drawing, painting, other decorative fashions, or made into another material or medium; and cannot be easily converted back to an unaltered hide or piece of hide.
2. Tanned, dried, cured, or preserved sea otter head, tail, or feet, or other parts devoid of the remainder of the hide which includes any of the following, but is not limited to: weaving, carving, stitching, sewing, lacing, beading, drawing, or painting, other decorative fashions, or made into another material or medium.

Examples of Significantly Altered and Not Significantly Altered Items:

Photos: USFWS



Significantly Altered

Slippers with sea otter trim—made from a sea otter hide that has been cut into small pieces and sewn.



Significantly Altered

Hat—made from a hide that has been cut into small pieces and sewn. The hat brim is natural fur; the top part of hat is shaved fur.



Significantly Altered

Mittens—made from a sea otter hide that has been cut into pieces and sewn.



Significantly Altered

Purse—made from a sea otter hide that has been cut into small pieces and sewn.



Significantly Altered

Pillow—made from a sea otter hide that has been cut and stitched on all edges.



Significantly Altered

Scarf—made from a sea otter hide that has been cut, lined, and sewn on all edges.



Significantly Altered

Blanket —made from a sea otter hide that has been blocked, lined, and stitched on all edges.



Not Significantly Altered

Scarf / neck roll—made from sea otter hide that has been cut, but has not been stitched or lined.



Not Significantly Altered

Drawing—made from a sea otter hide that has not been blocked, and has not been stitched or lined.

The full guidance document, a photo gallery, and frequently asked questions and answers are available on the Web: http://www.fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/mmm/hunting_seaotter.htm

To find a tagger in your area or to request a copy of the guidance:
E-mail (fw7_ak_marine_mammals@fws.gov) or call (907) 786-3800 or 1-800-362-5148.

