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FEATURE MATERIAL -- EXCELLENT PICTURES OF SEA OTTER IN NATURAL HABITAT AVAILABLE ON LOAN TO PUBLISHERS

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SEA OTTERS TO BE TRANSPLANTED ALONG ALASKA COAST

The Government plans to sponsor some new colonies in Alaska -- colonies of sea otters, that is. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that its 40 years of sea otter protection have paid off to the extent that more than 8,000 of the animals now live along the Alaskan and Aleutian Islands coast. So many, in fact, that it is now feasible to transplant small colonies of them to other areas, where sea otters have not been seen since the scourge of Russian and American fur-traders that all but wiped them out by the late 1860s.

Fish and Wildlife Service refuge workers plan to capture small numbers of sea otters at such places as Amchitka Island in the Aleutians (where the largest number of otters occur) and start new colonies along the islands and coast of Alaska. Some day the Government plans to harvest a percentage of the sea otters for their pelts. That harvest should eventually result in a several hundred thousand dollar a year business.

Sea otters were once abundant along the Pacific coast, from southern California to northern Alaska, and were the objects of intense hunting during the Russian occupation of Alaska. At the time the United States acquired Alaska in 1868, these valuable fur-bearing animals had been reduced to the point of commercial extinction.

After the United States purchased Alaska, the killing of the few remaining sea otters -- hidden in little pockets along the coast -- was greatly curtailed by regulations prescribed by the Secretary of the Treasury. These regulations continued until 1910, after which time the killing of sea otters has been completely outlawed. Some people feared that the sea otters were doomed to extinction, but in a few small places little groups of sea otters lived under the watchful eyes and jealous secrecy of Federal agencies.

It was the great worth of sea otter pelts that caused the secrecy and the efforts to provide protection for the animals. When the Russians came to Alaska for the express purpose of getting many shiploads of otter pelts, a silky black sea otter pelt was worth its weight in gold. Some skins were said to have been sold for $2,500, but the average was much less. At any rate, the otter pelt was worth enough to cause piracy and the mass murder of whole tribes of native Aleuts. The early traders from Asia enslaved many of the native men, working them to death or killing them before sailing away.

Later on, American and English traders also engaged in sea otter raids and high-handed piracy. With this background of bloody, profitable and adventurous sea otter exploitation, it is no wonder that the mere mention of sea otters still creates an uncommon interest.

About all that the Federal agencies charged with protection of the sea otters could do for the animals during the early part of the century was to maintain secrecy about the location of small groups in isolated parts of the coast, since the agencies concerned did not have the necessary funds for much patrolling of the areas.

During the 1930s the Navy and Coast Guard gathered evidence that indicated that Japanese "fishing" craft might be netting sea otters illegally in Alaskan waters. From these reports, Congress became aware of the need for more adequate protection. This eventually enabled Federal agencies to station personnel and patrol boats in the Aleutians and elsewhere in Alaska.

The Navy and Coast Guard reports did serve the immediate purpose, however, of helping the Bureau of Fisheries (then guarding the otters) to gather much needed information and to do the best possible job of otter management with the limited funds available.

It was the sighting of a Japanese vessel, apparently netting sea otters, in an inlet of Amchitka Island that started the present management program that has proved so successful. There in the inlet was a large sea-going ship where no ship could possibly be afloat -- according to Navy charts. The charts stated that the inlet was filled with rocky reefs, and any ship venturing into the inlet would surely be destroyed. On sighting the Navy vessel, however, the Japanese ship put on steam and sailed away, right over the "rocks." Investigation soon showed that the "rocks" were really rip tides that created an illusion of reefs.

In the inlet thus inspected was found a large group of rare sea otters. Hidden away from hunters and pirates, the otters had lived and multiplied for many years. The Bureau of Fisheries received a small appropriation from Congress for the establishment of a sea otter station on Amchitka. This sea otter protection was materially assisted by the Navy and Coast Guard's alert watch on prowling Japanese fishing craft.

When the Bureau of Fisheries and the Biological Survey were consolidated in 1940 to become the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior, the sea otter management program was given impetus.

During the war years that sea otters began to multiply in their relative security. Now there are about 4,000 sea otters on Amchitka and about the same number scattered in small groups along other islands and coastal areas.

This increase was in spite of the fact that many soldiers stationed in the Aleutians took a fancy at "potting" sea otters. Some of the men tried to take home sea otter souvenirs -- still worth several hundred dollars each in some of the world's markets -- but Fish and Wildlife game management agents "discouraged" the practice. To even possess a sea otter skin makes a person subject to prosecution. Finally, the killing of sea otters by soldiers and the smuggling of pelts to Europe by pilots was stopped with the Army's cooperation.

Now, an Army biologist on Amchitka has been working for some time with the Fish and Wildlife Service in studying sea otters. In addition to this help, the Army has loaned jeeps and other equipment to refuge personnel and has otherwise been of assistance.

As in all cases of game management, a complete study of the animal's life history is needed before intelligent efforts can be made to apply management practices. In the case of the sea otter, this study has increased considerably

in late years through the efforts of wildlife refuge biologists. One of the things learned, for instance, is that the sea otters cannot live except along certain shorelines. They need to live in an area where the water is comparatively shallow, as off shelving beaches. In such areas the sea urchins live, upon which the otters feed mainly. There also needs to be kelp beds in which the otters can rest, play and hide from killer whales.

Killer whales and man are the sea otters' two worst enemies. The otters are constantly alert for them, occasionally shading their eyes from the glare of the sun with their paws to look for the single large fin of a killer whale cutting through the water or to spot man's boats approaching.

The sea otter has so many of the characteristics or mannerisms of people that he is often called "the child of the sea" or "old man of the sea." The two names are not as contradictory as they first appear: while the 55-inch long, 50-pound adult looks like an old man, with grizzled hair on head and shoulders and a full, bristly mustache, he lives and plays like a child. Although not as lithe a swimmer as the river otter, the sea otter undulates through the water with a scissors kick, now and then rolling over on his back to kick himself along with one foot -- his fore paws complacently resting on his chest.

The otter's chest also serves as his table. On it he spreads sea urchins as he tears them apart. While nibbling one tasty bit, he is apt to lose another to the floating sea gull that lazily swims about the "table" looking for an unguarded piece of food. After finishing lunch, the otter rolls over a few times and scrubs himself on the head and neck with his paws.

No mother of the wild is more careful of her young than the sea otter parent with her single kit or pup. A large share of the time, the little otter rests on his mother's chest, receiving more than an optimum of kissing and fondling. In an emergency, the mother tucks her pup under one arm and dives into the "jungle" of kelp to seek safety. The female sea otter is also like a human mother in that she will not hesitate to spank her little one on occasion. Should the pup, while learning to swim, fail to dive under a crest of a breaking wave, he could be killed on the rocks. Until this lesson is learned, the mother will thrash her crying pup -- although it no doubt hurts her worse than it does him.

Early American biologists and naturalists, like Ernest Thompson Seton, reported that the sea otter was monogamous. Following the indiscriminate slaughter by early traders, however, the otters were reported to have become polygamous. The Japanese, who also have sea otters in their northern islands, claim them to be polygamous. Which, for a number of years, has enabled the Japanese to harvest the "surplus" males -- which amount to about 10 percent of the herd.

To date there is no record of sea otters being kept alive in captivity for more than a few days. Perhaps with better knowledge of their specialized food habits it might become possible. But it must be regarded as a slim risk until otherwise proved by careful experimentation.

No tale about sea otters would be complete without mention of California's sea otters -- even though the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not share in the management. The California sea otters were supposedly killed off early in the fur-traders' mad slaughter of more than a century ago. A few sea otters remained, though, hidden away in inaccessible coves and inlets. Now California has about 200 sea otters of her own.

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