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Soft Gold and the Pacific Frontier: Geopolitics and Environment in the Sea Otter Trade

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in

World Cultures and History

by

Richard John Ravalli

Committee in charge:
Professor Gregg Herken, Chair
Professor Sean Malloy
Professor Jan Goggans
Professor David Igler

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VITA

1998	Bachelor of Arts, California State University, Stanislaus
2001	Master of Arts, California State University, Stanislaus
2005-2007	Teaching Assistant, School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts University of California, Merced
2009	Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, Merced

Introduction

Covering over one-third of the earth's surface, the Pacific Basin is one of the richest natural settings known to man. As the globe's largest and deepest body of water, it stretches roughly ten thousand miles north to south from the Bering Straight to the Antarctic Circle. Much of its continental rim from Asia to the Americas is marked by coastal mountains and active volcanoes. The Pacific Basin is home to over twenty-five thousand islands, various oceanic temperatures, and a rich assortment of plants and animals. Its human environment over time has produced an influential civilizations stretching from Southeast Asia to the Pre-Columbian Americas.[1] An international agreement currently divides the Pacific at the Diomede Islands in the Bering Strait between Russia to the west and the United States to the east. This territorial demarcation symbolizes a broad array of contests and resolutions that have marked the region's modern history. Scholars of Pacific history often emphasize the lure of natural bounty for many of the first non-natives who ventured to Pacific waters. In particular, hunting and trading for fur bearing mammals receives a significant amount of attention, perhaps no species receiving more than the sea otter—originally distributed along the coast from northern Japan, the Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka peninsula, east toward the Aleutian Islands and the Alaskan coastline, and south to Baja California.

The story of EuroAmerican fur trading dates back centuries to the Age of Discovery and the first explorers, settlers, and traders who ventured to the North American Atlantic seaboard. By the late seventeenth century, England's Hudson Bay

[1] Arrell Morgan Gibson and John S. Whitehead, *Yankees in Paradise: The Pacific Basin Frontier* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), chs. 2-3.

Company was chartered and beaver pelts had become a major continental commodity.[2] Partly because of this rich, deep history with ties to eastern and trans-Atlantic markets, little fur trade scholarship has centered on the Pacific conceptually or firmly placed Pacific trading in larger global contexts.[3] Hence, although the editors of one volume observed that "[p]re-gold-rush trade in animal skins along the California coast was in fact firmly linked to intercontinental markets connected via the Pacific Ocean,"[4] few have developed such historiographic ground.

Evidence of the need for a Pacific-grounded fur trade history is that studies of the sea otter trade typically focus on particular localities in the Eastern Pacific Basin and/or on specific national players in the eighteenth and nineteenth century trade. The approach I offer integrates these works into a broader picture of Pacific history. In doing so, I both amplify and refine previous arguments about the importance of the sea otter trade. I argue that EuroAmerican desire for the luxurious and costly fur of *Enhydra lutris* was central to the Pacific's economic and political development. The high exchange rates that merchants received for sea otter in the China market helped spur the first extensive non-native activity in many coastal areas. As entrepreneurs and hunters of various backgrounds competed and cooperated for the region's fur bearing resources, territorial claims were shaped and contested. Principally, I reaffirm the geopolitical significance of American success at sea otter trading in the Pacific. I also argue that wider geographic and temporal perspectives clarify the various environmental consequences of the trade.

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[2] For a general overview of this era of the North American fur trade, see James A. Hanson, *When Skins Were Money: A History of the Fur Trade* (Chadron, Nebraska: Museum of the Fur Trade, 2005), chs. 3-5.
[3] Recent examples of Pacific/global fur trade studies are Jim Hardee, "Soft Gold: Animal Skins and the Early Economy of California," in Dennis O. Flynn, Arturo Giraldez, and James Sobredo, Eds., *Studies in Pacific History: Economics, Politics, and Migration* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 23-39; Nancy J. Taniguchi, "Jed Smith, U.S. Trade, and Global Connections," *Southern California Quarterly* 88:4 (Winter 2006-2007): 389-407.
[4] Flynn, Giraldez, Sobredo, 6.

Recent scholarship in the history of the United States West supports the application of expanded transnational and global scopes.[5] Most prominently, David Igler has written that much of the Eastern Pacific Basin did not function as a historical and geographic reality until European and American traders journeyed to ports and assisted in its integration with the emerging Pacific World. These individuals brought with them foreign cultural traditions, germs which decimated native populations, and often destructive systems of forced labor in addition to exchange goods, yet their various activities were essential in bringing locations such as Sitka, Hawaii, and Alta California into a wider international imagination. This study of the sea otter trade fits well within such a framework. One of my contentions is that historians have largely bypassed the Western Pacific origins of the trade. While like Igler I focus primarily on the Eastern Pacific, I argue that an examination of inter-Asian fur exchanges from roughly 1500-1800 sheds new light on the subject. Not only does the commodification of the sea otter originate within this context—a phenomenon involving Japanese enterprises and native Ainu peoples from Hokkaido and the Kurils—but many of the commercial, political, and environmental aspects of the sea otter trade have important parallels and contrasts in the Western Pacific Basin. Therefore this study provides global comparisons that reshape our understanding of the fur trade specifically and the US West generally.

[5] For examples, see David Igler, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," *American Historical* Review 109:3 (June 2004): 693-719; Lissa Wadewitz, "Pirates of the Salish Sea: Labor, Mobility, and Environment in the Transnational West," *Pacific Historical Review* 75:4 (November 2006): 587-627; Taniguchi.

Encompassing the entire natural range of the sea otter, a range that crosses a number of historic and geographic boundaries, this study has distinct implications for scholars evaluating the emergence of the Pacific World.[6] For one, it suggests that the historical dynamics of the Far East, including the above-mentioned Western Pacific, were more important to intensive trans-oceanic connections and permanent settlements in the Eastern Pacific Basin than the explorations of individuals like British Captain James Cook. Had it not been for the value first attached to sea otter pelts in Asia, than the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century merchant enterprises at places such as Nootka Sound and Hawaii—established following news of Cook's fateful third expedition—would have proceeded more slowly than they did. Additionally, I am not the first to view the Spanish mission system in Alta California as first and foremost a reaction against Russian fur traders pushing *eastward* from the Western Pacific. Ultimately I support a "West Meets East" interpretation of Pacific development for much of the eighteenth century. The Eastern Pacific emerges at this time in large measure because of events occurring elsewhere in the Basin. The centrality of China is a concept at play here, one which many world historians would recognize. I chose to center on the sea otter, a creature that to varying degrees and at different locations and times was vital to the Pacific frontier. Its historical importance invites multidisciplinary perspectives. Political scientist and world systems researcher John D. Carlson has recently stressed the significance of the sea otter trade in the incorporation of the Pacific Northwest,

[6] An edition of the American Antiquarian Society's online journal *Common-place* offers a scholarly yet readable collection of essays from those engaging in early Pacific World dialogues. See *Common-place* 5:2 (2005), Available online at http://www.common-place.org/vol-05/no-02/.

particularly Nootka Sound, into the global capitalist economy.[7] I do not entirely share his methodological approach, but I do agree that a number of scholarly endeavors illuminate this subject while arguing that regional perspectives which include the Northwest as one comparative component are needed.

My attention to *Enhydra* as a species leads me to an environmental history of the trade. While historians in the last few years have begun to focus more sharply on issues related to the natural consequences of the sea otter trade, an evaluation of the complex occurrences that affected otter populations throughout the Eastern Pacific Basin during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is needed.[8] Clearly the animals were vigorously pursued along North American coasts for nearly a century, and overall their numbers were dramatically reduced. Yet this decline took place at different rates at different locations and periods. Moreover, a collection of factors, including conservation and the distinctive geographies where sea otters live, influenced localized rebounding of their numbers during the first major period of sea otter hunting and trading (defined as roughly prior to 1850). I also utilize the above concerns for a period after 1850 in order to fill a "Dark Age" gap for the Pacific sea otter. Scholars have said relatively little about the species for the decades spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to the period being historiographically "dark," surviving populations were hunted for their pelts and were increasingly threatened with extinction prior to more recent national and international conservation policies. Therefore this dissertation

[7] John D. Carlson, "The 'Otter Man' Empires: The Pacific Fur Trade, Incorporation and the Zone of Ignorance," *Journal of World Systems Research* 3:3 (Fall 2002): 390-442.
[8] For examples, see Anya Zilberstein, "Objects of Distant Exchange: The Northwest Coast, Early America, and the Global Imagination," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64:3 (July 2007): 591-620; Ryan Jones, "Empire of Extinction: Nature and Natural History in the Russian North Pacific, 1739-1799," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2008.

examines new layers of the history of the sea otter in ways that emphasize the interplay between environment, commerce, politics, and geography.

Otters were not the only natural resource that attracted early EuroAmerican commercial interest in the Eastern Pacific. Russian hunters exploited a variety of animals for pelts in the Aleutians and Alaska. Hawaiian sandalwood, also shipped to China, largely replaced sea otter as a major regional commodity by the 1810s and 1820s, and Americans traded with Russians for increasing numbers of fur seal skins around the same time. For some, flora and fauna mattered little. As previously noted, Spanish colonization along the coast north of Mexico was largely for strategic reasons, although individuals in New Spain did make some inroads into the sea otter trade. Despite such qualifications, understanding human greed for the fur of the sea otter—or, appreciating the species *itself* and its own history—is important for understanding the forces that shaped the modern Pacific Basin. This is not meant to marginalize the human relations story of the sea otter trade. Abuse of Native American and Asian peoples who performed most of the arduous hunting for pelts and complex cultural exchanges and shifts have been deeply probed by scholars. I document many of these developments throughout.[9] Nevertheless, I seek to provide non-human participants a measure of attention they have yet to receive in the literature. Rather than a case against speciesism, this represents an acknowledgement that a careful examination of the sea otter's past may inform future

[9] Essentially, this study operates under two general understandings in regard to the significance of indigenous peoples in the sea otter trade. One, while evidence suggests that some Pacific natives in pre-history over-hunted the sea otter, the extensive pursuit of the animals in recent centuries would not have occurred without non-native involvement. Also, as Daniel Clayton points out, many of the political engagements and border negotiations in the Eastern Pacific frontier that developed in part from fur trading took place with little regard for issues of Native American sovereignty (See Daniel Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* [Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2000], especially chapter 12). Future scholars are invited to question these understandings and give greater place to native issues and agency in the environmental and geopolitical histories of the sea otter.

efforts to benefit a creature that is recovering from the effects of intense human depredation to this day. In particular, this study provides a more complicated and less romanticized (and thus, hopefully more helpful) version of otter natural history, a point to which I return in epilogue.

The record of the sea otter trade supports a narrative of national expansion as much as one of environmental exploitation. I self-consciously employ the word *frontier* for this study for I seek an opportunity to integrate "Old West" and "New West" historiographies. Stephen Aron identified an emerging synthesis from debates between defenders of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis—which upheld the notion of the West as the unfolding of American individualism and democratic identity—and more recent authorities such as Patricia Nelson Limerick who reject the frontier concept and interrogate the West as a region (or regions) with its own people, resources and history often scarred by "conquest."[10] As Aron notes, current writings on the Pacific World, particularly Igler's work, reveal a chance to transcend region versus frontier dialogues, to move scholars beyond divisive battles between place and process. I follow this path in spirit while offering an additional work as a potential guide. Arrell Morgan Gibson's *Yankees in the Pacific*, post-humorously published with assistance from John Whitehead, builds on Turner and argues that the Pacific Basin of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a theater for a number of "nationalizing" currents that integrated much of the region with the westward advancing United States and extended American influence throughout. Gibson's chapter titled "The Maritime Fur Trade" advances similar arguments to this study regarding the political significance of American sea otter

[10] Stephen Aron, "What's West, What's Next," *OAH Magazine of History*, November 2005, 22-25. For Limerick's groundbreaking work in "New West" history, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987).

enterprises. Yet despite being mostly written prior to the ascendancy of New West history (Gibson died in 1987), *Yankees in the Pacific* contains vital elements of more recent scholarship, treating the Pacific Basin as a distinct geographic and environmental space, detailing diverse ethnic peoples, and keenly aware of international and global contexts. Whitehead writes that Gibson "stood in the threshold between two waves of western writing."[11]

I do not wish to fully advance Gibson and Whitehead's neo-Turnerian construct for the Pacific Basin—that is, factors separate from Americanizing developments are given significant treatment in this dissertation. However, I do agree that the region offers the possibility to fuse place with process, to develop both a national narrative and one attuned to the Pacific's unique past and character. Indeed, Aron's *transcendence* may not be attainable in this case, for it seems to complicate the prospect of a robust history of the Pacific West by relying too heavily on New West themes. In my own opinion, a national emphasis for the West has been marginalized by recent historical trends and this requires correction. The sea otter trade speaks to global connections and relationships, and a portion of the coast involved in the trade resisted the orbit of the United States government. British Columbia, after all, *went British*. Yet overall American success on the fur frontier and its significance for the geopolitical configuration of the Eastern Pacific is just as important for this study. This is not meant to imply that the activities of Boston sea captains, sailors, and American investors in maritime commercial projects are beyond reproach. Poaching sea otters in Spanish California and environmental destruction are among the questionable "conquests" that took place during the trade. Overall, what I hope follows is account of the sea otter's place in United States expansion

[11] Gibson and Whitehead, x.

in the Pacific that is sensitive to and integrates the concerns of recent historiography, but does not lose sight of the "old school" approach that I feel is too often missing.[12]

If the geopolitical themes of this paper strike some as overly conventional, at minimum they offer a synthesis of major ideas surrounding the importance of the sea otter trade that have yet to receive the integrated analysis that they do here.[13] Moreover, they are presented alongside recognition of the complex international and national dynamics of eighteenth and nineteenth century Pacific commerce. At particular places and times, the international currents of fur exchanges predominated, such as the Kuril Islands prior to 1850 (discussed in Chapter 1), or the Pacific Northwest in the late eighteenth century (Chapter 3). Hence, while failing to acknowledge Western Pacific origins and connections, the eminent Northwest historian F.W. Howay aptly described the "International Aspects of the Maritime Fur-Trade."[14] However, the Aleutian Islands and much of Southern Alaska remained a Russian fur zone until the Alaskan Purchase in 1867, while Americans assumed the majority of California sea otter enterprises during the Mexican Era. Nationalizing trends were also at work. This global commercial and political matrix guaranteed that at no time prior to the mid-nineteenth century did merchants and hunters from the United States operate most activities in the Pacific related to sea otters. Nevertheless, American otter traders challenged Russian colonial hold in Alaska. They brought the first American ships to California and their

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[12] For a recent study with a generally-similar tone and structure to mine, emphasizing American political, economic, and environmental dynamics for the post-World War II Pacific Basin, see Mansel G. Blackford, *Pathways to the Present: U.S. Development and Its Consequences in the Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). I respond to Blackford's thesis regarding Pacific integration in the conclusion of this study.

[13] Hence, while Clayton involves explorers and sea otter traders in his synthetic geopolitical study of Vancouver Island, he focuses on a singular location and does not utilize the expanded regional context that I do. See Clayton.

[14] F.W. Howay, "International Aspects of the Maritime Fur-Trade," *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* 36 (1942): 59-78.

transoceanic excursions established a significant American presence in the Hawaiian Islands. In short, the sea otter trade was an early but important factor in United States expansion throughout the Eastern Pacific Basin. As Adele Ogden writes, national acquisition was a "culmination of a movement begun and greatly furthered by the American drive around the Horn into the North Pacific for sea otters."[15] "Soft gold" benefited others, but its particular relevance for the history of the United States West is given special attention in this study. What American prowess at exploiting sea otters meant for *Enhydra* as political boundaries in the Pacific shifted and developed is emphasized as well. To borrow Richard White's characterization, the sea otter represents "nationalized nature" at least as much as it fails to conform to such a narrative.[16] That particular relationship between a species and an expanding republic is at the interpretive core of this dissertation.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American traders entered and ultimately thrived in a Pacific frontier that was characterized in many ways by conflict. As is pointed out but commonly neglected as a focus by recent historians of the trade, furs were connected to a series of formative diplomatic and geopolitical struggles. These various events and their resolutions recur throughout my study. Prior to the Mexican-American War, nations contended non-militarily for commercial and territorial hegemony in the Eastern Pacific, and fur trade profits were often at the center of contention. Otter hunters and traders not only competed with their own countrymen for economic dominance but with those representing other powers. Oftentimes the outcome was

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[15] Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 152.
[16] See Richard White, "The Nationalization of Nature," *The Journal of American History* 86:3 (1999): 976-986.

detrimental to sea otter populations; sometimes it was not. Spanish officials, for example, never firmly developed a sea otter industry in response to Russian and British efforts, thus leaving the animals largely undisturbed in California during the late eighteenth century (discussed in Chapter 2). Yet whether or not success was had at exploiting sea otters, what many involved in the trade understood was that their activities were inspired by and helped to generate both real and potential international incidences. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contentious disputes over Pacific furs were coupled with conservation policies. Maritime fur seal hunting, which replaced the sea otter trade in economic significance by the end of the 1800s, spurred a cooperative environmental campaign meant to protect dwindling fur seal and sea otter numbers. However, as seen in Chapter 4, those events in international conservation were also marked by intense disputes. The general point is that the fate of various fur bearing species in the Pacific Basin—otters, seals, beavers, and others—were related and inextricably linked to shifting commercial and political patterns that usually formed as a result of resource competition. The animal studied here was simply the first to attract broad international attention in the region, possessing a fur worth fighting for.

Finally, I close this dissertation in epilogue with a brief analysis of cultural factors related to modern sea otter conservation. Historians have been largely silent on the issue of otter conservation, leaving unanalyzed, among other things, popular perceptions of the species that emerged from natural history. These perceptions both aided and distracted from various attempts to assist sea otter recovery since the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, while I do not offer a thorough account of recent sea otter history (my main historical trail ends with the 1938 “rediscovery” of the sea otter), I hope to highlight new

directions that argue for the importance of culture and popular culture in studies of the animal.

Chapter 1: The Inter-Asian Origins of the Pacific Sea Otter Trade, 1500-1800

The history of the Pacific sea otter trade is generally written from a EuroAmerican perspective. The second North Pacific expedition of Danish explorer Vitus Bering—sent forth at the behest of the Russian crown and which ultimately returned with hundreds of valuable sea otter pelts—is often emphasized in historical literature. The maritime activities of British, American and Spanish merchants in the Eastern Pacific Basin at Nootka Sound, the Hawaiian Islands and California during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries are also thoroughly documented. Much less is written about Japanese merchants, native Ainu peoples, and Russian fur traders in the Western Pacific who helped make possible the pursuit of sea otters elsewhere.

This chapter offers an examination of the inter-Asian origins of the sea otter trade, an important topic for several historiographic reasons. Beyond accounting for the beginnings of Chinese commercial interest in the species, inter-Asian fur exchanges from roughly 1500 to 1800 provide scholars an opportunity to evaluate the effects of sea otter hunting and trading in a larger global arena. For a variety of factors, the trade of Hokkaido and the Kuril Islands was not as significant a stimulus for the first extensive non-native activity there as it would become for much of the Eastern Pacific Basin. Nevertheless, it did play a role in shaping the geopolitical contest over the Russo-Japanese frontier by the eighteenth century. Russian merchants attempted to exploit the region's sea otter and other animal resources but met with limited success because of prior Japanese claims. I suggest that the lack of any dominant player in the sea otter trade of the Western Pacific contributed to the existence of a fundamentally international

territorial zone until Japan's control of the Kurils was recognized in the late nineteenth century. The environmental effects of the Western Pacific trade by 1800 both reflect and differ from developments elsewhere in the historic range of the sea otter. Hunting pressures eliminated many of the animals in the eighteenth century yet overall not to the extent of other places and times. In the Kurils, political dynamics and conservation efforts help account for a stabilization of sea otter numbers by the mid-nineteenth century, which provided for an influx of hunters to the islands by American commercial outfits.

More broadly, I argue that events associated with the inter-Asian fur trade are essential to the appearance of a Pacific World by the eighteenth century. The first modern markets for sea otter pelts, the establishment of Russo-Chinese trading relations, and Russian activity in the Western Pacific all set the stage for the expansion of European contacts with much of the eastern littoral of the Pacific Basin. Prior to the 1700s, as David Igler contends, the concept of an Eastern Pacific "would have made little sense." Spain's Manila Galleons set off on trans-oceanic excursions in the sixteenth century, and Europeans formed other post-Columbian ties with Asia and the Southern Pacific. Yet the "integration of the entire Pacific Basin and the emergence of something approximating a 'Pacific world' relied on developments in the ocean's eastern and northern portions".[1] I offer that we need to slide his argument to the west and back in time. By emphasizing the Asian trade and Russian continental extension by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, I hope to advance a view of this process which could be described as "West meets East." That is, many of the happenings in the Eastern Pacific central to

[1] David Igler, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," *American Historical* Review 109:3 (June 2004): 695.

the integration of the Pacific Basin were driven by ones in the Western Pacific. This understanding not only promotes a broader context for Russian colonization in North America but also argues that the international flurry of ships which transformed the world's largest body of water by 1800 would have taken longer to do so without a particular set of global circumstances. In short, eighteenth century Pacific history cannot be understood without the Western Pacific. Central to my analysis is the creature known formally as *Enhydra lutris*. The high exchange rates established in Asian markets for its fur played an integral role in forging the Pacific World. The sea otter emerges as a being that unwillingly shaped—even defined—the notion of an Eastern Pacific Basin in addition to the larger historic and geographic construct of which the Eastern Pacific is a part. Building a deeper appreciation of its past with humans at all edges of its natural distribution is therefore a worthy endeavor.

China and Fur

For much of its imperial history, China lacked forests capable of supporting sizable populations of large furbearing animals. The clearing of northern woodlands for farms left relatively little space for such species to dwell. Knowledge of fur as a rare luxury item can be traced to the Tang Dynasty (roughly 600-1000 AD), a mixed blood Chinese and Central Asian ruling house. Fur "seems to have been associated with 'exotic' peoples from Central Asia" at this time.[2] According to Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, it may have faded in cultural importance during less heterogeneous dynasties. Nevertheless, current research places the possible introduction of China to sea

[2] Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400-Present* 2nd. Ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 119.

otter fur in the mid-Ming (1450-1550). Referencing Japanese scholarship, Chikashi Takahashi cites 1483 as the earliest recorded year for the export of sea otter to China from Japan.[3]

The rich fur of *Enhydra lutris*—which, instead of a thick layer of protective blubber, protects the animal from the cold temperatures of the Pacific—saw both luxury and utilitarian application among Chinese. Generally, fur was used to line coats for warmth, particularly in colder northern China, and it also found use in the more temperate portions of the country. Late-eighteenth century British sea otter trader John Mears observed that even in Canton, "the cold will often render a fur dress necessary."[4] Clothes with fur lining were carefully preserved items and often stayed in families for a number of years. Garments designed with sea otter pelt were preferred in the northern China, although many in southern China used it for trim and caps.[5] Yuri Lisyanski, a Russian naval officer at Canton in the early 1800s, observed that in addition to those who lined their coats with otter furs, "others are satisfied with a fur collar and lapels."[6] The sea otter's hair is so dense, with as many as 150,000 hairs for every square centimeter, that no matter its use it was valued higher than any other animal pelt by Chinese merchants (with perhaps the exception of the Russian sable).

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[3] Chikashi Takahashi, "Inter-Asian Competition in the Fur Market in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in A.J.H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu, eds., *Intra-Asian Trade and the World Market* (London: Routledge, 2006), 40. It is probable that sea otter skins reached China via Japan prior to this date, partly because the Japanese knew of the sea otter's habitat centuries before 1483, as noted below. For the historic existence of sea otters at Hokkaido, see Kaoru Hattori, Ichiro Kawabe, Ayako W. Mizuno, and Noriyuki Ohtaishi, "History and Status of Sea Otters, *Enhydra lutirs* Along the Coast of Hokkaido, Japan," *Mammal Study* 30 (2005): 41-51.

[4] Quoted in James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 54.

[5] Gibson, 54.

[6] Urey Lisiansky, *A Voyage Round the World, in the Years 1803, 5, & 6...* (London: John Booth et. al., 1814), 285

Asian Commercial Networks in the Western Pacific

The first sea otter pelts for Chinese buyers were acquired in the Kuril Islands by Ainu hunters and traders who brought them to posts on Hokkaido (formerly Ezo) in northern Japan, an island discovered by Japanese explorers as early as the first millennium. Japanese merchants then transported the items to Nagasaki for eventual export to China through Korea.[7] The Ainu of Hokkaido and the Kurils were originally a hunting and gathering people native to the islands and coastal ranges of the area. They exhibit more body hair than other East Asians—earning them exotic descriptions such as "shaggy bears" by early Russian explorers[8]—and although at one time their Caucasian features led to speculation about their origin, the Asian heritage of the Ainu has been well established. Recent anthropological and historical study emphasizes the importance of long-distance Ainu trade activity that helped to link Kamchatka, Sakhalin Island, and the Kurils with Hokkaido and Japan. Permanent settlers migrated to southern Hokkaido as early as the Kamakura era (12th-14th centuries) and laid the groundwork for an active barter exchange between the Japanese and northern natives. As Kaoru Tezuka describes:

> Products were brought to and from Hokkaido in ships traveling across the Tsugaru Strait or along coastal waters. These included items not produced in Hokkaido, such as rice, salt, tobacco, cloth, *koji* ferment, and metal which the Ainu very much wanted. The Japanese were particularly eager to receive eagle feathers, which they used to fletch their arrows, and marine products.[9]

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[7] Takahashi, 41-43.
[8] Walter A. McDougall, *Let The Sea Make A Noise…:A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 97.
[9] Kaoru Tezuka, "Long Distance Trade Networks and Shipping in the Ezo Region," *Arctic Anthropology* 35:1 (1998): 352.

It is important to note—although it remains speculative at this point—that because Chinese goods obtained by Ainu (and other groups) from the Amur River via Sakhalin were involved in these networks, it is entirely conceivable that sea otter furs first reached China centuries before Japan fully realized its potential as an export item. While more research is needed to shed light on that possibility, records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries support the fact that the Ainu were successful at sea otter trading from southern Kamchatka through the Kuril Islands. Fur was part of an active exchange system that moved Japanese and Ainu goods throughout the sea otter's northwestern-most range, ultimately connecting the Ainu not only with Hokkaido and Japan but with the Russian Empire as well.[10] The implications of such facts for historians of the Pacific deserve more scrutiny. Scholars who emphasize the significance of non-native explorers and traders in the Eastern Pacific as catalysts for the incorporation of the region into the modern world economy may benefit by widening their lenses to consider native shipping that preceded Vitus Bering's and James Cook's oceanic ventures.[11] The maritime realities of Ainu life played at least a partial role in fostering a wider international awareness of the Pacific Basin and its natural resources.

Hokkaido and the Kuril Trade

The sea otter trade at Hokkaido provided pelts for both Japanese and Chinese luxury markets. Brett Walker writes, "[T]he Kakizaki family acquired some goods transported through the Kurils. In the 1560s, for example, 'pure white sea otter pelts'

[10] Tezuka, 355-357.
[11] In addition to Igler's work cited above, see John D. Carlson, "The 'Otter Man' Empires: The Pacific Fur Trade, Incorporation and the Zone of Ignorance," *Journal of World Systems Research* 3:3 (Fall 2002): 390-442.

were traded in eastern Ezo. Later, in 1594, Kakizaki Yoshihiro reportedly offered three sea otter pelts as gifts to Hideyoshi, after his meeting at Hizen in southwestern Japan."[12] Portuguese reports from the 1600s note the existence of inter-Asian trade involving the Kurils and sea otters. By the early eighteenth century, otter furs from the islands were believed to have special healing properties, and the Chinese held that they were the "cushion of the emperor" according to one Japanese official.[13]

Sea otter fur was one of the most expensive items traded at Hokkaido. Takahashi provides a comparison of prices for fish oil, cloths of tree fiber, and mammal skins. The otter ranks at over 500 times the cost of seal in eastern Hokkaido for the year 1786.[14] No doubt this disparity is partly due to the fact that Kuril skins were rarer at the time as a result of increased competition from Russian merchants, as discussed below. Nevertheless, the Japanese long recognized the sea otter as a valuable commodity from their northern frontier. According to John Stephan, early seventeenth century reports labeled the Kuril Islands *Rakkoshima*, or the "sea-otter isles."[15] Animals hunted and exported by the Ainu were vital sources of symbolic power for early modern Japanese elites. Of these, hawks were perhaps most important to the economy of Hokkaido, trapped on the island by both Japanese specialists and Ainu. Similar to furs, hawks and falconry conferred a sense of wealth and prestige to lords as exotic things from

[12] Brett Walker, *Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 157.
[13] Walker, 157.
[14] Takahashi, 41.
[15] John Stephan, *The Kuril Islands: Russo-Japanese Frontier in the Pacific* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 7.

"barbarian" lands.[16] Some estimates from the mid-seventeenth century calculated profits from the hawk industry at or above all taxes collected from trade ships at Hokkaido.[17]

Around 1750, Japan established a trading outpost north of Hokkaido at Kunashir Island. This was apparently the destination for a group of Japanese merchants who ventured to trade with Kuril Ainu but were blown off course. Jean Baptiste-Barthelemy de Lesseps, who traveled to Kamchatka in 1787 with the French explorer Jean-Francois de Galaup comte de la Perouse, noted a curious encounter with nine Japanese who shipwrecked in the Aleutian Islands and were ultimately saved by a group of Russians engaged in sea otter trading. De Lesseps did not entirely believe their story but his record is unclear about whether they were after otter skins at all, either in the Kurils or the Aleutians. He asked one of the sailors "some questions respecting the nature of the merchandise they had saved from their wreck" and was told that it consisted mostly of "cups, plates, boxes, and other commodities," some of which was sold at Kamchatka.[18] Nevertheless, even with the move to Kunashir, events such as this were uncommon, as most of Japan's trade with the north prior to 1800 took place at Hokkaido and involved the Ainu.

Whatever Japanese traders sought in return—furs, hawks, fish—the Ainu were dramatically affected by trade connections. Commercial contacts "rapidly transformed the productive rhythms of Ainu life" as natural resources were increasingly viewed for their market value and less as sources of sustenance.[19] Leaders adopted Japanese goods

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[16] See Walker, 100-109 for the political dynamics of the hawk industry in Japan.
[17] Walker, 105.
[18] Jean Baptiste-Barthelemy de Lesseps, *Travels in Kamtschatka* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970), 208-217. Walker exaggerates in claiming that these individuals intended to trade sea otter pelts at Kunashir (158).
[19] Walker, 97-98.

as indicators of social and economic standing. Sake was integrated into the Ainu metaphysical universe, offered in ritual to ancestors and deities.[20] Such shifts resulted in increased dependence on Japanese trade and local environmental depletion. The over-hunting of deer for skins was particularly destructive to Ainu communities on Hokkaido, a major cause of famines there in the late eighteenth century. As Walker notes, deer pelts "likely made up the majority of animal skins traded in Ezo."[21]

Russian Entry into the Trade

Russian extension eastward to the Pacific by the early 1700s presented distinct economic and political challenges for the expanding Japanese state. Due in part to the robust Kuril trade, some in Japan believed that the Kamchatka peninsula was within their rightful national claim. However, the appearance of foreign "red-haired devils" in these northern reaches contested such notions and threatened to disturb the area's lucrative fur exchanges. A Japanese official in 1785 noted:

> The Kuril Islands belong to Japan. Sea-otter fur is the best product of Ezochi. It has been sent to Nagasaki to be sold to Chinese ships since the old days. However, in recent years, the Russians have come to collect sea-otter furs and sell them to Beijing as a Russian product. This is a shame and a serious problem for Japan.[22]

This was written by Mogami Tokunai, a member of a mission dispatched by the shogunate to explore the Kurils for potential colonization and Russian trade opportunities. Apparent in his report is that the economic concerns of the frontier, which

[20] Walker, 126.
[21] Walker, 121.
[22] Quoted in Takahashi, 42.

for some the sea otter trade symbolized, were beginning the give way to national security concerns by the late eighteenth century.[23] Japan's increasing fears of Russian encroachment can be traced to events on the Eurasian continent. As Cossacks and entrepreneurs (or *promyshlenniki*) began to expand east across the Ural Mountains during the 1580s and 1590s, their efforts at trapping—sable, in particular—and collecting tribute contributed greatly to the Russian economy. Detrimental effects on the indigenous human populations of Siberia were also part of this movement. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Sea of Okhotsk was within the tsar's reach. Russians ultimately penetrated south of Okhotsk to the Amur River, raiding villages of natives who in turn petitioned China for assistance. It was there along China's northeastern border that the Treaty of Nerchinsk was signed in 1689. Russia agreed to recognize the Amur as the official border with China and was granted trading rights in return. After 1728, most Russo-Chinese exchanges were limited to the border town of Kyakhta.[24]

Prior to Nerchinsk, Russian furs were marked largely for European markets. Following the treaty, China became a major destination for the promyshlenniki particularly considering the high prices established in Asian markets for sea otter, something they were then in position to exploit. For as the supply of Siberian furs ran relatively low by the early eighteenth century, and as explorers advanced toward Pacific otter populations, the Kyakhta trade became a very lucrative venture. In the early years of trade at Nerchinsk and Kyakhta, squirrel and ermine sold best to Chinese merchants, and Russians benefited from a number of products other than tea, such as silk, gold, and

[23] See Stephan, 66-68, for the Japanese shift from economic to political anxieties regarding the Russo-Japanese frontier.
[24] Stephen Haycox, *Alaska: An American Colony* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 40-43; McDougall, 46-54.

supplies for Siberian outposts.[25] While Eva-Maria Stolberg discussed an overall decline in Russo-Chinese exchanges beginning in the early 1700s, her evaluation is questionable.[26] Citing extensive Russian sources, James R. Gibson offers that various factors account for an ascending trade at Kyakhta during the eighteenth century. Among them are a 1754 removal of internal Siberian customs duties and the establishment of a bank for Kyakhta merchants.[27] According to Gibson, "From 1755 to 1760, Kyakhta's total customs duties of 1,376,000 rubles contributed just over 7 percent of Russia's gross income from all foreign trade. ...[I]n the last half of the 1700s, the China trade represented about one-half (by value) of Russia's foreign trade and from three-fifths to two-thirds of its Asian trade."[28]

Hauling pelts from the Pacific coast across eastern Siberia and toward the Manchu border cut into Russian profits from the sea otter, as did British and American competition in the Eastern Pacific by the end of the 1700s. Nevertheless, the species was one factor in the burgeoning commercial activity at Kyakhta. Peter Simon Pallas was a visitor to the trading outpost in 1772 and wrote that "to the Chinese Kamchatka sea otters, both large (dams) and medium (juveniles), are the most important and pleasing commodity."[29] Other than the dwindling sable, sea otter was the most valuable fur item

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[25] Eva-Maria Stolberg, "Interracial Outposts in Siberia: Nerchinsk, Kiakhta, and the Russo-Chinese Trade in the Seventeenth/Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Early Modern History* 4:3-4 (2000), 327-328.
[26] Stolberg, 334-336.
[27] James R. Gibson, "Sitka-Kyakhta versus Sitka-Canton: Russian America and the China Market," *Pacifica* 2 (November 1990): 44.
[28] Gibson, 44-45.
[29] Quoted in Gibson, 43. Increasing competition from the Anglo-American sea otter trade at Canton by the end of the eighteenth century, which effectively lowered the prices that Russians could receive at Kyakhta, meant that Chinese merchants returned to their earlier preference for trade in smaller Siberian furs such as squirrel. British Captain John Dundas Cochrane, during his journey through the region in the 1820s, noted this preference with curiosity (John Dundas Cochrane, *Narrative of a Pedestrian Journey Through Russia and Siberian Tartary* Vol. II [New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1970], 169.)

that Russians exported to China in these years. According to Pallas, it sold from 90 to 140 rubles per pelt, with various species of fox going for approximately 20 to 60 rubles.

The earliest advance of Russians toward the sea otter populations of the Kamchatka peninsula and the Kurils was prompted by the exploration of Cossack Vladimir Atlasov, whose report was received by the expansionist tsar Peter the Great in 1701. Atlasov told of milder winters, constant volcanic activity, and native Kamchadals who dressed in skins, ate fish and were, according to him, foul-smelling savages. However, other details piqued Peter's interest in further exploration of Kamchatka and areas to the south. These included native possession of trade items from a "magnificent people" beyond the peninsula and a representative of these people named Dembei, a Japanese castaway held captive at Kamchatka. By the 1720s, daring individuals encouraged by the tsar had traveled down much of the Kuril chain, encountered the Ainu, and demanded tribute.[30] These early forays in the Western Pacific ultimately laid the groundwork for Bering's expeditions east toward the Americas. Yet establishing trading relationships *south* of Kamchatka and laying claim to territories there were Russian motivations as well.

Maps from the 1700s illustrate a primacy of the Western Pacific for Russians during much of the century, as well as the difficulty of obtaining information about lands beyond the western littoral. Gerhard Friedrich Muller was a historian with the Russian Academy of Sciences who traveled in Siberia with Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition. Based on this he began his own independent cartographic work in the 1740s and was called upon to refute an inaccurate map of Russia's North Pacific discoveries that was published in France in 1752. Muller's 1754 map is a generally accurate picture

[30] McDougall, 57-58.

of Siberia and Kamchatka, with the Kurils, Japan, and Sakhalain Island in less clear focus, but shows a large "turtle head" protrusion from the North American continent extending west across the ocean, a non-existent but surmised feature drawn in dotted lines.[31] Much more proper Russian mapping of the Pacific began to appear by the late eighteenth century. The expedition of Joseph Billings and Gavriil A. Sarychev from 1785-1792 produced correct and highly detailed depictions of the Aleutian Islands and the nearby Alaskan mainland.[32] A juxtaposition of the Muller map with one from Billings/Sarychev demonstrates that the Eastern Pacific firmly entered the Russian intellectual landscape only after the Western Pacific did. Much of the former remained shrouded in mystery into the late-eighteenth century while the latter was a relatively well-understood frontier. Furthermore, the timing of the maps suggests that the Eastern Pacific came into greater focus largely because of the numerous fur traders and explorers who ventured across the ocean after Bering, a topic discussed in the following chapter.

Russian Hunting in the Western Pacific

Procurement of sea otter on Kamchatka and among the Kurils surrounding the years of the Bering expeditions suffers from some lack of historical attention and misjudgment. Russian hunters often referred to them as "Kamchatka beaver," thus at least one influential scholar may have inadvertently underestimated the commercial importance of populations in these locations.[33] Nevertheless, primary and secondary

[31] Carol Urness, "Russian Mapping of the North Pacific to 1792," in Stephen Haycox, James Barnett, and Caedmon Liburd, eds., *Enlightenment and Exploration in the North Pacific 1741-1805* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 133-136. The Muller map is on page 117 of this volume.
[32] Urness, 139-142.
[33] When discussing Russian tribute collecting (*yasak*) in the northern Kurils in the early eighteenth century, George Alexander Lensen mentions "beaver" as the principal fur sought after by Japanese and Russians alike, yet farther to the south for a later period he distinguishes sea otters. See his *The Russian Push*

sources in English contribute some facts. The first Russian expedition to the northern Kurils in 1711 found no sea otters on Shumshu Island but for an island beyond noted that natives "do hunt sea otter in January" and trade for pelts with people farther south.[34] S.P. Krasheninnikov was a student who accompanied the Second Kamchatka Expedition and whose 1755 work provided the first detailed account of the peninsula. He described local hunting methods for "sea beaver" and noted that Kuril inhabitants did not always prefer such skins for trade:

> They [Kamchatka natives and Cossacks] have three different ways of catching them: first, by nets placed among the sea cabbage, whither the beavers retire in the night time, or in storms. Secondly, they chance them in their boats, when the weather is calm, and kill them in the same manner they do sea lions or sea cats. The third method is upon the ice, which in the spring is driven on the coast by the east wind;…The Kuriles did not esteem the skins of beavers more than those of seals or sea lions before they saw the value that the Russians put upon them; and even now they will willingly exchange a dress made of beavers' for a good one made of dogs' skins, which they think are warmer, and a better defense against the water.[35]

In a later work Krasheninnikov wrote that natives from Kamchatka to Urup Island paid annual tribute in sable, fox, and sea otter.[36] According to Lydia T. Black, Emel'ian Basov, one of the first to attempt a voyage to the Aleutians in 1743, took sea otters from

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Toward Japan: Russo-Japanese Relations, 1697-1875 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 32, 65, 69. Merchants were indeed interested in a variety of furs, but the fact that the northern Kuril Islands are part of the historic range of *Enhyrda lutris* supports the likelihood that Lensen erred in some way.

[34] Basil Dmytryshyn, E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, Eds. and Trans., *Russian Penetration of the North Pacific Ocean, 1700-1799: A Documentary Record* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1988), 45.

[35] S.P. Krasheninnikov, *The History of Kamtschatka And the Kurilski Islands, with the Countries Adjacent*, Trans. James Grieve, M.D. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), 131-132.

[36] Walker, 162.

the Kurils around the same time.[37] Stephan writes that "[o]ne merchant collected 118,000 roubles for a single year's (1774) sea otter catch" from the Kurils.[38] It is unclear if the take of Bering's surviving crew from the Commander Islands in 1742 intensified the activities of Siberian entrepreneurs to seek after Kuril otter populations as much as it initiated the hunt in the Aleutians. One reason for this is a conscious Russian emphasis by that time on collecting furs and settling in the northern islands so as to not upset Japanese claims farther to the south. What is known is that local natural resources were central to overall Russian investment in the Kurils in the eighteenth century, and a number of major effects are evident. For one, extracting furs by force and other abuses committed by promyshlenniki caused northern Ainu and some Kamchadals to flee south along the Kuril chain and occasionally resist violently.[39] Also, Urup Island, or "Sea Otter Island" for its abundance of the species, ultimately became the focus of a major colonization attempt late in the century. Those who promoted permanent settlement in the Kurils also argued for the needs of developing an agricultural base to provision Siberian outposts and facilitating trade with Japan. A series of Japanese rebuffs and Russian inability to deal with them effectively meant that other economic and political dynamics commanded Russian attention in the islands by the late eighteenth century.[40]

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[37] Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 24. Black notes a mid-1700s prohibition of merchant travel to the Kuril Islands which "affect[ed] the development of the Aleutian trade" (65). Yet as Stephan notes, such directives from the Department of Siberian Affairs (lifted in the 1760s) were not intended for the northern Kurils and were not always heeded by locals (49).

[38] Stephan, 63(n).

[39] Stephan, 48-50; Walker, 162-163. In this sense, while Russians did proselytize among and attempt a more humane assimilation of the inhabitants of Shumshu Island, the treatment of native peoples in the Western Pacific at this time differed little from what the Aleut often experienced during the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, local Japanese were also guilty of exploitation and harsh treatment of Ainu.

[40] Stephan, 61-64; McDougall, 98-102.

Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Trade

While sailors had visited Urup for decades prior, the attempt to establish a colony on the island dates to 1794. In that year the governor of Irkutsk recommended settlement of Urup and the newly created Northern Company (later the Russian-American Company) controlled by Grigorii Shelikov launched an effort.[41] In addition to Shelikov, the Kuril colony involved another individual well-known in the history of the Russian-American Company: Aleksandr Baranov, Shelikov's manager in Alaska. Forty men and women led by Vasilii Zvezdochetov were placed under the authority of Baranov and dispatched to Urup. As Stephan summarizes:

> Zvezdochetov's party landed on the south-east (Pacific) coast of Urup in the summer of 1795 and christened the colony 'Slavorossiia'. Harsh natural conditions soon undermined the whole project and nearly annihilated its members. Volcanic pumice yielded little barley or oats. Exposure and starvation decimated laboriously imported livestock. Tsar Paul's granting the Russian-American Company a twenty-year commercial monopoly in the Kurils in 1799 came as faint consolation to dwindling survivors. By that time only thirteen colonists were alive. Of these some abandoned Urup for the comparative comfort of Kamchatka. Upon Zvezdochetov's death in 1805, the colony ceased to exist.[42]

Hence while Japanese traders were centered mostly on Hokkaido, Russians actively pursued fur stocks throughout the Kurils and inched closer to Japan. By the last decade of the 1700s, this movement of "red barbarians" was interpreted as a clear threat from a foreign power. In fact, speeding the demise of the colony at Urup was Japan's response of fortifying the adjacent island of Iturup. Under Kondo Juzo, the shogunate oversaw a

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[41] For Shelikov's earlier attempts at the Kuril trade in partnership with a rival company, see Vasilii Nikolaevich Berkh, *A Chronological History of the Discovery of the Aleutian Islands* Trans. Dmitri Krenov, Ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ont: The Limestone Press, 1974), 77-78.
[42] Stephan, 64.

large-scale effort to protect the Kurils against Russian encroachment. Japanese activities at Iturup were relatively successful in comparison to their non-native counterpart. Impoverished Ainu communities were provided for and subject to a vigorous assimilation program.[43] Ainu trade with colonists on Urup was shut down, cutting off important sources of Russian sustenance and further solidifying native dependence on Japan.[44] Roads, dock works, and a small fort were constructed. By 1801, an envoy visited Urup and claimed the island as Japanese territory. However, the trade blockade and massive migration of Urup Ainu to Iturup were more effective than direct diplomatic pressure. Japan solved its dilemma with Sea Otter Island peacefully. Yet soon after, major incidences in the Western Pacific threatened to bring Russia and Japan into open hostilities and marred relations between the two nations for years to come.

Nikolai Rezanov, son-in-law of Shelikov and granted the Russian-American Company royal monopoly in 1799 following Shelikov's death, was sent by tsar Alexander I on another attempt to officially open trading relations with Japan. Reaching the Japanese coast by October of 1804, Rezanov spent more than six months in isolation at Nagasaki, the location offered to Russia for limited trade during a previous attempt. Finally word came from the shogun rejecting the new request. In anger, and apparently ill from "rheumatism and chest pains aggravated by the chill and humidity of the North Pacific," Rezanov plotted revenge while on an inspection tour of Russian America. He convinced two young lieutenants, Nikolai Khvostov and Gavril Davydov, to attack Japanese outposts in the area of Sakhalin Island (recently occupied in the south by Japan) and the southern Kurils. In October of 1806, Kvostov and Davydov took hostages,

[43] Stephan, 70-71.
[44] Walker, 176.

burned structures, and stole temple objects at Sakhalin, leaving behind, as Walter A. McDougall notes, "a proclamation condemning the Japanese refusal to trade and threatening to lay waste all northern Japan."[45] In the spring of the following year they assaulted Iturup and returned to plunder Sakhalin. Japanese warriors responded by capturing Captain Vasilii Mikhailovich Golovnin, dispatched by the Russian Navy in 1811 on a geographic survey of the Sea of Okhotsk and the Kuril Islands. Golovnin landed at Kunashir for provisions—warned of Kvostov and Davydov's activities yet apparently unaware of military preparations by locals. Russians counter-responded by capturing a high-level merchant on Kunashir. By 1813, negotiations ended the stand off. Prisoners were exchanged and the governor of Irkutsk formally apologized for the attacks against Japanese settlements.[46]

While a war was avoided, the series of events at the turn-of-the-century set a geopolitical tone for much of the 1800s. The Kuril Islands remained a Russo-Japanese frontier to the extent that neither power could consolidate its hold on them. A defacto border between Urup and Iturup Islands was offered partial recognition in Alexander I's 1821 *ukase,* a declaration attempting to reassert royal authority over much of the North Pacific. In 1855, the Treaty of Shimoda agreed to the boundary in the Kurils and placed Sakhalin under joint possession of Russia and Japan. Finally, the Treaty of St. Petersburg, signed in May of 1875 and in effect until World War II, offered the entire Kuril chain to Japan in exchange for Russian control of Sakhalin.[47] A number of national and international issues were involved in shaping this Western Pacific zone in the nineteenth century. The inter-Asian fur trade was a phenomenon that influenced the

[45] McDougall, 131-134.
[46] Stephan, 79.
[47] Stephan, 80-95.

area's political development leading up to that time. Geographically, Russian explorers and traders had a relatively easier task incorporating the Kamchatka peninsula, the northern Kuris, and the natural resources of those locations into their empire's orbit. So long as Japan established prior commercial relationships to the south along their own territorial fringes—of which the sea otter was an important though not as central component—then the advance of promyshlenniki was frustrated in ways unlike it was in the Aleutian Islands. Russians could exchange goods with and demand pelts from natives. However, the deepening reliance of Ainu middlemen on the Japan trade by the 1700s made it difficult for Russia to establish anything resembling fur trade dominance throughout the Kurils. Moreover, Japanese actively defended their border against encroachment. The desire to keep foreign elements out of their nation helped ensure that island territories north of Hokkaido stayed within Japan's domain, however loosely.

Ultimately the sea otter trade of the Western Pacific helped forge an *international* portion of the Pacific Basin similar to other areas where the species was pursued. Both competitors desired rich otter furs for Asian markets, and the Ainu did the vast majority of the hunting. Yet for a number of reasons (Japanese interest in other products from the Kurils and Sakhalin, the timing of Russian arrival on the Pacific, and Russian interest in economic relations with Japan, just to name a few), neither party can be said to have dominated the trade and thus make stronger claims to Pacific lands. The uniqueness of the Western Pacific lies partly in the fact that the early modern state to first access the sea otter, Japan, did not actively seek after furs and make a concerted effort to inhabit territory in response to the trade. At the same time, this confirms that Europeans and Americans attempting to purchase Chinese goods were ultimately the ones who

vigorously sought after the animals. What Asian peoples did do was establish the commercial basis by which Russia, Britain, and the United States were able to reap the economic and geopolitical benefits of sea otter fur. Future research will hopefully build on this chapter and compare locations such as the Kuril Islands with other places and times of the sea otter trade to more accurately gauge the legacy of its inter-Asian origins.

Environmental Effect of the Trade

Environmentally, the sea otter fared somewhat better in the Kurils than it did elsewhere. S.I. Kornev and S.M. Korneva conclude, "In the eighteenth century, hunting pressure was not high enough to result in population declines."[48] Support for this statement can be seen in the struggle noted above to control the Kuril trade. Russian exploitation was not intense enough to significantly reduce sea otter numbers in part because of the tensions with the Ainu and Japan. Attention to North American furs and colonies by the latter half of the 1700s also meant that Kuril otters were not overhunted. Nevertheless, this applies mostly to the central and southern Kurils, as hunting and tribute payments on Kamchatka and the northern islands during the eighteenth century did reduce populations of fur bearing mammals.[49] Tempered Japanese enthusiasm for the sea otter may also explain the relative abundance of the animals by the mid-nineteenth century. Japan's connection to Iturup apparently did little to constrict the island's herds. Englishman H.J. Snow, who hunted sea otters in the Kurils during the 1870s and 80s (discussed in Chapter 4), noted the 1869 construction of a colonial office at Iturup but

[48] S.I. Kornev and S.M. Korneva, "Historical Trends in Sea Otter Populations of the Kuril Islands and South Kamchatka," in Daniela Maldini, Donald Calkins, Shannon Atkinson, and Rosa Meehan, eds., *Alaska Sea Otter Research Workshop: Addressing the Decline of the Southwestern Alaska Sea Otter Population* (Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Sea Grant College Program, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2004): 21.
[49] See Stephan, 98-99.

questioned whether it had anything to do with interest in sea otter skins. He wrote, "Having visited the island of Yetorup [Iturup] in 1873, and conversed with both Ainu and Japanese there on the subject, I know that at that time little or no attention was given to hunting the otter, nor had there been for many years previously." Snow believed that "[t]he long rest from molestation" accounted for both the large numbers of sea otters that he found at the island and their tameness toward humans.[50]

The Russian-American Company returned to Urup Island in 1828. Company historian P.A. Tikhmenev, whose two-volume work was published in the 1860s, noted that sea otters were sighted at Urup and fifty men were sent there to build structures and procure skins. "Hunting on Urup Island brought the company more than 800,000 paper rubles worth of furs during 1828 and 1829," according to Tikhmenev.[51] Experienced Aleut laborers were brought in and were working elsewhere in the Kurils by the 1830s. However, it was around this time that Russian-American Company officials introduced conservation efforts meant to buttress declining stocks of sea otters and fur seals throughout their Pacific holdings. To protect the otter trade for the future, larger hunting parties concentrated in particular areas which were then were abandoned for a period of two to three years. This rotation system, in addition to other methods, had the effect of stabilizing yearly catches after becoming official company policy in the 1830s.[52] Therefore, even with the return to Urup, Kuril sea otters never experienced the long-term

[50] H.J. Snow, *In Forbidden Seas: Recollections of Sea-Otter Hunting in the Kurils* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), 291.
[51] P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company* Trans. and Ed. Richard A. Pierce and Alton Donnelly (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 173.
[52] See Katherine L. Arndt, "Preserving the Future Hunt: The Russian-American Company and Marine Mammal Conservation Policies," *Fort Ross – Salt Point Newsletter*, Fall 2007, 4-6.

exploitation by Russians seen in other areas of the Pacific Basin. The timing of rejuvenated hunting enterprises served as a check against environmental degradation.[53]

Ultimately, American and other hunters ventured to the Kurils after 1850 and depleted the area's marine mammal resources beyond what the Russian-American Company, Japan, or the Ainu ever achieved. These developments are discussed in a later chapter. By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States in particular had become a major national force in the sea otter trade and visited a proverbial birthplace for its commercial empire in the Pacific, paying tribute to the Asian sea otter in a manner that, at that time, its people knew best.

In the end, the Western Pacific sea otter trade set in motion the Russian incorporation of territories across the northern Pacific. By helping solidify trade routes in the outer reaches of Siberia and introducing local merchants to the value of the sea otter, it established the principle basis by which the Russian Empire extended its reach over an ocean. Promyshlenniki were checked in this future advance in a manner somewhat similar to their experiences in the Western Pacific, but it was not before they assisted in laying claim to a broad expanse across modern-day Alaska. By the mid-eighteenth century, the necessary demographic and economic ingredients were in place for a "fur rush" toward eastern lands. All that was needed was a catalyst for this phenomenon to unfold. Vitus Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition provided it. The survivors of that fateful journey returned from islands just off the east coast of Kamchatka—geographically in the Western Pacific—but the items they brought back, along with news

[53] As evidence of the success of Russian conservation efforts, Tikhmenev noted that a "long closed season in the Urup Island area, where in the early 1840s the sea otters disappeared completely...remedied the situation and the hunting at this island is now quite good" (357).

of lands farther away, effectively introduced the East Pacific Basin to the world. These events are the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Russo-Spanish Contests and the Early Decline of *Enhydra lutris* in the Eastern Pacific Basin

The return to Avacha Bay in August 1742 of the beleaguered survivors from Russia's Second Kamchatka Expedition was a formative event in the history of the Pacific. Their leader Vitus Bering, who died with others the previous year just east of Kamchatka on Bering Island, is not credited by history with being the first European explorer to cross the strait that now bears his name. That distinction officially belongs to a little-known expedition commanded by Semyon Dezhnev in 1648. Nor was the Danish captain the first under the Russian flag to make landfall in North America. The Bering expedition was beaten by less than ten years in that accomplishment by Mikhail S. Gvozdev.[1] However, these facts mattered not at all to the numerous hunters and merchants on Kamchatka who soon after the return of Bering's crew set out across the ocean for still-mysterious lands to the east. What mattered to them were the hundreds of sea otter pelts that the men had with them, animals they had eaten on Bering Island to survive. It was the promise of rich fur catches that drove promyshlenniki across the North Pacific and ultimately extended the Russian Empire to America.

While sea otters were not the only animals that Russian outfits pursued in their voyages, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of otter fur to expansion throughout the Aleutian Islands after 1741 and the establishment of the first permanent

[1] For the Dezhnev and Gvozdev expeditions, see Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 17-20, 23-29; Orcutt Frost, *Bering: The Russian Discovery of America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 50-52, 70-71.

European settlement in Alaska at Kodiak Island some forty years later.[2] (Unalaska Island was home to a permanent base in the Aleutians through use by hunters prior to Kodiak.) As I claimed previously, the sea otter trade played an integral role in inaugurating extensive trans-Pacific connections and in formulating the modern conception of an Eastern Pacific in the eighteenth century. Promyshlenniki not only returned to Kamchatka with highly-valued peltry but with new knowledge—however fragmentary—of territories farther and farther beyond the peninsula. Such commercial and colonial energies initiated a geopolitical struggle for much of the western coast of North America. Spain's response to Russian activity is now well-known to visitors of California: a series of missions and presidios started in 1769 meant to block further extension of the tsar's reach. The sea otter trade was only indirectly responsible for the establishment of Spanish colonies in Alta California but Spain did eventually attempt inroads in the China fur market by tapping otter populations. Despite rising international tensions by the end of the century, Spain never experienced a major diplomatic crisis with Russia in the Eastern Pacific as it did with England. The origins and outcome of the Nootka Controversy are detailed in the following chapter. Emphasis is given here to Russian and Spanish relations in the wake of sea otter trade and the "near miss" between these two powers. Contrasts in the early nineteenth century with the founding of the Russian fur hunting and agricultural outpost of Fort Ross are also included. While the showdown for the Pacific frontier of North America was a two-sided affair for only about a third of the

[2] The point bears some emphasis because, as Katherine L. Arndt suggests, English-language scholarship on Russian America since 1990 has tended to look beyond the historical importance of sea otter hunting and trading. See Katherine L. Arndt, "The Russian-American Company and the Northwest Fur Trade: North American Scholarship, 1990-2000," Meeting of Frontiers Conference, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/rr/european/mofc/mofcprog.html. What follows is a fresh re-appreciation of the Russian trade, one that offers some contrast with the Western Pacific trade discussed in Chapter 2.

eighteenth century, I contend that compartmentalizing Russo-Spanish elements reveals informative similarities and differences with factors surrounding the sea otter trade's development on both sides of the Pacific.

Mirroring events in the eighteenth-century Western Pacific, the advance of Russian fur traders in America was a threatening presence to a rival nation and attempts were made to check their movement. While Japan had long-standing economic investments to protect in addition to the integrity of its northern borderland, Spain's motivation to challenge the accomplishments of promyshlenniki was primarily territorial. In the early stages of this challenge, Spanish colonial authorities had little or no awareness of the profits that Russians realized in the China market with sea otter pelts.[3] This gap in knowledge and overall disinterest in the sea otter trade proved unfortunate for Spain, as a speedy and unequivocal adoption of the trade might have solidified its claim on lands far to the north of California, forestalling or perhaps eliminating intrusion by Russia, England, or the United States. Therein lays an important contrast with the Russo-Japanese contest in the Kuril Islands. The sheer geographic vastness of the sea otter frontier in the Eastern Pacific offered Spain distinct advantages, but also intense challenges. A sizeable span of uncolonized coastline north of Mexico, even up to southern Alaska, might have been brought under Spanish influence, with substantial commercial benefit. However, the task of incorporating this larger buffer zone into the empire in the relatively short period before Anglo-American arrival on the coast proved

[3] A reflection of this is provided in the voyage of Juan Perez to the Northwest coast in 1774, discussed below, which was initiated with only minor instructions regarding gathering information on North Pacific flora and fauna. According to Herbert K. Beals, the Spanish viceroy apparently "assigned little or no importance to animal pelts as an exploitable natural resource." See Herbert K. Beals, Trans. and Annotation, *Juan Perez on the Northwest Coast: Six Documents of His Expedition in 1774* (Portland, OR; Oregon Historical Society Press, 1989), 27. More is said below on Spanish knowledge of the Russian fur trade.

daunting. Too much land, home to too many fur bearers, meant that the Eastern Pacific Basin shifted away from a bipolar scenario during the last decades of the eighteenth century, further depriving Spain, and by connection, Mexico, of its long-privileged position along the "Spanish lake." By comparison, Japan effectively limited foreign advancement and influence for a longer period following the presence of the first Russian hunters in part because it dealt with a much smaller, and more isolated, northern geography. Thus a minimal and relatively late fortification of the Kurils was adequate to keep intruders out.

In addition to highlighting missed but limited commercial and territorial opportunities for New Spain, I focus on Russian and Spanish sea otter enterprises in the latter half of the eighteenth century because it offers an opportunity to illuminate the environmental legacy of the early trade. The exploitation of native labor in pursuit of the sea otter, particularly in Alaska, has been documented by scholars. The expertise of Aleut and other indigenous peoples in capturing and killing marine mammals was vital to the economic success of the Russian otter trade. Native knowledge of the natural world also made basic survival possible for Russian colonists in the harsh North Pacific. Thus trappers often forced demands upon groups and used violence to subdue opposition. Like other colonial experiences, more complex economic and social relationships also formed in Russian America, and specialists have begun to explore these dynamics.[4] Yet until very recently, the exploitation of the Alaskan sea otter itself has been marginally or falsely understood. (Even more so than Russia's competitor in the Western Pacific, Spain was never primarily responsible for significant sea otter depletion in California.) Ryan

[4] For an essay on the subject and suggested readings, see Gwenn A. Miller, "Russian Routes: Kamchatka to Kodiak Island," *Common-place* 5:2 (January 2005): http://www.common-place.org/vol-05/no-02/miller/index.shtml.

Jones offers one of the first detailed environmental histories of the sea otter in the North Pacific. Utilizing eighteenth and nineteenth century records and Russian archival material, his island group-by island group analysis detects particular patterns of decline throughout the 1700s.[5] Overall, the movement of non-native peoples across the Aleutians and to the Alaskan littoral was strongly linked to the environment they encountered and exploited. As a particular area's marine mammal resources grew scarce, hunters moved farther east to find new grounds. This process culminated in the establishment of Sitka in southeastern Alaska by the end of the eighteenth century. Factors other than sea otter depletion, including competition from English and American traders, also precipitated the building of what later became Russian's new colonial capital. Nevertheless, the thinning of herds and the discovery of new ones was a driving force for Russians in the Pacific prior to 1800. As Jones argues, officials only began to take seriously reports of the environmental damage of the fur trade by the end of the century, and the policies of St. Petersburg encouraged the destruction of particular species. The fate of sea otters in the eighteenth century Eastern Pacific was determined in large measure by Russian expansion in America, as the commercial activities of other Euro-Americans were contained mostly on Vancouver Island, or failed to materialize in any major way. The natural historical importance of the Alaskan trade, prominent in popular-level works such as Harold McCracken's *Hunters of the Stormy Sea*, receives development here.[6]

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[5] In addition to Ryan for sharing his excellent work, I offer many thanks to David Igler for introducing us at and inviting me to his April 2008 symposium titled "Pacific Passages: Connecting East, West, and Center in the Pacific Basin," held at The Huntington Library.

[6] See Harold McCracken, *Hunters of the Stormy Sea* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957). In my view, McCracken's book is more than a general, non-academic statement about sea otter decline in Alaska, but it is dated and can therefore be improved, as with other writings on Russian America and the fur trade, by recent environmental studies.

The Second Kamchatka Expedition

Shortly before his death in 1725, Peter the Great commissioned the First Kamchatka Expedition, one of his many attempts at Russian exploration and expansion in the North Pacific. He chose Captain Bering to command the venture across Siberia and to the peninsula, where Bering and crew built a ship in 1728, sailed into the Bering Strait, and explored the northeast Asian coast. Yet discovering the relationship between Asia and North America, one of the expedition's stated goals, went unfulfilled. Thus, under Bering's recommendation, a second effort was launched. It included a voyage by Martin Spanberg (a member of the previous expedition) from Okhotsk to Japan in 1738, but his three ships were separated in the Kuril Islands and never sighted Hokkaido. Another attempt led by Spanberg the following year resulted in the first Russian landing on Honshu. The accomplishment was discredited by the Okhotsk administrator who believed the explorers had reached Korea and not Japan.[7]

Bering's second attempt to sail east toward America began in June of 1741, when the *St. Peter* and *St. Paul* left Petropavolvsk on Kamchatka. After almost three weeks, Aleksei Chirikov, captain of the *St. Paul*, was separated from Bering's ship in a storm and fog. He managed to reach southeastern Alaska where a number of his men disappeared after making landfall. Assuming them killed or captured, Chirikov and his officers decided to return to Kamchatka. They skirted the southern coast of Alaska and the Kodiak Islands, traded with Aleuts, and brought the scurvy-stricken *St. Paul* back to Avancha Bay on October 10. The *St. Peter* was still at sea and experienced a more disastrous outcome. After getting separated from Chirikov, Bering ended up at Kayak

[7] Frost, 90-91; Walter A. McDougall, *Let The Sea Make A Noise…:A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 58-59. McDougall errs in claiming that Spanberg was unsure whether or not he had reached Japan.

Island in the Gulf of Alaska in July. The longboat was launched to explore nearby islands, water was gathered, and expedition naturalist Georg Steller made observations of recent human habitation. In late August, Bering named the Shumagin Islands for a sailor who died of scurvy and was buried there, the ship's first casualty.[8]

Still in the Shumagins (on the Pacific side of the Alaska Peninsula) in early September, the expedition made its first native contact. Two kayaks approached the *St. Peter* and gifts were exchanged. Bering's native Siberian interpreter was unable to communicate with the Americans effectively. Invited by gestures to come to shore, officer Sven Waxell decided to take out the longboat with nine other men, yet after about an hour of interaction and observation he was forced to order musket fire into the air when the natives grabbed the interpreter and would not let him return to the boat. The following day more trading was accomplished but with dwindling supplies and an increasingly sick crew, Bering decided to return home. Severe storms and burials at sea were common occurrences on the journey westward. Finally by early November the crew had enough and decided to land. Unfortunately, the land they sighted and stopped at was not on the Kamchatkan coast, as many had hoped. They eventually realized that they had to winter on an unknown, uninhabited island.[9]

Bering died on the island that now bears his name on December 8, 1741. For much of the winter and spring the crew of the *St. Peter* ate sea otters, which were abundant there. Steller wrote that "for more than six months it served us almost solely as our food and at the same time as medicine for the sick."[10] Men even gambled with sea

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[8] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 40-44, Frost, 177-178.
[9] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 45-48.
[10] Georg Wilhelm Steller, *Journal of a Voyage with Bering, 1741-1742* Ed. O.W. Frost, Trans. Margritt A. Engel and O.W. Frost (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 148.

otter pelts to pass the time. They also dug roots, ate sea lions, and by May 1742 killed their first adult sea cow. The large quantity of tasty meat provided by this now extinct species allowed more men to be put to work dismantling the wreck of the *St. Peter* and building a new vessel. Nourished by the island's natural resources and aided by Steller's keen knowledge of dietary remedies for scurvy, the survivors sailed from Bering Island in August. In nearly two weeks they made it back to port. Thirty one sailors out of an original 67 had died. Hundreds of sea otter skins were brought back from Bering Island.[11]

The Fur Rush

Emel'ian Basov was one of the first to take advantage of the new information brought back by Bering's crew. Born in a small Siberian village, Basov rose to become a sergeant in Okhotsk and originally sought support for a voyage to the Kuril Islands, for which he was granted official permission in 1741. He was aided by a number of financiers who pooled their resources and commissioned the construction of a ship on Kamchatka during the winter of 1742-1743. By the time the vessel was completed, a voyage to the east had been planned, made possible by a member of the Bering expedition who led the way for Basov and crew toward the Aleutians.[12] The Basov enterprise first wintered at Bering Island in 1743, hunted foxes and sea otters, and sighted the Aleutian's Near Islands during the return trip in 1744. They killed some 1,200 sea otters during this initial venture and made a number of other successful trips to the

[11] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 49. As Black notes, the exact number is not known, although Steller claimed that some 700 sea otters were killed during the stay on Bering Island (56).
[12] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 59-62.

Commander Islands. By the mid-1740s, Russian competitors were hunting in the Aleutian Islands.

The generic name that promyshlenniki gave to their locally-built ships was *shitik*, from the Russian word for sew. Due to the lack of construction materials on Kamchatka, hand-hewn planks were literally sewn together using seal or walrus skin, and occasionally reindeer skin was used for sail.[13] While many of these boats proved strong enough for the rough waters of the North Pacific, a number of shitik wrecked, taking cargo and crew with them. In the early years of Russian activity in the Aleutians, independent servicemen and entrepreneurs financed and crewed the vessels, with each participant granted a particular number of shares. Kamchatka natives, Itelmen (Kamchadal) and Koriak, were often hired as cheap labor for fewer shares. As Lydia T. Black writes, owners believed that these peoples "were less prone to diseases and, because of their diet, were especially resistant to scurvy."[14] Together, Siberian residents and natives provided enterprises with an intimate knowledge of land and marine animal hunting, in addition to necessary fishing and ship building expertise.

Typically, crews first landed in the Commander Islands, gathered sea mammal skins and provisioned there for about a year, then moving eastward to other islands and the Alaskan mainland. Once one of the "Distant Islands" was reached, they established a main camp and divided into smaller parties known as artels to look for furs. Often, artels were stationed near Aleut villages. This allowed for the possibility of sexual relations with Aleut women as well as hostage taking—an old Siberian practice and known at the

[13] McCracken, 32.
[14] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 66.

time among Alaskan natives—in order to guarantee safety.[15] Deadly encounters between promyshlenniki and indigenous tribes occurred early on in the trade. A 1745 expedition to the Near Islands resulted in a number of Aleuts being shot after a trading attempt went awry. According to a contemporary source, the head of a reconnaissance party in a separate incident later:

> treated the inhabitants in a hostile manner; upon which they defended themselves as well as they could with their bone-lances. This resistance gave him a pretext for firing; and accordingly he shot the whole number, amounting to fifteen men, in order to seize their wives.[16]

Such abuses resulted in violent responses against other groups of Russian hunters. Black notes that in 1761, one vessel "lost a labor crew of twelve on the island of Adak,...veterans of several voyages to the Aleutians."[17] Nevertheless, many outfits were ultimately successful in co-opting native Alaskan labor by force, while some established more cordial fur exchanges. The skill of Aleuts and others at traveling in and hunting otters from skin-constructed kayaks known as *baidarkas* became central to Russian economic success in the Eastern Pacific by the end of the eighteenth century. While Itelmen traditionally pursued sea mammal quarry, they were essentially river-based peoples who lacked the maritime abilities necessary to efficiently exploit populations in

[15] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 70.
[16] William Coxe, *Account of the Russian Discoveries Between Asia and America* (New York: Argonaut Press, 1966), 36.
[17] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 70.

the Aleutians and along the Alaskan coast (and promyshlenniki were mainly land hunters).[18]

Due to the high prices Chinese traders were willing to pay for sea otter pelts, Russian ventures in Alaska gave particular attention to procuring them. Observers often noted this preference. English historian and traveler William Coxe wrote in 1780 that "the skins of the sea-otters are the richest and most valuable" of all those brought back to Kamchatka from the Aleutians.[19] According to Russian chronicler Vasilii Nikolaevich Berkh, "The price for a sea otter was 10 rubles at Iakutsk, but they were sold to the Chinese for 60 and 90 rubles."[20] Similar to Japanese interests in the Kuril Island trade, other furs outnumbered sea otter in total catches. Various types of foxes were valued in Russia and overall represented a majority of the Alaskan fur trade.[21] However, unlike merchants on Hokkaido, Russian entrepreneurs vigorously pursued a lucrative medium for what was, for them, a relatively new China trade. Despite the difficulties inherent with exchange at Kyakhta—including an interruption of trade there during the 1760s and 1770s—bringing sea otter pelts to that outpost was a central goal for investors and laborers alike, even the dominant goal during the earliest decades of activity in the Aleutians. By the end of the eighteenth century, searches for abundant otter grounds carried Russians all the way to the Alaskan mainland and shitik voyages lasting five or more years were not uncommon.

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[18] See Frost, 193-194. For one of many secondary descriptions of Aleut baidarka hunting, see Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 11-14.
[19] Coxe, 12.
[20] Vasilii Nikolaevich Berkh, *A Chronological History of the Discovery of the Aleutian Islands* Trans. Dmitri Krenov, Ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ont: The Limestone Press, 1974), 76.
[21] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 69.

Spanish Response to the Russian Presence

Despite attempts by officials to keep Russian North Pacific discoveries and the "fur rush" secret, news leaked out. Brief accounts of the Second Kamchatka Expedition and Bering's death appeared by the mid-1740s. An anonymous 1748 account written in both Russian and German was published.[22] The French cartographer Joseph Nicolas Delisle, formerly of the Russian Academy of Sciences, produced two maps in France in 1752 and falsely claimed that Bering never made it beyond the island on which he perished.[23] A book by Jesuit priest Miguel Venegas titled *Noticia de la California* was published in Madrid in 1757 and an English version appeared two years later. In it, Venegas warned of the ramifications of the Russian appearance in North America:

> [I]s it not natural to think that the Russians in future voyages [after 1741], will come down as low as cape Blanco: and if California be abandoned by the Spaniards even as far as cape San Lucas? and we may well suppose that they who to-day take a view of the coasts and country, may to-morrow determine to plant colonies there. ...How shall we hinder the Russians from making settlements there, unless we be beforehand with them?[24]

Similarly, in a 1759 study Jose Torrubia (who earlier had served the Catholic Church in the Philippines) expressed Spanish fears about Russian expansion. He linked developments in the Western and Eastern Pacific by noting that "from [Kamchatka] in the past the Muscovites descended to Japan," and that they were approaching California

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[22] Frost, 276-277.
[23] Frost, 278; Carol Urness, "Russian Mapping of the North Pacific to 1792," in Stephen Haycox, James Barnett, and Caedmon Liburd, eds., *Enlightenment and Exploration in the North Pacific 1741-1805* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 134.
[24] Miguel Venegas, *A Natural and Civil History of California* Vol. II (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 222.

"[i]n a similar way".[25] Yet neither Venegas nor Torrubia mention the sea otter trade. Spanish officials apparently did not have concrete knowledge of the commercial benefits that Russians were reaping in the Aleutians until a diplomatic report in 1764.[26] Had research, espionage, or discovery provided such information at an earlier date, then fortification north of Baja California might have looked somewhat differently than it did. Greater knowledge of the sea otter trade may have motivated colonial planners to give emphasis to resource exploitation in the Eastern Pacific, thereby offering a basis to not only check the promyshlenniki but to hamper the entry of British traders in the Northwest during the 1780s.

Ultimately, colonization of Alta California was more strongly linked to broad changes in the eighteenth-century Spanish state than it was to new possibilities in fur trading. Among numerous reforms, the first Bourbon kings sought to streamline imperial administration and ensure that colonial revenue was efficiently collected. Of major concern to Carlos III, who began his reign in 1759, was not only the news of Russian encroachment but the outcome of the Seven Years' War in 1763. Spain's ally France was forced out of Canada and the Protestant British emerged as a major North American threat.[27] With all of these issues in mind, Carlos appointed Madrid judge Jose de Galvez as *visitador-general* of New Spain in 1765. Galvez was given broad powers to reform and protect American holdings, and at a 1768 meeting in San Blas he enunciated the Spanish plan to occupy the coast north of Baja. In addition to sending a sea expedition to Monterey, a report from the meeting noted that:

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[25] Jose Torrubia, *The Muscovites in California* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1996), 44
[26] See Warren L. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 46.
[27] McDougall, 64-65.

> it was also agreed upon that it would be most important to undertake an entry or search by land, at the proper seasons, from the missions to the north of California, so that both expeditions might unite at the same harbor of Monterey...for protecting the entire west coast of California and the other coasts of the southern part of this continent against any attempts by the Russians or any northern nation.[28]

By 1769, the overland party from Mexico, including the Franciscan padre Junipero Serra from Baja, constructed a mission at San Diego. Later that year San Francisco Bay was discovered by land (earlier Spanish sailors had missed it in coastal fog and dangerous waters) and in 1770 a presidio and mission were established at Monterey Bay. The goal of Spanish planners was to incorporate Alta California into the empire by bringing Christianity and agriculture to coastal tribes—thus creating a "neophyte" labor force—and protecting territorial claims with military outposts. The former objective met with limited success prior to mission secularization in the early nineteenth century.[29] Spain did succeed in preempting Russia in establishing permanent settlements north of Mexico in the Eastern Pacific. Yet competing in the Pacific fur trade was far from the minds of colonial authorities who organized them. The mere fact that the Russians were present in the region was enough to stimulate Spanish geopolitical aspirations. The commercial currents that carried Russians eastward were less important.

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[28] "From the Record of a Meeting at San Blas, Mexico," in Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, eds., *Lands of Promise and Despair: Chronicles of Early California, 1535-1846* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2001), 111.

[29] For studies of the California missions that emphasize the complex relationships between natives and priests, often with disastrous results for local Indians, see James A. Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769-1850* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Indeed, it was a diplomatic rumor of planned Russian expansion in the North Pacific that to a large measure inspired the voyage of Juan Perez in January of 1774.[30] Perez was ordered to explore and lay claim to the coast north to 60 degrees latitude. Due to sickness on board the *Santiago*, in addition to dense fog and difficult currents, the expedition was forced to turn around just north of the Queen Charlotte Islands during the summer of 1775, short of its intended goal. However, the return trip brought Perez and crew to Vancouver Island and a harbor Perez named San Lorenzo, known today as Nootka Sound.[31] They were the first Europeans to visit the location and, while not landing, they exchanged gifts with natives there. (These actions set the stage for a later conflict with English sailors at Nootka.) According to Perez, after offering abalone shells from California, his men "got in return various sea otter skins and many sardines."[32]

The mixed success of the Perez expedition prompted a second, two-ship journey north of California in 1775 led by Bruno de Hezeta and Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. Landing in present-day Washington State, seven of Bodega's crewmen were killed by natives. Despite Hezeta's suggestion that the ships return home, Bodega slipped his vessel away during a foggy night and continued north. He claimed possession of two territories near 60 degrees, including Bucareli Bay in Southeast Alaska. On his return trek, Bodega named Bodega Bay in California. Through the voyages of 1774 and

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[30] Charles E. Chapman, *A History of California: The Spanish Period* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 272-274. According to Chapman, Antonio de Bucareli, viceroy of New Spain, "did not become excited" by the rumor, but expressed concern about extension of Russia or other powers on the continent.

[31] Iris H.W. Engstrand, "Seekers of the 'Northern Mystery': European Exploration of California and the Pacific," in Ramon A. Gutierrez and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 93-94.

[32] "Juan Perez's 'Diario,' 11 June-28 August 1774," in Beals, 89.

1775, as Iris H.W. Engstrand writes, "Spain established a solid foundation for her claim of sovereignty over the Pacific Coast from Monterey to the Gulf of Alaska."[33]

The First Russian Colony in Alaska

The expeditions to the Northwest, including a relatively extensive return trip to Bucareli Bay in 1779,[34] momentarily bolstered Spanish confidence that Russia's claim in the North America was weak. That perception was soon challenged in the 1780s at Kodiak Island. The nature of the Alaskan fur trade underwent distinct changes in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Large merchant houses, capitalized from cities such as Moscow, began to push out smaller Siberian traders. Such actions were important for Russian success in the trade in part because of the great distances ships had to cover at the time to find untapped hunting grounds. Major competitors emerged that funded increasingly costly enterprises to the Aleutians and beyond, fighting for dominance on the coast. Irkutsk merchant Pavel Sergeevich Lebedev-Lastochkin managed expeditions to the Kuril Islands and Alaska in the 1770s. His one-time partner Grigorii Shelikov sought financial and governmental support for a permanent settlement in America. Between 1782 and 1783, Shelikov and his backers built three galiot vessels in Siberia and launched them to sail for Kodiak Island, an area known to Russian hunting parties for at least twenty years.[35] Kodiak was rich in timber, densely populated with potential native laborers, and, of course, replete with fur-bearing animals. The island is also strategically

[33] Engstrand, 95.
[34] See Stephen L. Landgon, "Efforts at Humane Engagement: Indian-Spanish Encounters in Bucareli Bay, 1779," in Haycox, Barnett, and Liburd, 187-197.
[35] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 102-107.

located near the mainland, where Lebedev-Lastochkin's and Shelikov's men eventually engaged in open confrontation.[36]

Natives on Kodiak were known to fight, and the colony had a violent beginning. Although official crown policy dictated that indigenous people in the Pacific "were to be brought under the Russian scepter through persuasion, without violence," Shelikov planned for a military invasion of the island. According to Black, "Perhaps he counted in advance on support from Siberian officials (whom he cultivated and bribed) should an investigation follow."[37] By August 1784, Shelikov's vessels sailed into Three Saints Bay, assaulted Alutiiq strongholds in the area, and built fortified island and mainland (Kenai Peninsula) outposts. Shelikov's self-serving account of these events emphasizes tenderness toward natives, not slaughter. At one point he attempted to "lead them to an understanding of books," and apparently taught a number of children Russian with some success.[38]

From Kodiak, artels were sent to surrounding islands, including St. Paul in the Pribilofs, and to Alaska's Prince William Sound. As in the Aleutians, Russians relied on hostage taking to guarantee that men would hunt. As Gwenn A.Miller describes:

> Russians took women and children hostage, holding them captive in a long cabin along the shore. As the Russians demanded greater numbers of pelts, the sea-otter population around Kodiak soon diminished. Many Alutiiq men drowned as the Russian *promyshlenniki* forced them to travel further and further away from the island for progressively longer

[36] For more on these competitive disputes and their impact on Russians and natives alike, Katerina Solovjova and Aleksandra Vovnyanko, "The Rise and Decline of the Lebedev-Lastochkin Company: Russian Colonization of South Central Alaska, 1787-1798," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 90:4 (Fall 1999): 191-205; Jeremy Atiyah, *The Great Land: How Western America Nearly Became a Russian Possession* (Oxford, UK: Parker Press, 2008), 61-63.
[37] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 107.
[38] Grigorii I. Shelikhov, *A Voyage To America: 1783-1786* Trans. Marina Ramsay, Ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1981), 45

periods of time in perilous weather conditions.[39]

Nevertheless, Shelikov was aware that force and fear of retribution would not be enough to guarantee long-term stability in America. Thus he called for Kodiak Islanders to be treated fairly and provided for materially. More than once he sought to have unmarried, male Russian colonists marry native women. Likewise, in addition to wives, promyshlenniki often adopted Alutiiq food and dress. What emerged in Russian America, beginning most dramatically at Kodiak, were curious but not entirely unique convergences of colonial "violence and dependence," "coercion and compassion."[40] The social destruction wrought by the sea otter trade was part of larger transformations in the lives of indigenous Alaskans.

Spanish Attempts at the Sea Otter Trade

In time, individuals in Mexico realized both the economic and strategic importance of the Pacific sea otter trade and sought to capitalize on it. While padres in Baja California knew of sizable populations of the animals as early as the 1730s and pelts were occasionally shipped on Manila galleons,[41] coordinated efforts to procure sea otters did not begin until late in the century. In addition to word of British Captain James Cook's arrival on the coast and dramatic news of the profits his crew made with furs taken to China, the need of Chinese quicksilver (mercury) for mines in New Spain motivated the first Spanish plan. Vicente Vasadre y Vega gained permission in 1786 to establish a system whereby mission Indians hunted sea otters in exchange for Mexican

[39] Miller.
[40] Miller.
[41] Ogden, 2.

trade items. Furs were then shipped to Canton to exchange for quicksilver. By late 1786, Vasadre collected over 1,000 otter pelts from Baja and Alta California for his first trip to the Far East the following year.[42]

Because California natives by-in-large did not traditionally hunt sea otters, and with rumors of presidio soldiers abusing Indians to obtain pelts for themselves, Vasadre modified his plan. Mission control of the trade was tightened and more extensive trade goods were sent from San Blas to Monterey. However, despite initial enthusiasm in both California and Mexico City for Vasadre's enterprise, it soon crumbled. His superiors considered the return on trade articles too low and handed over control of fur exchanges to the military. More importantly, the Philippine Company monopoly petitioned for exclusive control of the quicksilver and sea otter market in the mid-1780s. Both the Spanish governor at Manila and company agents at Canton frustrated Vasadre's attempts to sell his furs. In 1790, a royal decree officially ended his arrangement.[43]

Although Vasadre's sea otter effort was short-lived, Spanish authorities in the Pacific understood the importance of developing the trade in order to curtail Russian and English involvement with the coast. Thus while Vasadre's plan was underway in 1786, the *intendant* of the Philippines suggested to the king that fur trade colonies be established from California to Alaska. He wrote:

> It is undeniable that by treating those miserable natives with gentleness and affability, and by having them know the advantages of clothing themselves and of living under a pious chief, who will direct and govern them, enjoying all the rights of humanity, we shall be able to hold fast by their help a rich and powerful commerce to which other strong nations now aspire, which perhaps, if we are

[42] Ogden, 16-17.
[43] Ogden, 18-24.

negligent, will gain sole rights in it when we are purposing it.[44]

This proposal was turned down by the Philippine Company as too expensive and risky, but the geographic and territorial aspects of otter trade initiatives took on increasing significance just prior to and following the Nootka Controversy in 1789. A series of proponents in Mexico emphasized the advantage New Spain enjoyed of already having established a series of supply bases in California, and they reminded officials of the value placed upon California abalone shells by Northwest Indians. Although resolution of the Controversy officially forced Spain to abandon a permanent settlement at Nootka, a number of last-minute attempts were made to strengthen Spanish claims in the Northwest and to deprive other nations the commercial benefit of sea otter trading in the area. Expeditions successfully traded sheets of copper and abalone shells for sea otter pelts in the early 1790s. The schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana* accomplished this at Nootka in 1792 and sailed into the Inland Passage. There they encountered the Englishman George Vancouver and his vessels before returning to Mexico.[45] Overall, however, the Philippine Company's monopoly on Chinese goods continued to stymie attempts by merchants to engage in the sea otter trade either along the California coast or farther north, and the company itself had abandoned its interest in it. Various individuals expressed Spanish desire in the Pacific fur trade prior to 1800, yet mercantilist policy and diplomatic concession worked together to effectively deny Spain the rewards that herds of *Enhydra* in the Eastern Pacific provided. This failure to develop marine resources came back to haunt Spain in the early nineteenth century, as both Russians and Americans entered California waters to hunt. It was a consequence ominously foretold

[44] Quoted in Ogden, 25.
[45] Cook, 353-355.

by Spanish friar Antionio de San Jose Muro, who composed a long letter to Madrid in 1789 warning of the need to stop foreign sea otter enterprises. Russian hunting in California was a "dire moment I see as not so distant as some others imagine," according to him.[46] It is not known if the padre's plea was ever considered.

Crisis and "Near Miss" in the Eastern Pacific

The response of the Russian Empire to burgeoning international activity in the Pacific was intended to be dramatic. A circumnavigation squadron was ordered so that imperial claims in America could be fortified. A veteran of the Cook expeditions named Joseph Billings, then in Empress Catherine's navy, was called upon to lead a portion of the effort to explore the North American littoral and oust any foreign settlers or ships by force. Formal expedition papers were signed in late 1786 although planning had been underway for over a year.[47] Four newly built, heavily armed vessels were prepared, complete with modern scientific and navigational equipment. Yet before they could launch, Russia became embroiled in a war with Turkey and Sweden. By October, 1787, all but the Billings-led portion, already in motion, was canceled.

Word of the Russian maneuver reached Madrid from the Spanish ambassador in St. Petersburg during the last months of 1785. In addition, the Pacific voyage of France's Jean Francois Galaup comte de la Perouse dropped rumors in 1786 to officials in Chile and California of Russian expansion. From this came incorrect inferences by Spaniards of a settlement at Nootka Sound.[48] By 1788, two ships were ordered north under the

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[46] Quoted in Cook, 136.
[47] Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 94.
[48] Cook, 111-115; Robin Inglis, "The Effect of Laperouse on Spanish Thinking About the Northwest Coast," in Robin Inglis, ed., *Spain and the North Pacific Coast: Essays in Recognition of the Bicentennial*

command of Esteban Jose Martinez, a veteran of the Perez expedition of 1774. His orders were to investigate Russian settlements and commerce in the North Pacific and to take possession of land when possible. However, Martinez was to avoid conflict with ships or individuals of any nation. At Kodiak Island and Unalaska farther to the west, the expedition learned from Russian fur traders that while there was no colony at Nootka, a force was on the way to occupy it and to eliminate the rumored English presence there. Martinez was thus apparently able to gather information about the larger circumnavigation squadron, with news of its cancellation not having reached Alaska. As Warren L. Cook writes of the Russian leader at Unalaska, "It is amazing that [Potap] Zaikov was so candid with his interrogator [Martinez], but he may have hoped to forestall any move Madrid might be contemplating with regard to Nootka."[49] In fact, relations were so cordial between the two men that for a number of weeks they feasted together at various banquets, resulting at one point in a drunken tirade by Martinez against his own men. Meanwhile, the Billings expedition was busy mapping in the Western Pacific and did not reach the outpost at Unalaska until 1789.[50]

Martinez returned to San Blas and immediately offered to proceed north again to prevent foreign occupation of Nootka Sound. Whether he expected to find representatives of Russia or England, it was there, the following year, that his actions contributed to a diplomatic standoff that ultimately forced Spain to abandon its exclusive

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of the Malaspina Expedition 1791-1792 (Vancouver, B.C.: Vancouver Maritime Museum, 1992), 48-49. For more on the La Perouse expedition, see Jean Francois Galaup, *Voyages and Adventures of La Perouse*, Trans. Julius S. Gassner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969); John Dunmore, *Where Fate Beckons: The Life of Jean-Francois de la Perouse* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2007).

[49] Cook, 125-126.

[50] Carol Urness, "Russian Mapping of the North Pacific to 1792," in Haycox, Barnett, and Liburd, 142.

claim to the location.[51] However, had Billings been one year early at Unalaska, and certainly if war in Europe had not diverted Russian ships away from the Pacific, then one might imagine a direct conflict between Martinez and Catherine's envoys in 1788. If the outcome would have been peaceful, or violent with Spain on the losing end, it is possible that Martinez—witnessing first-hand imminent Russian designs on Nootka—would have considered the location a loss, with his superiors in agreement. Thus, a Russo-British showdown at Nootka was a potential outcome. Instead, it was a Spanish expedition that intercepted English sea otter merchants there. Either way, England effectively inserted itself both politically and geographically into the international struggle for the Eastern Pacific Basin by the end of the 1700s. What was essentially a two-way contest gained an additional participant, and American ships from Boston casually watched from the sidelines.

Russian and Spanish entanglements over the sea otter frontier were not limited to the eighteenth century. Indeed, after 1800 they were much more direct and confrontational in nature. Manager of the Russian-American Company (discussed below) Aleksandr Baranov, seeking to expand operations south of Sitka, dispatched hunting crews of Aleuts to the rich sea otter grounds of the San Francisco Bay in 1809 and 1811. Despite attempts by Spanish sentries to halt activities of the groups, thousands of skins were obtained. Thereafter, Baranov moved to establish a permanent fur hunting base in California that would serve to supply agricultural products for needy Alaskan

[51] Spanish claim in the Northwest included a short-lived settlement in 1792 at Neah Bay in the Strait of Juan De Fuca, which was, as David J. Weber writes, "[t]he first white settlement in the continental United States west of the Rockies and north of San Francisco". See David J. Weber, "The Spanish Moment in the Pacific Northwest," in Paul W. Hirt, ed., *Terra Pacifica: People and Place in the Northwest States and Western Canada* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1998), 14. On which nation's presence worried the Spanish more, Black offers the interesting suggestion that anxieties regarding a joint Russo-British effort against Spain motivated Martinez's voyages in 1788 and 1789. See Black, "The Russians Were Coming...," in Inglis, *Spain and the North Pacific Coast*, 29.

settlements. Fort Ross, just north of San Francisco and constructed beginning in 1812, was the result.[52] While Spain was unable to stop the founding of the settlement, they did successfully rebuff Russian attempts to expand hunting operations beyond Ross and limited trade largely to agricultural supplies. On numerous occasions, Russian-American Company representatives attempted to negotiate a contract system whereby Aleuts would work along Spanish waters with furs divided equally. Citing earlier restrictions from Madrid, California governor Pablo Vicente de Sola turned down each request.[53] Despite foreign activity being mostly around Fort Ross, where sea otters were quickly depleted, the existence of Russians in California represented a dramatic turnaround for Spain from the geopolitical realities of previous decades. Once able to assert claim (ultimately unsuccessfully) via right of previous discovery to large portions of coastline north of California, now they feuded with their old Pacific rival less than 100 miles from the nearest presidio. On the other hand, Russia accomplished in the East what they were unable to in the West, establishing a working outpost on the geographic equivalent of northern Hokkaido. As Cook observes, "[T]he existence of the Russian enclave indicates the weakness of Iberian dominion over the coast north of San Francisco after the turn of the century."[54] To be sure, Spanish inability to develop the sea otter resources of

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[52] Ogden, 57-60.

[53] Ogden, 63-64. Much has been made in California history and literature of an earlier visit to San Francisco in 1806 by Russian-American Company director Nikolai Rezanov. Widower to Shelikov's daughter, Rezanov was cordially received by the Spanish and promised to marry a fifteen-year old girl named Maria de la Concepcion Marcela Arguello, daughter of the presidio commandant. The events later gave rise to romantic writings about Spanish California, including Gertrude Atherton's *Rezanov*. Nevertheless, according to Cook, "The courtship tends to obscure the fact that Rezanov came to California on a mission amounting to espionage, inimical to Spanish interests, for he cherished the dream of expropriating for Russia a goodly portion of Alta California" (498-499). Indeed, Rezanov shortly thereafter wrote that the proposal to Concepcion was at least partly for advancing Russian interests in California. The entire episode belongs as much in a story of the international fight for the Eastern Pacific Basin as it does in the pages of a sentimental novel.

[54] Cook, 504. In addition to the Nootka Convention of 1790, the Napoleonic Wars and a Mexican insurgency beginning in 1810 that disrupted supply ships to California were factors behind New Spain's

California was only one reason for this new struggle on the coast. Yet had individuals such as Vassadre succeeded, it is unlikely that Russians—in addition to American merchants—would have been able to reach as far as they did. Nevertheless, while Ross for a brief time posed a dramatic challenge to Spanish and later Mexican claims in Alta California, the colony was never much more than a self-sufficient enterprise. It was finally sold to the Swiss pioneer John Sutter in 1841.[55]

Sea Otter Decline in Alaska

The failure of Spanish sea otter operations left the California population largely unaffected for the eighteenth century, and American vessels did not trade or hunt in California waters in significant numbers until after 1800.[56] However, the environmental effect of the Russian advance in Alaska has been subject to some debate. Black wrote in 1981 that "[t]he depletion of the major fur-bearers—the fur seals and the otters—did not occur until after 1867. When sovereignty over Alaska passed from Russia to the United States, Alaska's fur wealth was still intact."[57] Her estimation that Russian presence in the North Pacific had little overall effect on sea otter numbers is challenged by Jones. He charts significant and long-lasting decline for *Enhydra* throughout the Aleutians Islands

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weakening hold in the Eastern Pacific during the early nineteenth century. See Cook, 532-533; Beebe and Senkewicz, 294.

[55] Fort Ross has generated a sizable body of specialty literature, but one of the best overviews is still Harvey Schwartz, "Fort Ross, California: Imperial Russian Outpost on America's Western Frontier, 1812-1841," *Journal of the West* 18:2 (1979): 35-48. More is said in the following chapter on the geopolitical significance of the colony as it relates to Russian and American relations.

[56] According to Ogden, Vasadre's aborted plan produced a total of 9,729 skins from Baja and Alta California (24). An anonymous eighteenth century Spanish manuscript, reproduced in Cook, lists an additional 3,356 skins taken to Asia in 1791 on board the *Princess Real*, the majority of which were Vasadre's remaining pelts from California. See Appendix C – A Balance Sheet of the Spanish Sea Otter Trade, 1786-1797, in Cook, 549; 297-298. To compare with a more intensive period in the California otter trade, Ogden writes that "9,356 skins are known to have been obtained" in 1811 alone (140).

[57] Black, "The Nature of Evil: Of Whales and Sea Otters," in Shepard Krech III, ed., *Indians, Animals, and the Fur Trade: A Critique of* Keepers of the Game (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 121.

during the eighteenth century. According to Jones, "On the whole, across the entire North Pacific, sea otter catches gradually increased through the decades, peaking in the 1780s."[58] His examination of specific island groups reveals shorter periods of boom and busts, corresponding with the discovery and near-extinction of local sea otter herds.

For example, the Near Islands (just east of the Commander Islands) reached a crisis point in the early 1760s. As Jones notes:

> The reason for the decline was the same as in the Commanders – an intense rush of several vessels over the short span of several years that decimated the population before it had time to recover through natural growth rates. In the Near Islands, the barrage came in the years 1756-1762, when at least 8 hunting voyages sailed specifically to these islands in search of sea otters. These numbers exclude several other voyages that called at the Near Islands, but had the Fox Islands as their chief hunting ground.[59]

While sea otters were not completely eliminated from the area until the nineteenth century, the boom period and subsequent decline made it necessary for promyshlenniki to continue through the Aleutians to find fresh hunting grounds. Hence the Andreanov and Fox Islands were discovered in the 1760s. Andrean Tolstykh was the first to establish relations with the Andreanov natives, and artels killed approximately 3,000 otters during his first voyage. By the 1770s, expeditions brought back fewer pelts from these central Aleutian Islands.[60] According to Jones, minor attempts were made by the Russian state

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[58] Ryan Jones, "Empire of Extinction: Nature and Natural History in the Russian North Pacific, 1739-1799," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2008, 142. For archaeological evidence that pre-historic Aleuts over-hunted sea otters, see Charles A. Simenstad, James A. Estes, Karl W. Kenyon, "Aleuts, Sea Otters, and Alternate Stable-State Communities," *Science* 200:4340 (April 28, 1978), 403-411.

[59] Jones, 155.

[60] Jones, 161-162. Partly due to nineteenth century Russian conservation initiatives, a small but steady hunt was maintained at the Andreanovs prior to the Alaskan Purchase. According to P.A. Tikhmenev, "From 1842 to 1861, the [Russian-American] company exported 1,188 sea otters...from the Andreanov Islands,"

for conservation of animal herds in the eighteenth century, but *yasak* (tribute) collected by hunting outfits was a more powerful concern for royal officials. These were relatively small payments to the government yet they "bit into sea otter populations already reeling from the promyshlenniki's attacks."

As already seen, sea otter decline drove Russian merchants farther east and eventually to Kodiak Island by the 1780s. Shelikov, aware of the long-term effect that human activities were having in the Pacific, noted the "visible decrease in furs" putting smaller merchants out of business as one of the reasons why state approval for his proposed monopoly made sense. As Jones suggests, Shelikov may have envisioned a preservationist, hunting management role for a centralized commercial operation in Alaska—the monopoly that was finally granted to Shelikov's widow in 1799 as the Russian-American Company—but evidence for this conclusion is scant.[61] What is known is that the pattern of discovering and exploiting distant sea otter grounds continued beyond Kodiak to mainland and southeastern Alaska by the end of the eighteenth century. Prior to sending hunting parties to California, Baranov accompanied a contingency of Russian settlers and promyshlenniki to Yakutat Bay in 1795. That same year, former British navy officer and company employee James Shields sailed for Baranov to the Queen Charlotte Islands, Bucareli Bay, and Sitka Sound. He traded for otter skins with Tlingit peoples and noted the presence of British merchants. Russian-American Company officials later expressed concern that Sheilds contacted his fellow

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or, approximately 62 pelts per year. See P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company* Trans. and Ed. Richard A. Pierce and Alton Donnelly (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 405.

[61] Jones, 171-172. Furthermore, according to Jones, Russian hunters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sometimes explained the absence of sea otters in particular areas to migration of the animals, and not to over-hunting. While the latter was a much more likely occurrence, the migration theory may have been another factor working against sea otter recovery at the time; for if herds were simply temporarily out of reach, as some believed, there was no need to protect them for future hunts.

countrymen in the area and warned Baranov to "[b]e as careful as possible in watching his actions." Nevertheless, Shields' reconnaissance efforts and his escort of a large baidarka hunting party to Sitka helped open the door for building a new settlement there named Novo-Arkhangel'sk in 1799.[62]

The environmental devastation left in the wake of this advance was difficult for observers to miss. It was something from which sea otter numbers in the Aleutians and southern Alaska would not recover until Russian conservation efforts appeared in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. The German naturalist Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, accompanying an inspection tour of Russian-America and the recently-founded Novo-Arkhangel'sk, wrote:

> The decline in the number of sea otters, more apparent with each passing year, and the interest in trading in their valuable fur has caused the Russians to expand farther and farther eastward from Kamtschatka. The number of sea otters on the Aleutian Islands diminished noticeably after they began being pursued and killed in ever greater numbers. This has caused the Russians to move farther and farther, first to Kodiak, from there to Cook's River, to Prince William Sound, and then to the bays and inlets farther south and then to the Northwest Coast of America. They have killed so many sea otters of every age that they are now either almost totally extinct or have moved farther south. It is now hardly worth financing hunting parties at the northern outposts.[63]

Langsdorff also mentioned that Russian presence at Sitka and Russian-led otter hunts served the purpose of denying American ships the economic benefits of fur trading in the

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[62] Basil Dmytryshyn, E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, Eds. and Trans., *The Russian American Colonies, 1798-1867: A Documentary Record* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1989), 30; Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 146-148; 155. The settlement at Sitka was destroyed by natives in 1802 but was re-built two years later. Yakutat was permanently devastated in 1805.

[63] Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, *Remarks and Observations on a Voyage Around the World From 1803-1807* Vol. II, Trans. and Annotated Victoria Joan Moessner, Ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1993), 45.

area. Since "all the sea otters near and far are being killed by all the imported Aleuts," little was left for American outfits that had previously visited the coast.[64]

At the end of the eighteenth century, the disappearance of sea otters, coupled equally with fears of regional competitors, advanced Russian claims in the Pacific into the Northwest. Sitka soon became responsible for nearly three-fourths of the Russian-American Company's otter pelts, once again temporarily solving the problem of scarcity.[65] However, as Langsdorff described, commercial, environmental and political dynamics converged at Sitka, and these factors surrounding the colony's existence shaped the development of the Eastern Pacific Basin well into the 1800s. The international struggle in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Northwest usually gathers most attention in histories of the sea otter trade. As seen already in this dissertation, those events and developments were preceded by nearly a century of activity within the natural range of the sea otter. Before Nootka became a site of diplomatic contention for territory and fur trafficking, the creature paid a price for its genetics on two sides of an ocean.

[64] Langsdorff, 47.
[65] James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 14.

Chapter 3: The International Context and American Dominance of the Sea Otter Trade

This chapter examines the causes and consequences of United States success at the sea otter trade of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Generally, it argues that American merchants, sailors, and hunters laid important groundwork for national expansion to the Pacific Coast. Numerous vessels, most from Boston, plied the Eastern Pacific from California to Alaska. Their overall commercial accomplishments relative to other national players in the trade helped establish the United States as a competitor for territory in the region. By the 1820s, due partly to population decline set in by overhunting, the sea otter was no longer a major reason why American or other ships visited the coast. Conservation policies were enacted by both Mexico and Russia in attempts to stabilize sea otter herds, but Russian efforts in Alaska proved more effective.

Central to this paper is that the Americanization of the sea otter trade took place on an international stage in the Eastern Pacific Basin on which a series of diplomatic entanglements directly or indirectly related to competition for otter fur unfolded. These specific events, brought on by activities in the Pacific Northwest[1], influenced the political landscape of the Eastern Pacific. In addition to the Nootka Controversy, I highlight two other well-known events: the struggle over Astoria surrounding the War of 1812 and the tsarist Ukase (royal decree) of 1821. In all, various forms of international contest—

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[1] For my purposes, the Northwest includes areas roughly encompassing Southeast Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. I exclude Southern Alaska and Northern California. For geographic changes in Pacific fur trading and the occasional effect they had in promoting different conceptions of the "Northwest," see James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 204-207; Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 123-124.

involving local affairs in the Pacific frontier and cases of conflict and resolution from politicians in capitols—demonstrate both the weakening and solidification of borders in the North American West. Moreover, to apply Francois Furstenberg's characterization of the Trans-Appalachian frontier, they suggest that a type of "Long War for the West" was also waged on the continent's Far Western portions.[2] While no major imperial military engagement took place in the Eastern Pacific prior to the Mexican-American War, one can track backward from that moment to the 1790s and an evolving British, Spanish, American, and Russian struggle in the Northwest that was ultimately settled at the middle of the nineteenth century. That the United States emerged from this "Long War" able to successfully assert the claims it did in the 1840s without establishing a fur trading colony, save for the brief existence of Astoria, is at least partly testament to the accomplishments of the sailors and owners of New England coasters.

To reap the economic benefits of the Pacific fur trade, merchants both competed and cooperated with commercial agents of other nations. One of the best known examples of the latter method was the licensing by the Russian-American Company of Native Alaskan hunters for American ships to hunt sea otters along the California coast. While it is indeed true that "cases of conflict and collaboration often coexisted" in Russian and American relations in the Eastern Pacific, one of the chief arguments here is that the commercial and political relationship between the two was mostly defined by otter trade conflict into the 1820s.[3] Essentially, I argue for a deeper appreciation among historians of the trade for Howard L. Kushner's *Conflict on the Northwest Coast:*

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[2] See Francois Furstenberg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History," *The American Historical Review* 113:3 (June 2008): 647-677.

[3] The quote is from Jean Heffer, *The United States and the Pacific: History of a Frontier*, Trans. W. Donald Wilson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 92.

American-Russian Rivalry in the Pacific Northwest, 1790-1867.[4] As Kushner details, the activities of American vessels were not only a major cause of the ukase but traders themselves played an instrumental role in forming the diplomatic response of the United States. In the latter regard, I utilize an 1822 article in the periodical *North American Review* by Boston entrepreneur William Sturgis. A sailor in the Pacific at the turn of the century, Sturgis drew upon his intimate knowledge of the Northwest to produce an influential document that challenged Russian claims there.[5] While few Americans involved in the sea otter trade actively pursued roles in territorial questions and disputes to the extent that he did, Sturgis's article is the most forthright example of how the trade provided business interests in the Pacific with opportunities to contest the geopolitical positions of rival powers.

The depletion of sea otters in the Northwest by around 1820 brought new trading patterns to the coast that strengthened the link between maritime fur exchanges and the interior trade in beaver pelts. England's Hudson Bay Company made a concerted effort to drive off American traders and fortify possessions between the Columbia River and Russian settlements. Overland hunters also advanced into California, where sea otters were still regularly pursued after 1820 with and without Mexican license. Additionally, decades-worth of visits by Pacific traders and explorers established a significant foreign presence in the Hawaiian Islands. Overall, the pursuit of profit from animal furs, both sea otter and beaver, inaugurated and facilitated the incorporation of a broad expanse of the

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[4] Howard J. Kushner, *Conflict on the Northwest Coast: American-Russian Rivalry in the Pacific Northwest, 1790-1867* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975). One major sign that Kusher's work has not received due attention in sea otter trade history is its absence from James Gibson's definitive *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods.* Gibson details the effect that the ukase had on Boston traders, whereas I develop on Kushner and emphasize the role that traders played in prompting the ukase.

[5] William Sturgis, "Examination of the Russian Claims to the Northwest Coast of America," *North American Review* 15 (October 1822): 370-401.

Eastern Pacific Basin into the global economy. For its role in the expansion of non-native interests in the region, the sea otter paid a hefty price. Hunting in the Northwest reduced populations to the point of the commercial irrelevance of the local trade by the mid-1800s. (Discussed in the following chapter, continued efforts by Native American and American hunters in the Northwest during the late nineteenth century eventually produced the total extinction of the species between Alaska and California.) Likewise, Russian, Mexican, and American outfits depleted sea otters on the California coast prior to 1850. Alaskan sea otters fared better at mid-century than their relatives farther south, but their numbers remained below pre-Russian levels. Therefore, this chapter offers a geographically-integrated view of the environmental legacy of the trade and is attuned to the varieties of place in the Eastern Pacific. In a number of ways, the natural consequences of the sea otter trade's heyday are every bit as complex as its territorial and political developments.

James Cook and the First Northwest Traders[6]

In 1776, while independence was declared in the British colonies on the eastern seaboard, Captain James Cook set sail from Plymouth, England on his third expedition to the Pacific. The stated intention of planners was discovery of the fabled Northwest Passage, a navigable route across the northern reaches of the North American continent linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. No doubt the strategic advantage that such a waterway would afford England against her European foes—Spain, in particular, had already begun to extend north along the Pacific coast from Mexico—was also a

[6] No attempt is made here to consult the extensive literature on the life and exploits of James Cook. For a recent treatment, see John Gascoigne, *Captain Cook: Voyager Between Worlds* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007).

consideration. Like his previous expeditions, Cook rounded the Cape of Good Hope and headed toward the South Pacific. He landed at Tahiti in August 1777 and "discovered" the Hawaiian Islands in January of 1778, where he would later be killed by natives. By late March, the *Resolution* and the *Discovery* dropped anchor at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island. A healthy trade with local peoples took place during the expedition's brief stay. As Cook's journal describes:

> A great many Canoes filled with Natives were about the Ships all day, and a trade commenced betwixt us and them, which was carried on with the Strictest honisty on boath sides. Their articles were the Skins of various animals, such as Bears, Wolfs, Foxes, Dear, Rackoons, Polecats, Martins and in particular the Sea Beaver, the same as is found on the coast of Kamtchatka.[7]

After exploring the coast of southern Alaska and searching in vain for the Northwest Passage, Cook returned to winter at Hawaii where he met his fateful end in February of 1779. The captain's men sent news of his death overland via Kamchatka, and sailing south on their return voyage they put in at the Portuguese colony of Macao, at the mouth of the Pearl River. Sixty miles up the river at Canton, the official Manchu port open to foreign shipping, Chinese merchants offered exorbitant prices for the crew's remaining sea otter pelts. As one work on the sea otter trade observes, "The Englishmen were very close to mutiny."[8] Indeed, just before the expedition left for England, three crew members stole the *Resolution*'s cutter in an attempt to return to the Northwest coast and obtain sea otters. A two-day search for the men produced no result.

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[7] J.C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery* Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1967), 296.
[8] Robert Kingery Buell and Charlotte Northcote Skladal, *Sea Otters and the China Trade* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968), 53.

Excitement spread by the mid-1780s as official and unofficial reports of the Cook expedition were published. However, the first English businessman to send a ship to the Northwest for the purposes of the sea otter trade was John Henry Cox, stationed not in London but in Canton. Arriving in China in 1781, Cox sold British-made "singsongs," or mechanical toys, when he heard of the profits made by Cook's crew. He collaborated with a number of friends in the East India Company—the official English monopoly for the China trade—and purchased the *Harmon*, a 60-ton vessel that was renamed the *Sea Otter* and dispatched across the Pacific in 1785.[9] Captained by James Hanna, the *Sea Otter* arrived at Nootka Sound in August. The voyage was a commercial success, gathering 560 skins and returning safely to Canton in 1786. Unfortunately, Hanna and crew left a lasting and negative impression on the Nootka (or Nuu chah nulth) chief Maquinna. At one point the men of the *Sea Otter*, threatened when natives tried to force their way onboard in an apparent attempt to address an earlier wrong, opened fire on a canoe and killed over twenty Nootkas. Also, while invited on the vessel, Maquinna was given what he was told to be a seat of honor, a chair with gunpowder piled underneath. A sailor lit the powder, projecting Maquinna from his seat and leaving him with scars visible years later to visitors.[10] While the militarily-ordered people of Nootka were likely impressed by these first experiences with explosives (which the later episode was apparently intended to accomplish), and while Hanna did attempt to smooth over

[9] Richard Batman, *The Outer Coast* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1985), 61-62; Gibson, 23.
[10] Batman, 63-64; Gibson, 166. For conflicting information regarding the deadly encounter between the *Sea Otter* and Northwest natives, see Daniel W. Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 69-70.

relations by tending to injured natives, the actions of the *Sea Otter*'s crew and of those of subsequent ships that visited the Northwest came back to haunt Pacific fur traders.

Other trade ventures soon followed, including a return trip to the Northwest by Hanna in 1786. With permission from the EIC, two veterans of the Cook expeditions, Nathaniel Portlock and George Dixon, were dispatched from England. After a brief but tense stay at Hawaii during the summer of 1786, Portlock and Dixon sailed for Cook Islet and Prince William Sound. They encountered a Russian artel working at the former location but still managed to obtain some sea otter furs. According to Portlock and Dixon's published account, the Queen Charlotte Islands "surpassed out most sanguine expectations, and afforded a greater quantity of furs than, perhaps, any place hitherto known."[11] Overall, they extolled the natural abundance of the coast and the prospects for bringing otter pelts to China: "On the 26th [January 1788], our principal furs, viz. the 2,552 otter; 434 cub, and 34 fox, were sold and delivered to the East India Company's Supercargoes, for 50,000 dollars."[12]

British mercantile control hampered the abilities of their country's merchants. Trade outfits were legally required to obtain licenses from the EIC and/or South Sea Company (the holder of exclusive rights for British trade in the Pacific Ocean). Such arrangements proved costly at the Canton market, where EIC officials exacted sizable percentages. In addition, the company usually forbade ships from exporting Chinese goods to Europe, offering specie instead. This denied British traders the most profitable exchange in the sea otter trade.[13] Some attempted to bypass restrictions by sailing under

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[11] Captain George Dixon, *A Voyage Round The World; But More Particularly to the North-west Coast of America: Performed in 1785, 1786, 1787, and 1788...* (London: Geo. Goulding, 1789), 235
[12] Dixon, 303.
[13] Gibson, 25-26.

dummy foreign ownership and captains. One such arrangement involved Cox and former British naval officer John Mears, who along with other partners sent ships out of Macao under supposed Portuguese colors.[14] Vessels owned by this general group helped set off the Nootka Controversy (as discussed below). However, for the most part, England's merchants could not exploit the Northwest trade as successfully as their American competitors. As with Spain, government-sponsored monopolies held back development of maritime fur exchanges just when the emerging United States entered the otter fields. Traders from the east coast of North America, unencumbered by stifling regulations, made the most out of soft gold at Canton.

American Entry

Merchants in the young United States were quick to take advantage of the lucrative Northwest-Canton route. With American access to British home ports and the West Indies limited following the War of Independence, New England traders sought out the China trade. Chinese goods—porcelains, silk, wood carvings—were in demand in the United States from its earliest national years, and tea had been a popular drink during the colonial era. However, gold and silver, the preferred method of payment at the Canton market, was limited in America. Thus traders initially exported ginseng to China, which grew wild on the North America continent. Boston entrepreneur Sullivan Door described its all-purpose medicinal use in Asia: "It promotes digestion, procures appetite, calms the mind..., procures easy births, gives vigour to old and young".[15] The first American ship to make port in the Far East, the *Empress of China*, left New York in

[14] Batman, 69-70.
[15] Quoted in Gibson, 100. Ellipsis is mine.

February 1784 carrying a load of ginseng and other raw materials. Sailing via the Cape of Good Hope and the Indian Ocean, it returned in May of 1785 laden with tea and Oriental wares. The *Empress* brought its financiers a modest 20-30 percent profit on their investment.[16]

Unfortunately for the Americans, the Chinese preferred Korean ginseng; thus most traders relied either on British credit for manufactured goods to trade, or on a separate exchange medium.[17] The Pacific fur trade was particularly attractive to commercial outfits in Boston, who were generally short on specie and whose smaller vessels were more easily maneuvered along the Northwest coast. As James R. Gibson summarizes, "[T]he coast trade became a Boston trade."[18] The first American ships to engage in a sea otter enterprise, the *Lady Washington* and the *Columbia Rediviva*, skippered by Robert Gray and John Kendrick respectively, left Boston Harbor in September 1787. Gray reached Nootka Sound first the following year but found the trading there light, partly due to the presence of British traders Mears and his associate William Douglas. The Englishmen used aggressive means to obtain furs and built a temporary fort at Friendly Cove on Vancouver Island. Once Mears and Douglas were gone by October, natives flocked to Gray and Kendrick's ships and trading commenced.[19]

Deciding to winter at Nootka, the Americans obtained a greater number of skins in the spring of 1789 as the *Lady Washington* cruised the Queen Charlotte Islands and other locations on the coast, trading metal chisels for sea otters. Meanwhile, British

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[16] Arrell Morgan Gibson and John S. Whitehead, *Yankees in Paradise: The Pacific Basin Frontier* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 95; Heffer, 21-22.
[17] See Gibson and Whitehead, 173-174.
[18] Gibson, 95.
[19] John Scofield, *Hail,* Columbia*: Robert Gray, John Kendrick and the Pacific Fur Trade* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993). 95-113.

traders, including Douglas, returned to Nootka and encountered the expedition of Esteban Jose Martinez, sent north with orders to occupy Nootka for the Spanish empire (mentioned in the previous chapter). While Spanish colonial authorities had earlier given notice to capture the Boston vessels as they ventured to the Northwest, Martinez interpreted his own instructions liberally and left Kendrick and Gray unmolested.[20] After witnessing the beginning of the ensuing international crisis between Spain and England, the American captains separated. Kendrick remained on the coast in the *Lady Washington* to trade. Command of the *Columbia* was transferred to Gray as he crossed the Pacific to Canton and returned to Boston in August of 1790, the first American to circumnavigate the globe. Despite the expedition's meager financial returns, its Boston backers sent Gray back to the Northwest the following month. In May of 1792, as he plied the coast, he "discovered" the river that now bears his ship's name.[21]

The Nootka Controversy

Anglo-Spanish controversy erupted at Nootka in 1789 partly because of the diplomatic failings of Martinez and the British Captain James Colnett, and partly because of their conflicting missions in regard to occupying the locale. After Mears returned to China with a load of furs, his associates reorganized their efforts as a legal trading company, obtaining licenses from both the EIC and SSC. Colnett was dispatched for Nootka in 1789 onboard the *Argonaut*. His goal was to construct permanent trading

[20] Scofield, 130-132.
[21] Heffer, 29. Discussed in Chapter 3, Bruno de Hezeta's expedition was officially the first to sight the mouth of the Columbia River in 1775.

outposts on the coast; hence he carried twenty-nine Chinese artisans and workers for the task.[22] As Colnett's superiors explained to him:

> In placing a Factory on the Coast of America we look to a Solid establishment, and not one that is to be abandon'd at pleasure; we authorize you to fix it at the most Convenient Station only to place your colony in Peace and Security and fully protected from the fear of the smaller Sinister Accidents; the Object of a Port of this kind is to draw the Inhabitants to it, to lay up the small Vessels in the winter season, to build, and other commercial purposes. When this point is effected different trading houses will be established and Stations that your knowledge of the Coast and its commerce point out to be the most advantageous.[23]

Therefore, some measure of conflict between Colnett and Martinez—the latter having erected and christened fortifications at Friendly Cove by June—was perhaps inevitable. Unfortunately for Mears and associates, Colnett was partly responsible for a heated exchange onboard Martinez's vessel *Princesa* shortly after arriving. He falsely claimed that he was acting on behalf of the King of England in attempting to fortify Nootka and apparently insulted Martinez. The equally-blustery Spanish don arrested Colnett and crew and had them shipped to Mexico for trial by the end of July.[24] News of the incident reached London and Madrid in January 1790. Talk of war followed, particularly after the arrival in London of Mears, who worked to inflame Parliament regarding his losses at Nootka. Funds for a military engagement were approved while Spain sought outside support. However, with France mired in the beginnings of revolution and with Russia and the United States remaining neutral, Spanish Foreign Minister Puerto de

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[22] Warren L. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 143-144.
[23] James Colnett, *The Journal of Captain James Colnett Aboard the Argonaut*, Ed. F.W. Howay (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1940), 20-21.
[24] Scofield, 147-149.

Floridablanca was compelled to accept British terms. Spain renounced exclusive title to Nootka and admitted that the seizures by Martinez were illegal.[25] As Warren L. Cook explains, "Madrid's yielding had little to do with the validity of Spanish claims to the area in question; the consequence was a matter of which contender could marshal the most coercive power in Europe."[26]

The economic benefits of the sea otter trade figured prominently in the proceedings of British officials during the Controversy. Daniel Clayton discusses how Mears was questioned in London in 1790 before the Committee of Trade and Plantations. The merchant was interrogated repeatedly regarding fur trafficking and was asked about other areas of Pacific commerce, such as whaling.[27] According to Clayton, this reflects the larger reality of how many in eighteenth-century England closely associated international commerce with national identity. The actions of Martinez were an affront to British pride not simply because of their lack of acceptable legal standing but because of economic and cartographic information that bolstered Britain's imagined global position. The "ledger and the map" were powerful tools employed during the standoff over Nootka. Such nation-state traditions were "technical matrices through which Britain ordered the Pacific as a commercial arena and a space of European sovereignty."[28]

The 1790 Convention did not end the matter. Since occupation took precedence over claim of prior discovery during the negotiations over the Northwest, Spain sought to reaffirm its right to the base at Nootka. The attempt was made all the more possible by the ambiguous wording of the Convention treaty itself, which left it unclear who could

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[25] Walter A. McDougall, *Let The Sea Make A Noise…:A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 93-94.
[26] Cook, 247.
[27] Clayton, 178-179.
[28] Clayton, 181.

settle where north of San Francisco. When George Vancouver arrived on the disputed coast in 1792 on a mission to take formal possession of Nootka, in addition to engaging in a final British quest for the Northwest Passage, he encountered naval officer Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. Cordial relations were established between the two representatives but Bodega refused to completely relinquish Spanish claim to the location. Maquinna, seeming to comment on the rivalry and communicate his desire for a peaceful resolution, presented sea otter skins to Vancouver and Bodega during an elaborate ceremony in their honor. Ultimately the Brit and the Spaniard could not reach a deal at Nootka. The matter was referred home for further deliberation.[29]

News of the failed negotiations between Vancouver and Bodega reached Europe during the French Reign of Terror and a brief Anglo-Spanish alliance spurred on by the events in Paris. A final agreement on Nootka was the result. Signed in January of 1794, the "Convention for the Mutual Abandonment of Nootka" called for the Sound to be evacuated by both parties and open only to temporary structures.[30] It was a blow from which Spanish hopes for the Northwest coast would never fully recover. However, despite the Controversy ending with England's first major territorial victory in the Northwest, an extended war with France drew attention away from the possibilities for developing a far away stretch of coast on the North American continent. British mercantilism and French concerns aided the United States in its commercial domination of the sea otter trade at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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[29] McDougall, 94-95; Cook, 362-375. For studies of Vancouver as explorer in the North Pacific, see Stephen Haycox, James Barnett, and Caedmon Liburd, eds., *Enlightenment and Exploration in the North Pacific 1741-1805* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).
[30] Cook, 412-413.

American Takeover

According to an early Massachusetts history of the sea otter trade, "[A]t the close of the last century [1700s], with the exception of the Russian establishments on the northern part of the coast, the whole trade was in our hands".[31] Generally, American ships were outfitted with a wide variety of goods for natives, although items such as textiles, tools, muskets, and ammunition tended to be most popular. Metals, a staple of the first years of the trade, lost favor by 1800 as native demands on the coast shifted.[32] Vessels left harbor in late summer or early fall, made the difficult trip around Cape Horn, and arrived on the Pacific coast some six months later. Those that reached the Northwest earliest (prior to March) had the best success at turning a profit, as competition for available furs was intense. Typically, gifts were exchanged with village chiefs and prices for skins were fixed until a captain was finally able to "break trade." Bartering took place over the side or occasionally on board the ship, and American and other merchants often noted the commercial prowess of Indians. As the early British trader James Strange wrote, "They would not part with any thing out of their hands, before that had received an equivalent; they never forgot to examine carefully our goods."[33] Natives played rival merchant vessels off of each other in order to increase prices for their skins. This practice resulted in a number of American ships colluding on the coast to fix exchange rates and divide takes equally, a counter-measure which became more common in the 1810s as sea otter numbers were reduced.[34]

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[31] Appendix I – The Northwest Fur Trade, by The Hon. William Sturgis, in Briton C. Busch and Barry M. Gough, Eds., *Fur Traders from New England: The Boston Men in the North Pacific, 1787-1800* (Spokane, WA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1997), 93-94.
[32] Gibson, 214-216.
[33] Quoted in Gibson, 121.
[34] Gibson, 128.

Not all American ventures were successful ones. Sturgis, who became a partner in one of the most prestigious Boston firms in the trade, Bryant and Sturgis, noted, "The erroneous idea which was cherished respecting the immense profits made in the N.W. Trade induced many adventurers to engage in it without either information or Capital. The consequence was that anyone acquainted with the business might foresee, that almost all of them made losing voyages."[35] However, many Boston-Northwest-Canton trips made immense returns on their initial investments. A general picture of profits is provided by Gibson: "During the 1790s an average of $62,673 worth of American trade goods were bartered on the coast for furs annually; during the same period the annual value of American shipments of sea-otter skins to Canton averaged some $350,000."[36]

The mercantile spirit and shrewdness of New England merchants played a significant role in the Americanization of the sea otter trade. Vessels often stayed on the coast and gave anything they could as long as furs were available. For example, the *Hancock* in 1799 sold some of its sails for "a Skin apiece," the captain sold his waistcoast and trowsers for one skin, and the ship's longboat garnered ten.[37] Captains and officers of American ships were invested in the financial success of each voyage through a system of "privilege," or cargo space for their own store of Chinese goods, and percentages of net profits. The advantages afforded through these arrangements were recognized by rivals in the HBC: "The American Coasters are masters & part owners of their Vessels &

[35] Appendix II – William Sturgis on the American Vessels and the Maritime Trade, in Busch and Gough, 107.
[36] Gibson, 58.
[37] Gibson, 30.

cargoes filled out on the most economical & cheapest manner & who moreover enjoy facilities & privileges in his Canton Dealings of which British subjects are deprived."[38]

Violence in the Trade

The concerns of Boston owners notwithstanding, a number of American captains resorted to violence along the Northwest coast. (Sturgis was probably the most vocal advocate for native rights of any sea otter merchant in the early nineteenth century.) A combination of fear, prejudice, and cultural misunderstanding helps to explain these outbursts. Probably the most notorious American offender was Captain Gray. At one point, nervous from earlier incidents on the coast and with a penchant for revenge, Gray ordered his men to open fire on a canoe "with the war Hoop" off modern-day Washington state, killing approximately twenty natives.[39] Similar to their Russian predecessors in the Pacific fur trade, several captains used hostages to obtain sea otters.[40] The transient nature of American presence in the Northwest—trading for a season or two and not settling among local tribes—likely accounts for a number of violent events, as many Boston shipmasters never returned to the coast and thus may have been more willing to use extreme measures to turn a profit. Yet the detrimental effect of aggressive activity on commercial relations restrained others. Cruelty to indigenous peoples could not only upset immediate trade opportunities but "might drive the Natives into the hands of rival Nor'westermen," as Gibson observes.[41]

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[38] Quoted in Mackie, 127.
[39] Scofield, 253-254.
[40] Gibson, 160-163.
[41] Gibson, 171.

Natives often responded in kind to abuses by EuroAmericans. One of the best-known incidents of violence against a sea otter trade vessel took place at Nootka Sound. In 1803 the *Boston* was captured and all but two of her twenty-seven crew were killed by natives under the command of Maquinna. One of those spared was John Jewitt, the ship's blacksmith, whose skill as an armourer made him a valuable captive for the Nootka chief until his rescue in 1805. Jewitt published accounts of his ordeal, helping craft it into a popular nineteenth century captivity narrative.[42] While the attack on the *Boston* is commonly interpreted by historians as revenge by Maquinna for earlier insults and aggressions by non-natives, Anya Zilberstein recently emphasized the depletion of sea otters on Vancouver Island and the resulting loss of trade goods for the native economy, as material items had earlier strengthened Maquinna's tribal position through the potlatch. She writes, "If the loss of maritime commerce meant an erosion of the privileged status Maquinna had maintained [on the island] since the 1780s, then the attack on the *Boston* might be understood as a sort of endgame."[43] The killing of all but Jewitt and the ship's carpenter and the forcing of Jewitt to forge a myriad of rings, bracelets, and metal weapons for inter-tribal exchange does strongly suggest that causes in addition to revenge explain this particular episode.

Hence, while Sturgis lamented the "injustice, violence, and bloodshed"[44] of Northwest commerce, it consisted at various moments of bloody encounter begetting bloody encounter. Yet this sanguine legacy was only part of the overall effect that the

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[42] See, for example, John R. Jewitt, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Jewitt; Only Survivor of the Ship Boston, During a Captivity of Nearly Three Years among the Savages of Nootka Sound: With an Account of the Manners, Mode of Living, and Religious Opinions of the Natives* (Middletown, CT, 1815).

[43] Anya Zilberstein, "Objects of Distant Exchange: The Northwest Coast, Early America, and the Global Imagination," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64:3 (July 2007), 615.

[44] Appendix I, in Busch and Gough, 86.

trade had on indigenous populations of the coast. Scholars of the Northwest, particularly of British Columbia, have debated the nature and extent of change introduced by British and American maritime activities. Clayton evaluates these views, including the "enrichment thesis" of the late twentieth century. This interpretation argues that native exchanges with traders were mutually beneficial. For Clayton, whose focus is Vancouver Island, scholars have been guilty of over-generalizing and have not fully appreciated the geographic variations of the trade. "Along the west coast of Vancouver Island," he writes, "wealth flowed into some Native areas and bypassed others, making some Native groups powerful and others vulnerable to colonization. And the effect of the trade on Native material culture was not egalitarian."[45] Furthermore, contact with Europeans and Americans intensified tribal territorial disputes and disease "did not have a blanket impact." Essentially, the complexities of one oft-visited location on the coast highlight the need for historians and others to be wary of interpretations of the sea otter trade centered too firmly on its destructive or beneficial results.

At the Islands

Boston fur traders were the first non-natives to visit the Marquesas Islands, some 850 miles northeast of Tahiti. The *Hope*, captained by Joseph Ingraham, stopped there in 1791. As a later trader described the Marquesas, "The islands are broken and mountainous, the soil fertile: bread-fruit, cocoa-nuts, sugar-cane, &c., are produced here in abundance."[46] However, the most popular stop for provisions and relaxation during Northwest-China voyages was the Hawaiian (or Sandwich) Islands. The British captain

[45] Clayton, 156.
[46] William Dane Phelps, "Solid Men of Boston in the Northwest," in Busch and Gough, 59.

Hanna went there in 1785. Many a seafarer after him took advantage of the convenient location and natural abundance of the islands. Ships wooded, watered, and bought a variety of foodstuffs, particularly hogs. Hawaiian pigs, fattened on sugar cane, proved a popular island export. Gray's *Columbia* purchased 150 hogs and a number of large casks of salted pork.[47] Polynesian women gave themselves, often as a result of their husband's encouragement. One trader wrote, "[A]lmost every man on board took a native woman for a wife while the vessel remained, the men thinking it an honour, or for their gain, as they got many presents of iron, beads, or buttons."[48] Sexual contact was one of the main ways that foreign disease was introduced to Pacific island communities. Charting larger infectious exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin at the turn of the nineteenth century, David Igler writes, "Endemic among European and American sailors, gonorrhea and syphilis turned epidemic when let loose among the eastern Pacific's virgin soil populations. Both diseases caused debilitating sickness and increased sterility and infant mortality rates, creating a reproductive time bomb."[49]

Indeed, partly because the Hawaiian Islands proved a popular destination for merchant, whaler, and explorer alike (and missionaries arrived by the 1820s), the location witnessed some of the more dramatic alterations of any place visited by sea otter trade vessels. In addition to diseases, traders brought guns and ammunition, which were utilized by the politically and militarily astute king Kamehameha to unite the islands in the 1810s. Kamehameha employed a number of British and American sailors and workmen, and recruited two trusted English advisors, Isaac Davis and John Young, from

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[47] Gibson, 44-45.
[48] Quoted in Gibson, 48.
[49] David Igler, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," *American Historical* Review 109:3 (June 2004), 699-700.

otter trade ships in 1790.[50] Not only did Pacific fur traders encourage dramatic social and political shifts for Hawaiian islanders, but they connected the archipelago to broader geopolitical contests in the Eastern Pacific. Peter Corney was sailor for the Montreal-based North West Company and also worked for the HBC after the two ventures merged in 1821. Like other Northwesters, he promoted greater British involvement in the trans-Pacific fur trade. After staying at Hawaii for a number of years, Corney warned London readers in 1821 that commerce between the coast, the islands, and China was dominated by Americans and Russians "while an English flag is rarely to be seen."[51] He emphasized that the Northwest trade "is now totally in the power of the Americans," and that the United States government and American merchants wished to establish overland fur outposts to the Columbia River: "Such is the project contemplated, and if it succeed, it would have this important consequence, that it would lay the foundation of an American colony on the shores of the Pacific Ocean."[52] Corney's account was one of many sources of inspiration for the HBC to make its presence felt in the Eastern Pacific beginning in the 1820s.

In California Waters

The first Americans to stop at California ports attempted to trade supplies for sea otter skins caught by mission Indians, but Spanish officials resisted what they considered contraband trading. In response to these counter-measures, to the greater difficulty of finding untapped sea otter grounds in the Northwest, and to the arrival of Russian

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[50] Gibson, 278-280.
[51] Peter Corney, *Early Voyages in the North Pacific, 1813-1818* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1965), 87.
[52] Corney, 91-92.

competitors at Sitka in 1799, a number of traders entered into a contract system with the Russian-American Company to transport Aleut hunters to the coasts of Baja and Alta California. In 1803, Irish-born Boston sailor Joseph O'Cain first suggested the idea to Company manager Aleksandr Baranov at Kodiak Island. Baranov agreed to provide natives and baidarkas in exchange for an equal portion of O'Cain's take. The agreement partly fulfilled Baranov's obligation to his superiors to expand hunting operations south toward California. It also offered him a measure of control over American merchants, whose activities Russian officials were increasingly interested in curtailing, and dealing with Americans allowed RAC skins to enter the Canton market (officially closed to Russia by the Chinese). Despite protests from a Spanish commander in Baja, O'Cain's hunting expedition was a productive one. He returned to Kodiak in June of 1804 with some 1,100 furs, along with hundreds of others which he bought from California residents.[53]

Following O'Cain, more than half a dozen other captains hunted in California waters under the contract system. For example, in 1807 three vessels were outfitted with Aleuts and were active on the coast. Their captains steered clear of Spanish settlements, plying offshore islands and using isolated harbors like Bodega to dispatch biadarkas to rich otter grounds such as San Francisco Bay.[54] By the early 1810s, Russian and American hunting contracts ceased. The outbreak of revolution in Mexico led to a disruption of supply ships sent to California. Padres and settlers were thus more willing than before to engage in contraband trade for skins with the Yankees, helping make offshore hunting enterprises unnecessary. Equally important was the extension of

[53] Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 45-47.
[54] Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade*, 50-51. Contract hunters also took seals at the Farallon Islands.

Russian-led sea otter ventures far to the south of Sitka (discussed in Chapter 2). Baranov, never entirely satisfied with splitting proceeds with Americans but compelled to partly out of logistical necessity, sent his own expeditions to California, culminating in the founding of Fort Ross in 1812. Russian desire to strictly limit business deals with Boston traders was strong by the 1810s. According to an 1808 statement from the directors of the RAC, their presence in the Northwest posed political as well as economic challenges:

> The North American republicans expand their operations in places occupied by the Company and induce in the savages actions contrary to the goals of the Company. They instill among them the notion that they should not consider the Russians their oldest, most dependable and best friends, with the natural right to be their protectors not only against foreign nations but in intertribal quarrels. Such disputes have long been customary among them, and have led to their mutual destruction, with one tribe constantly warring with another over trivial insults. The republicans encourage this depravity by bringing all manner of firearms to exchange with these savages, who by their very natures and lack of education are craven and brutal.
>
> As a result of this the savages have caused a number of unfortunate situations for the Russians who had been friendly and had had commercial relations with them.[55]

Hence American success at the sea otter trade troubled the imperial goals of Great Britain, Russia, throughout the Eastern Pacific. Poaching and illegal commerce in California proved only a minor nuisance for New Spain compared to its larger internal issues in the decade before the Mexican Revolution. However, maritime fur hunters and

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[55] Basil Dmytryshyn, E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, Eds. and Trans., *The Russian American Colonies, 1798-1867: A Documentary Record* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1989), 160. Such negative observations were made despite (or in fact because of) the reality that Americans were major suppliers of the Sitka colony, as noted below. For the significance of sea otter trade tensions for Russia dispatching their first official diplomat to the United States in 1808, see Kushner, 11-12.

traders established commercial relations in the province that expanded during the Mexican Era and the hide and tallow era. One of the more prominent foreign merchants who brought trade goods to California's missions and ranchos, William Gale, was a former otter trader and employee of Bryant and Sturgis.[56] California's abundant sea otter herds provided an introduction for the economic and political takeover of California by the United States nationals during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Astoria

Had it not been for events surrounding the War of 1812, at least one particular geopolitical fear of Russia and England regarding the Northwest would have been realized. The first attempt by Americans to build a permanent outpost on the Columbia River was in 1810, as the *Albatross*, owned and outfitted by Boston's Abel Winship, his brothers, and other investors, sailed up the river. As Briton C. Busch and Barry M. Gough note, "The object was to have a fortified agricultural base and from there to enlarge the coastal trade."[57] However, due to fear of an imminent attack from a large number of natives, the crew withdrew and returned to sailing the coast before completing any structure. The wealthy New York-based merchant John Jacob Astor had slightly better luck, and more determination. Through fur buying trips to Montreal beginning in the late 1780s, Astor learned of the early overland expeditions and Pacific fur trade plans of the NWC. He was also inspired by reports from sea otter traders and the lucrative China trade.[58] Yet where a few British and American maritime entrepreneurs tried but

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[56] Batman, 176-177, 240-243. The classic, first-hand account of the California hide and tallow trade is William Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (New York: Signet Classic, 1964).
[57] Introduction in Busch and Gough, 26.
[58] James P. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 24-35

failed for a variety of reasons, Astor succeeded. Beginning in 1808, he laid out plans for a series of trading outposts along the Missouri River to the Pacific, roughly following the route established by the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Sensing as he did rivalry from Canadian merchants, Astor sought a level of support for his enterprise from President Thomas Jefferson. Instead of official sanction of even a government-supported monopoly, he secured, according to James P. Ronda, "only a vague statement of general support."[59] Yet furthering the incorporation of national territory between St. Louis and the Columbia was part of Astor's vision for the Pacific Fur Company, even if Lewis and Clark's patron gave only a minor blessing. Economic and imperial interests guided Astoria.[60]

By the spring of 1811, construction began on Fort Astoria on the southern bank of the mouth of the Columbia River. Unfortunately for its leading proprietor, the colony was plagued by struggle and division. Astor recruited a large number of experienced British fur trappers through his connections in Montreal, one of whom later recalled that "although engaged with Americans in a commercial speculation, and sailing under the flag of the United States, [the British workers] were sincerely attached to their king and the country of their birth."[61] In addition, supply and transport ships were beset with difficulties, including the well-known native attack on and destruction of the *Tonquin* in 1811 while on a trading mission to Vancouver Island. The outbreak of war with England

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[59] Ronda, 44.

[60] According to Walter A. McDougall, "Astor viewed his enterprise as a business venture, not a patriotic service or geopolitical experiment" (McDougall, 150). Yet this fails to appreciate the close association that Astor made between his investments and national aims in the West, as argued convincingly by Ronda. In a 1997 article, Ronda re-affirmed his view of Astor as an architect of empire: "In the era of John Jacob Astor and Meriwether Lewis there was no such thing as a commercial venture without implications for sovereignty and national expansion." See "The Education of an Empire Builder: John Jacob Astor and the World of the Columbia," *Columbia: The Magazine of Northwest History* 11:3 (Fall 1997): 18.

[61] Quoted in Mackie, 14.

and the overland arrival of a NWC party in late 1812 that brought news of the war sealed Astoria's fate. Convinced by the Northwesters to sell their buildings and beaver pelts before the arrival of the Royal Navy, the Astorians—unaware of Astor's hurried but failed attempts in the east to protect the colony from assault—relinquished control.

Resolution of Anglo-American claims in the Northwest dragged on for a few years following the Treaty of Ghent because it remained unclear if Astoria was sold or was captured territory during the war. Negotiations in London in 1818 offered the temporary answer of joint-occupancy of Oregon Territory. (Fort Astoria itself, renamed Fort George by the British, remained owned and operated by the NWC.) The border between the United States and Canada was drawn at the 49th parallel west of the Great Lakes, a North American demarcation agreed to by diplomats out of long-standing geopolitical assumptions and, according to Clayton, selective use of existing maps.[62] In the end, by being the initial linkage between the continental fur trade and the sea otter and China trades, Astoria allowed the United States to gain its first—albeit partial—frontage on the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, in light of the ten year joint-occupancy provision in the 1818 treaty, a controversial one for many Americans, it helped shape a national and international discourse on westward expansion for years afterward.[63] As Norman A. Graebner notes, the commercial importance of trans-Pacific trading remained a centerpiece for the United States in the decades of debate over Oregon Territory. Sturgis himself may have influenced President John Quincy Adams in renewed Oregon

[62] Clayton, 206-208.
[63] Ronda, 327-335; Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1983), 23-24.

negotiations in 1826 as Adams sought a western naval base more suitable than the Columbia River.[64]

American Sea Otter Traders and the Ukase

For a number of reasons, American maritime traders were a continual source of contention for US-Russian relations in the early nineteenth century. Beyond their "illicit" and destructive (from the Russian perspective) trading of guns and alcohol to Northwest natives, particularly in the area of Sitka, Russian officials became concerned about a growing dependence on Americans. Boston vessels proved to be major providers of food and supplies for Russian-America, as shipments to the colonies from the Western Pacific did not occur frequently enough for the needs of settlers. Also, some American sailors stayed behind at Sitka, including one who became an interpreter for Baranov.[65] Behind cordial and cooperative relationships that formed from these encounters existed deep anxieties for the tsar's ministers, RAC executives, and the local company manager. Thus the first Russian consul to the United States, Andre Dashkov, sought out Astor in the fall of 1809 in an attempt to use American merchants against themselves. Astor, then involved in planning his settlement on the Columbia, agreed that his company would become the sole provider of goods for Alaskan settlements in exchange for furs, cash, or bills of exchange. Astor's ships were to deposit Russian pelts at Canton and, naturally, abstain from the gun trade. Dashkov and the RAC believed that such a monopoly granted

[64] Graebner, 29. Sturgis argued for a military settlement at the Strait of Juan Fuca in a series of articles in early 1822. See Kushner, 39. For Adams's long history of relationships with Boston otter merchants, see Terrence J. Barragy, "American Maritime Otter Diplomacy," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1974, ch. 2. For more on the 1826 negotiations and how they were influenced by the diplomatic debate over Nootka, see Clayton, 211-215.
[65] Kushner, 15.

to a foreign company would discourage other shipping and eliminate Russia's larger American problem.[66]

Despite fears of some regarding territorial rivalry from Astor, the Russian government eventually formalized the agreement in early 1812. According to Kushner, this was a weakening move geopolitically, making Russian-America even more reliant on the United States for supplies and transportation. In addition, it gave "de facto recognition to future American territorial claims in the Pacific Northwest" by recognizing the legitimacy of Astoria.[67] Astor's larger plan for the Pacific soon thereafter crumbled and with it died the trade deal, but Russia still had a Yankee problem in the late 1810s. Between 1816 and 1821, over 90 American ships came to Sitka to trade, although this was roughly a decline from previous years due to provisioning from Fort Ross in California.[68] In addition, spurred on by the 1818 treaty with Great Britain, individuals in the United States Congress—most notably Senator Thomas Hart Benton from Missouri and Representative John Floyd of Virginia—took up the cause of national involvement in Northwest fur trading, with distinct consequences for Russian-America. In December of 1820, a committee chaired by Floyd offered details for a bill to occupy the Columbia River in order to secure the "Asiatic trade." The House never voted on the bill, but the committee report accompanying it contained harsh anti-Russian rhetoric, claiming that the tsar "menaces the Turk, the Persian, the Japanese, and Chinese, [and] even the King

[66] Kushner, 17-19; Ronda, 71-73. Kushner offers the traditional account of Astor seeking out Dashkov after the consul's arrival in the United States, although according to Ronda the opposite is more likely.
[67] Kushner, 22. Furthermore, as Sturgis argued in his 1822 response to the ukase, such arrangements undercut the Russian argument that trading by American vessels was "illicit" (Sturgis, 394).
[68] Kushner, 26; Gibson, 263.

of Spain's dominions in North America"[69] and was thus a threat to American interests in the Pacific. The congressional activity represents the first time United States officials coupled the sea otter and beaver trades with such aggressive international blustering. Northwest furs and empire were linked in a way for which Astor might have hoped a decade earlier.

Benton wrote that with the Floyd committee "public attention was awakened, and the geographical, historical, and statistical facts set forth in the report, made a lodgment in the public mind which promised eventual favorable consideration."[70] If congressional representatives stirred attention in the United States regarding the prospects of a permanent American presence on the coast, they strengthened Russian resolve to protect their North American colonies. The RAC, its original charter soon to expire, had removed Baranov in 1818 and placed Russian-America under naval authority.[71] The renewed company charter in September of 1821 coincided with a dramatic statement of tsarist sovereignty in the Pacific. Alexander I declared that territory from the Bering Strait to 51° northern latitude (the northern tip of Vancouver Island) was exclusively Russian and that foreign vessels were prohibited within "100 Italian miles" (about 92 English miles) from shore. "The transgressor's vessel is subject to confiscation along with the whole cargo," according to the imperial decree.[72] Whether an offensive or

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[69] Quoted in Kushner, 30. Floyd's connection to western expansion causes included his longtime friendship with explorer William Clark. Benton's Missouri connections made him a strong supporter of the overland fur trade and he developed a close relationship with Astor.

[70] Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government For Thirty Years, From 1820 to 1850* Vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1858), 13. For more on the effect of Floyd's proposed bill within American political and diplomatic circles, see Kushner, 30, 41; Ronda, 331-333.

[71] Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 191-192.

[72] McDougall, 166.

defensive strategic maneuver,[73] American otter traders were at the center of motivations for the ukase. Diplomatic correspondences underscored the point. The British ambassador in St. Petersburg assured London that the ukase was aimed at the "commerce interlope" of Americans, who came to Russian-America "for the purpose of interfering in [Russia's] trade with China in the lucrative articles of sea-otter skins."[74]

William Sturgis and American Diplomacy

Then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams sought to calm tensions between the capitols and work on a negotiation. Yet Adams too was a long-time supporter of American commercial interests and expansion in the Pacific. Hence the domestic political climate was conducive to involving the opinions of merchants, either otter traders or whalers (the American whaling industry in the Pacific was just beginning to reach its heyday), in a resolution of the U.S.-Russian controversy.[75] Onto this stage stepped Sturgis. His article in *North American Review* in October of 1822 had a distinct influence on the diplomatic proceedings.[76] In the first part of the article, Sturgis sought to explain the commercial importance for his country of the fur trade, "independent of any territorial rights which it may be thought to involve."[77] After establishing this point, he quoted from the ukase and from a lengthy letter to Adams from the Russian minister to

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[73] For a sampling of scholarship on the question, see David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Involvement: American Economic Expansion across the Pacific, 1784-1900* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 20-21(n. 23).
[74] Quoted in Kushner, 34.
[75] For American whalers in the Pacific, see Gibson and Whitehead, ch. 8; Heffer, ch. 2.
[76] Adams wrote to the American minister in Russia, Henry Middleton, in early 1823 and told him to read Sturgis's article in order to strengthen his diplomatic stance in St. Petersburg. The Russian consul in the United States sent two copies of it to the Russian foreign minister (Kushner, 171-172[n. 37]). In addition, as Kushner notes, the publication *Niles Weekly Register* re-printed portions of the article in November 1822 in criticism of the ukase, and Senator James Lloyd of Massachusetts wrote to President James Monroe in May of 1823, citing Sturgis for the importance of Pacific commerce to the nation (40-41; 54).
[77] Sturgis, 371.

the United States, Pierre de Poletica, before moving into a critique of Russian claims. Sturgis relied on historical information relating to Russian discoveries in order to cast doubt on the southern limits demanded by the tsar and Poletica. Conceding that Russia has a "plausible foundation" to areas encompassing the Aleutian Islands, Cook's River, and Prince William Sound—basically, southern Alaska—he wanted to weaken any title to southeastern Alaska and the rest of the Northwest, in part by noting that Spanish explorers could make stronger arguments for "first discovery."[78] The history of the trade and Sturgis's own experiences were marshaled in an effort to protect American investments in the Northwest. For if Russian claim to Sitka was weak, since it was a colony established in 1799 after English, American and other traders had ventured to that area of the coast, then the tsar had no right to forbid foreign shipping to such places where a lucrative trip could still be made:

> It is well known to the Russian fur company, that nearly all the sea otter skins, and most of the other valuable furs, are procured north of the 51st degree, and if 'foreign adventurers' can be prevented from approaching that part of the coast, the company would soon be left in undisturbed possession of the whole trade, for south of 51° it is not of sufficient value to attract a single vessel in a season. This would not only secure to them a monopoly in the purchase, but give them the control of the Chinese market, for the most valuable furs, which would be still more important.[79]

Sturgis therefore formalized the notion that the economy of the sea otter trade had distinct geopolitical consequences for the Northwest. For those readers not concerned with a Russian attempt at monopoly, he pressed worries regarding territorial advancement farther south along the coast. He warned of the Russian settlement at Ross and of a

[78] Sturgis, 380-383.
[79] Sturgis, 390.

potential takeover of California, which would place a "formidable population" of the tsar's subjects west of American boundaries. Overall, the Sturgis article proved a powerful tool for American politicians and at the very least buttressed an uncompromising stance against the ukase. The expert witness of a Boston shipmaster aided United States commercial and territorial goals in the Eastern Pacific, as Adams and others demanded not only that its ships be free to trade anywhere on the coast, but that Russia restrict its aggressive claims. The concepts of open markets and national expansion found influential allies, and Russia's bluff was called. The final result was a treaty signed in 1824 in which Americans were allowed to trade freely for ten years at any unsettled point along the coast. Russia agreed not to form any new colony south of Sitka. Trading in guns, ammunition and liquor was officially banned, but local authorities were not allowed to enforce the prohibition.[80]

The ukase and its aftermath demonstrated the weakness of Russian colonial authority in Southeast Alaska. Since sea otters could still be traded for along the many islands and straits of the Alexander Archipelago, merchants were not encouraged to recognize any type of exclusive national control there. Individuals such as Sturgis were even prompted to compose a sophisticated empirical case against the claims of St. Petersburg for the areas surrounding Sitka. Moreover, British fur traders encroached on Southeast Alaska by the 1830s, leasing a section of land from the RAC. They also pressured American vessels away from the coast for a period of time (as noted below). Nevertheless, American sea otter traders established a legacy of commercial activity in Russian-American waters that helped secure the position of the United States as a

[80] Kushner, 59-60. See 58-59 for the negative economic effect the ukase had on Russian-America as a factor in Russian capitulation. According to Gibson, the ukase had minimal impact on American vessels in the Pacific (174-175).

potential purchaser of Alaska in the 1860s, once U.S.-Russian relations improved. In the wake of fur trade ships, portions of Alaska beyond the Southeast witnessed a tri-national dynamic at the middle of the nineteenth century, the result of American whalers and British arctic explorers.[81] Therefore the Sturgis position that Russia's Northwest holdings were particularly vulnerable imperial possessions was geographically expanded in the years after it was published.

Britain's Columbia Department

The year following the U.S.-Russian treaty, the Russian government signed a similar accord with Great Britain, guaranteeing the right of British citizens to trade in the Northwest.[82] The agreement coincided with a renewed attempt by Canadian merchants to deny both Americans and the RAC the benefits of the region's fur exchanges. In 1821 the NWC merged with the HBC, creating a new, well-financed company directed from London.[83] Retaining the name Hudson Bay Company, it reorganized its Columbia Department (the name of its Oregon Territory district) under the leadership of George Simpson in order to secure the regional resources from Britain's coastal competitors. As sea otter numbers declined in the Northwest by the 1820s, American outfits turned to other opportunities for profit in the Pacific. The Hawaiian sandalwood trade boomed during the 1810s and 1820s, bringing more Americans to the islands and depleting the valuable trees found there.[84] However, Boston ships still visited the Northwest coast and their crews increasingly traded with natives for beaver pelts. As Gibson writes, "By the

[81] See Black, 261-262.
[82] Black, 198.
[83] Mackie, 30-31.
[84] Gibson, 253-258.

early 1820s American Nor'westermen were taking from 3,000 to 5,000 beaver pelts to Canton from the Northwest Coast annually."[85] As land furs were siphoned away from British posts in western North America, Simpson oversaw a hurried expansion of interior and coastal operations and an intensification of competition for peltry. Forts Vancouver, Langley, Victoria, and Simpson were among the HBC's numerous accomplishments throughout the Eastern Pacific Basin. Outbid and outmaneuvered for more than a decade, Americans largely abandoned coastal trading before 1840.[86]

For HBC officials, one aspect of quelling American frontier activities involved procuring the remaining sea otters of the Northwest coast. Simpson wrote in 1847 that while the species was becoming more numerous in the Aleutian Islands and other Russian possessions, "[t]o the south of the parallel of sixty degrees, they have become pretty extinct."[87] This was partly the result of the collection of hundreds of pelts by the company in the mid-1830s. Otters still existed in sizable numbers at the time along the coast of modern-day Washington State, and the efforts of British outfits appear to have made some impact on the local population prior to United States sovereignty (see Chapter 4 for more).[88] The HBC also subcontracted with English captain John Bancroft in 1837,

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[85] Gibson, 62.

[86] For details on the British fur trade in the Pacific during these years, see Mackie's excellent volume, particularly chapters 3, 5, and 6. For the HBC's lease in the area of Southeast Alaska, which allowed the company to replace American vessels as suppliers for Russian-America, also see Gibson, 78-80. More than a commercial arrangement between Britain and Russia in the Pacific, the Stikine Territory Lease offered the HBC opportunities for purchasing Alaskan lands ahead of the sale of Russian-American to the United States in 1867. See C. Ian Jackson, "The Stikine Territory Lease and Its Relevance to the Alaska Purchase," *The Pacific Historical Review* 36:3 (Aug. 1967): 289-306.

[87] George Simpson, *An Overland Journey Round the World, During the Years 1841 and 1842* (Philadelphia, PA: Lea and Blanchard, 1847), 131.

[88] Mackie, 143. Hence while the HBC attempted to conserve beaver and other furbearers in over-hunted areas of western North America (with limited success), the sea otter was apparently never given such consideration. For the company's Northern Department environmental policies, see Arthur J. Ray, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1850: An Examination of the Problems of Resource Management in the Fur Trade," in Lary M. Dilsaver and Craig E. Colten, Ed., *The American*

who was employed in the sea otter trade by an American firm. Bancroft was one of a handful of captains who began recruiting natives from Kaigani in Southeast Alaska to hunt in the Northwest as well as in California. He apparently repaid what he owed the company in pelts and had some success for his American employers as well until 1839, when Indian hunters onboard his vessel the *Lama* mutinied while off California, killing Bancroft and seriously wounding his wife (who later died after the ship was forced to return the hunters to their northern home).[89] Ultimately, although meeting with limited success south of the Columbia, the British did what was necessary to control the otter and other fur resources of the Pacific coast, including working with experienced Pacific seamen who had connections to rivals.

A major outcome of all these endeavors by Canadian merchants was the limitation of American claims in Oregon south of the 49th parallel. Yet overland American migrants and the renewed border dispute they inspired in the 1840s completed work begun by their nation's sea otter traders in the "Long War" for the Eastern Pacific. In the end, men from Boston and other east coast ports were never directly responsible for exclusive national acquisition of land. Missionaries and settlers separated the last trading vessels from the final resolution of the Oregon Territory. However, costal fur traders established and sustained interest in the region long enough for other frontier processes to operate. They also helped instill a trans-oceanic outlook during the final years of debate over Oregon. When an Ohio congressman commented that "we want Oregon to protect our fisheries and our trade with China, and to put a stop to the unscrupulous sins of Great

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Environment: Interpretations of Past Geographies (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 33-50.

[89] Mackie, 144-145; Ogden, 128-130.

Britain," he was expressing sentiments influenced by decades of sea otter trade activity as well as a heightened sense of territorial competition.[90]

Americans and Sea Otter Decline in Mexican California

Just as American merchants and outfits were principally responsible for sea otter decline in the early nineteenth-century Northwest, they had the greatest impact on the animals as the remaining trade increasingly moved south. After Mexico officially opened California to foreign commerce in 1822, a number of factors worked to diminish the province's sea otter herds.[91] Russian crews were offered limited contracts to hunt south of Fort Ross, but these were ended by 1830 as Mexican authorities sought to tighten national control over coastal trading. Those who wished to settle in California and become naturalized citizens had more frequent opportunities to collect otter pelts. Chief among such individuals was the English-born Boston trader John Rogers Cooper, who sold his vessel to acting governor Luis Antonio Arguello in 1823 and became a leading merchant in Monterey. Cooper (along with other naturalized businessmen such as Nathan Spear) acted as an exporter of otter furs and cattle hides for American commercial agents based in Hawaii.[92] Others hunted on the coast under licenses granted to California citizens, such as former beaver trappers George Yount and George Nidever, and African-

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[90] *Congressional Globe* 28th Congress, 2nd Session: 226. For similar statements, see Graebner, 37-38.

[91] For evidence suggesting that a lack of intensive hunting operations in California for a number of years surrounding Mexican independence produced an abundance of the species, see Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade*, 141-142.

[92] Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade*, 91-93. According to Ogden, Cooper also utilized bands of Kodiak natives (by hiring them from California's Russian settlements) to hunt along the coast on occasion, although it is not clear if he actually hunted himself (116). For the only biographical treatment of Cooper, see John Woolfenden and Amelie Elkinton, *Cooper: Juan Bautista Rogers Cooper, Sea Captain, Adventurer, Ranchero, and Early California Pioneer, 1791-1872* (Pacific Grove, CA: The Boxwood Press, 1983). For more on Americans in Mexican California and the economic, social, and political impacts they had on the province prior to the Mexican-American War, see Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., "Alta California's Trojan Horse: Foreign Immigration," in Ramon A. Gutierrez and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 299-330.

American Allen Light, a deserter from a trade ship in 1835 and nicknamed "Black Steward" by his hunting partners. Using rifles to kill sea otters from boats and Hawaiian natives—"Kanakas"—to swim after and collect carcasses, Nidever and Light embarked on various hunting trips together to the Channel Islands and along the coast between 1835 and 1836. According to Adele Ogden, "From fifty to sixty skins were the usual returns for a trip of three or more months."[93]

Job Dye came to California from Kentucky in 1832 and immediately set out on sea otter hunts, including one from Santa Barbara under the license of Don Roberto Pardo. Years later he described collecting 18 skins as a "successful hunt" but noted that Pardo sued him over expenses incurred, even though they had reportedly agreed to "each bearing half of the expense." Dye was forced to pay the expenses, which ate all his profit.[94] His contract the same year to hunt for the padre of the San Luis Obispo mission proved more lucrative. The padre provided all equipment and three Native Californians to assist in the venture. Dye collected otter skins totaling about 2,000 dollars.[95]

Despite continual efforts by Mexican officials to manage hunting and preserve the sea otter population of California, such as by banning the killing of pups, otter numbers in California were dramatically reduced during the 1830s. This was aided by the presence of several American vessels whose captains, including Bancroft noted above, carried Northwest Indians and hunted illegally in Mexican waters. The environmental impact of naturalized and foreign (as well as some Mexican) activity in California is

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[93] Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade*, 113.
[94] Job Francis Dye, "Recollections of California," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, pages 1-2. For the life of Dye, I also use Dye, "Early history and reminiscences of Job Francis Dye," Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA. In this document, Pardo is spelled "Pecao" and Dye recalled collecting "about twenty-four otter skins" during his brief partnership with him (page 10).
[95] Dye, "Recollections," pages 2-3; Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade*, 111.

demonstrated in Ogden's collection of shipping data available at the Bancroft Library.[96] While totals for sea otter skin shipments—most of them on American ships—must be read with some caution, for Ogden herself notes that some stopped in California carrying cargoes of pelts obtained farther north, a marked decline is shown. For example, the Hawaii-based American vessel the *Waverly* took 138 otter skins from the coast during an 1826-27 trading visit; hunters onboard the Russian brig *Baikal* killed 468 of the animals in 1825.[97] Most totals that are available for the late 1830s and early 1840s are more meager. The *Diamond* (British) gathered 44 skins in 1843, and the *Barnstable* (American) 80 between 1842-1844.[98] The numbers reflect the fact that sea otters could still be found, particularly in the Channel Islands and on the Lower (Baja) Coast, but they became an increasingly rare commodity during the last years of Mexican California.

Notwithstanding the varied and shifting citizenship status of those involved in the trade, it was Americans that significantly depleted the California sea otter by the time of the Mexican-American War. (A status approaching the near-extinction of the species in California was not reached until the turn of the twentieth century.) By contrast, the animals were safer in Russian holdings in the Pacific where American traders were less active. Discussed in Chapter 1, the RAC instituted conservation measures for their declining sea otter and fur seal populations generally around the same time Mexico did. Russian efforts produced a stabilization of marine mammal numbers in locations such as the Aleutians, and in the Kuril Islands in the Western Pacific. As already seen, the

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[96] Ogden, "California Trading Vessels, 1786-1847," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. This expansive compilation of shipping information and research notes was donated to the library in 1979. For tables representing selections of Ogden's data on trade in sea mammal skins, see Glenn Farris, "Otter Hunting by Alaskan Natives Along the California Coast in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Mains'l Haul: A Journal of Pacific Maritime History* 43:3&4 (Summer/Fall 2007): 26-28. (I thank Neva Sullaway of the Maritime Museum of San Diego for providing me a copy of this excellent journal issue.)

[97] Ogden, "California Trading Vessels," 455, 387 respectively.

[98] Ogden, "California Trading Vessels," 1067, 1000 respectively.

HBC's Simpson acknowledged the effect of these policies in the 1840s. Nevertheless, the relative success of Russian environmental management did not survive the nineteenth century. To adapt Furstenberg's term, the American entrepreneurs' "Long War" against the sea otter was not over after the United States officially advanced to the Pacific by 1850. Particular developments placed the remaining members of *Enhydra lutris* at the mercy of U.S. commercial forces throughout the Pacific Basin before Progressive Era conservation came to their rescue. This largely single-nation history is explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: The Dark Age and Reemergence of the Pacific Sea Otter, 1850-1938

Currently no comprehensive history of sea otter hunting after 1850 exists. This gap in the literature of the Pacific sea otter trade is partly explained by the fact that the economic and political significance of the trade waned prior to the Mexican-American War and the California Gold Rush in the American West. Historians have therefore been largely silent on the trade's enduring legacy.[1] Nevertheless, while markets for sea otter fur shifted to places other than China by the mid-nineteenth century, it continued as a valuable and increasingly rare commodity into the early twentieth century. Remaining populations of otters were vigorously pursued in the Eastern and Western Pacific by American, Native American, British and other hunters. One result was that the species was brought closer to total extinction by the turn of the twentieth century than at any time during the main era of the trade. Countries that competed for diminishing numbers of marine mammals united to pass a treaty in 1911 protecting both the fur seal and the sea otter. The U.S. government and states in the West implemented additional statutes that effectively ended the hunting of sea otters in the Eastern Pacific. Overall these are under-appreciated but substantive developments in environmental history that require at least a general overview.

As explained earlier, I refer to this era as the "Dark Age" of the sea otter not simply because little has heretofore been written about it but because many of the current problems with conservation of sea otters can be traced to this period of intensive exploitation of a previously-exploited natural resource. I focus somewhat on California

[1] The work that best discusses this period of the sea otter trade in epilogue is John Scofield, *Hail,* Columbia*: Robert Gray, John Kendrick and the Pacific Fur Trade* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993).

because the "rediscovery" of the species in the Monterey Bay area in 1938 is often identified as a symbol of its resilience, marking an end of the period. The rediscovery should be considered in the context of sea otter status throughout the Pacific Basin in the early twentieth century. Biologists and others recognized that otters remained in a number of places within their historic range, including California, yet such information was not widely disseminated. This allowed individuals to exaggerate the existence of the Monterey population. Despite the myth of rediscovery (and the guarded sense in which I employ "reemergence" for this chapter) the 1938 report spurred new conservation efforts and inaugurated the sea otter's role as a local cultural symbol. A California-centered analysis also facilitates a sharper contrast of sea otters there with populations elsewhere in the Pacific for the entirety of the 1850 to 1938 span. Some factors that contributed to the survival and the relatively slow recovery of the California otter are identified below.

Prior to 1850, a technological shift in the trade was a major reason for the destruction of the animals in the Eastern and Western Pacific later in the century. Adele Ogden cites 1836 as the first recorded use of rifles by hunters in California.[2] Thereafter the weapons were responsible for much of the sea otter depletion of the Dark Age. Shooting from both land and sea, while often a challenge to the marksmanship of hunters, not only threatened herds with extinction but likely accelerated their decline. The spread of American firearm technology into the North American West during the nineteenth century meant that specialized and labor-intensive native methods were no longer as important to extensive hunting enterprises. Anyone with a rifle could take in sea otters. As seen below, this stark reality allowed for a flurry of activity in the Kuril Islands

[2] Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 143. Some Russian hunters and many Northwest Indians used guns for killing sea otters before this date, but their expanded use in the Pacific as hunting tools can be traced to it.

beginning in the 1870s that sharply reduced sea otter numbers there in just 20 years. When Aleuts were equipped with rifles in the 1880s, annual catches from Alaska increased noticeably, a connection likely more than coincidental. Sea otters had as much to fear in this era from the loud cracks of gun barrels as from swift-moving canoes.

Technological changes and diffusion are just some of Pacific connections that prove crucial to understanding the final years of hunting and the beginning of twentieth century conservation efforts. Human predation extirpated the sea otter from particular localities, yet these depressing occurrences were not isolated. They were linked by many of the same economic, environmental, and geopolitical components of the Pacific World. When merchants in California—officially within the United States by 1850—could no longer make a profit from collecting pelts on the coast or from whaling, they extended to tap populations in the Kuril Islands. This attention elsewhere provided some breathing space for the California sea otter, helping ensure its existence into the twentieth century. It was disastrous for marine mammals in the Western Pacific. These and other dynamics illustrate that the sea otter continued to play a direct role in the forming of intimate trans-oceanic relationships even after its historic place in helping to generate such a global context had diminished. *Enhydra* found itself in an evolving Pacific World with the United States increasingly at its political and commercial center. Such a position confronted its members with formidable challenges and later offered distinct opportunities for preservation. The complex interplay between American economic and environmental interests in marine mammals produced both tragedy and triumph for sea otters at this time.

Changes in the China Trade

After the mid-nineteenth century, most sea otter pelts were exported to the United States and Europe. This shift away from Far Eastern markets was part of a larger change in the global economy centered on opium. The British East India Company profited handsomely from a rise of imports of the drug into China during the early 1800s. English and American traders (the latter largely dealing in Turkish opium) were increasingly able to purchase teas, silks, and other desired goods with opium cargoes as Chinese demand for opium increased. Despite Manchu decrees attempting to ban the trade, it flourished. According to Arrell Morgan Gibson, "Yankee ship captains in 1805 delivered 102 chests of opium to Canton; by the close of the 1820s, this had increased to nearly 1500 chests a year, valued at over $2 million, representing one-tenth of American imports to China."[3]

Strengthening Chinese protest of the damaging economic and social effects of the trade and British counter-response eventually led to the "Opium War" beginning in 1840. In August of 1842, the Treaty of Nanking officially ended the war, offered an additional four ports to foreign commerce, and ceded Hong Kong to Great Britain. A Sino-American treaty two years later extended trading rights at the five ports to the United States.[4] The "opening" of China to expanded trade and the continuation of illegal opium markets meant that trans-oceanic excursions involving soft gold as a substitute for specie were largely irrelevant, something which likely would have occurred had Pacific sea mammal populations not been significantly reduced. Not all American merchants exchanged opium for Chinese goods, but by the mid-nineteenth century increasing

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[3] Arrell Morgan Gibson and John S. Whitehead, *Yankees in Paradise: The Pacific Basin Frontier* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 181.

[4] Gibson and Whitehead, 182-183. For a general narrative of the Opium War from a Pacific perspective, see Walter A. McDougall, *Let The Sea Make A Noise…:A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 202-210.

numbers of them sought out China as a buyer of American industrial products. Textiles and other northern manufactured goods permeated the Chinese interior. By the 1850s, the United States exported roughly $10 million worth of products to China and imported $30 million.[5] Both opium and textiles assured the commercial marginality of older coastal trading patterns in the Eastern Pacific and facilitated China's economic imbalance toward the West.

Encouraged by these events and economic currents, sea otter pelts bypassed the Far East as Canton proved an increasingly unproductive market. During the waning years of the California trade (1830s-1840s), cargoes of furs were sent on hide and tallow ships to Mexico in addition to the United States. For example, owners of the *Nymph* made $159 in 1841 from furs sent to Mexico; the *Admittance* purchased 55 in San Diego in 1846 and sold them within one month after arriving in Boston.[6] Prior to the sale of Alaska by Russia to the United States in 1867, rising numbers of Russian-American Company furs were shipped to Europe instead of Kyakhta.[7] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most sea otter pelts bound for the Atlantic as part of American enterprises ultimately ended up in the London fur market. Newspaper accounts of sales in the 1890s reported that sea otter pelts were highly valued in London, going for as much as £260. The *New York Times* wrote that such high prices were paid "[a]lmost entirely [by] Russian noblemen, who especially prize the sea otter fur for the collars of

[5] Gibson and Whitehead, 183-184.
[6] Ogden, 148-150.
[7] Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 282. An increasing percentage of Russian textile exports to Kyakhta and the opening of the port of Shanghai led to the commercial irrelevance of the Kyakhta fur trade by 1850. See James R. Gibson, "Sitka-Kyakhta versus Sitka-Canton: Russian America and the China Market," *Pacifica* 2 (November 1990): 78-79.

their overcoats."[8] Hence, while Russia lost access to much of their Pacific territory (discussed below), the United States supplied the natural resources of that territory for the fashions of its former colonizer. Prior decades of China trading that carried furs *west* across the Pacific and away from North America helps explain why Americans never developed a significant fondness for sea otter pelts, despite their oft-touted beauty and quality. Boston merchants themselves, as John Scofield writes, "thousands of miles away in their comfortable countinghouses, probably never saw so much as the skin of one" sea otter.[9]

Hunting in Washington and Oregon

One of the earliest works that provides information on American sea otter hunting after 1850 is Charles Scammon's *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America*, published in 1874.[10] A sea captain who came to California during the Gold Rush and worked in the whaling industry, Scammon enlisted in the United States Revenue Marine Service (today the Coast Guard) during the Civil War and assisted the government studies of Russian America and Siberia just before the Alaskan Purchase. *Marine Mammals* represents the culmination of his work as an amateur naturalist. Scammon reported that American hunters out of California were pursuing otters in the Kurils at that time, and that between Gray's Harbor and Point Grenville in Washington Territory were "the most noted grounds" north of San Francisco. Hunting in California,

[8] "The Costly Sea Otter," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1894, page 10; "Furs Are Dearer," *The London Daily Mail*, May 28, 1899, page 6.
[9] Scofield, 348.
[10] Charles M. Scammon, *The Marine Mammals of the North-western Coast of North America* (Riverside, CA: Manessier Publishing Co., 1969).

as he wrote, "is no longer profitable for more than two or three hunters, and we believe of late some seasons have passed without any one legitimately engaging in the enterprise".[11]

Both Native Americans and whites took sea otters on the Washington coast. Local Indians used traditional spears and canoes as well as rifles during their hunts. Sea otter furs fetched hundreds of dollars a piece for them by the turn of the century.[12] Others established wooden derricks, or shooting stands, from which they shot at otters. A runner on the beach recovered the carcasses, which sometimes had to be done before a waiting Native took off with the kill. As Victor Scheffer describes one such location and the men who frequented it:

> In the 1870s, two men built a shooting stand on Copalis Rock; Six years later Charlie McIntyre bolted the stand to the rock with iron bars. The remains could still be seen through binoculars in 1938 [Scheffer worked for the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey at the time]. Samson John, with whom I spoke at Taholah, often took Charlie out to the rock by canoe and left him there for days at a time, where his only contact with the shore was by signal flag. Charlie later rigged a cable and pulley arrangement on which he could move a basket between the rock and the shore. He and his partner, Steve Grover, claimed to have killed 47 otters in one year. Charlie quit in 1903 when hunting ceased to be worthwhile.[13]

The combined methods of Native and American hunters proved all too effective, as sea otters were exterminated in Washington State and Oregon by the early twentieth century. Since in historic times the species was not as abundant between the Strait of Juan de Fuca and California as it was elsewhere, approximately fifty years of steady predation was

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[11] Scammon, 174.
[12] Victor B. Scheffer, "The Last of the Sea Otter Hunters," *Columbia* 14 (Winter 1999-2000), 15. The going price that hunters received for skins at the time Scammon wrote was fifty dollars (Scammon, 174).
[13] Scheffer, 15-16.

enough to eliminate these herds. Additionally, the otters were concentrated in limited stretches of coastline, which likely facilitated the building of deadly derricks.[14] The last specimen taken in Oregon was reportedly in 1906 and the killing of several sea otters in 1910 marks the total depletion of the creatures in Washington.[15] Generally, pelts from these areas—as with Alaskan sea otters taken during the same period—were sold in San Francisco and later found their way to the London market, although "rich Chinese" buyers in California appear to have acquired them as well.

According to wildlife biologist Karl W. Kenyon, hunters in the early twentieth century also extirpated sea otters from the coasts of British Columbia and Baja California. In reference to a 1929 kill at Grassie Island, he concludes, "The sea otter apparently became extinct on the British Columbia coast during the 1920s."[16] The last sea otter in Mexico was reportedly taken in 1919 and Kenyon's visits there prior to the time he wrote produced no data on the animals. (Otter hunting in these areas in discussed below.) Hence, paralleling growing concern for sea otter conservation, developments in

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[14] See Ogden, 6-7, 186(n) and Victor Scheffer, "The Sea Otter on the Washington Coast," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 3 (1940): 372-373. As Ogden notes, trade ships prior to 1850 often bypassed this span of coast, including portions of northern California, although some sea otters were obtained there. Indeed, the local herd emerged as a sizable one by the mid-nineteenth century in part because of the earlier attention given to the more dense populations of otters in other areas of the Eastern Pacific. Its existence can also be attributed to the timing of the Hudson Bay Company's attempt to exploit the sea otter trade in the late 1830s, although British traders were apparently responsible for the extinction of the animals in the area of Cape Flattery on the Washington littoral prior to United States sovereignty. See Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 142-145.

[15] Karl W. Kenyon, *The Sea Otter in the Eastern Pacific Ocean* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 184-185; David R. Hatch, "Elakha: Sea Otters, Native People, and the European Colonization of the North Pacific," in Donald B. Ivy and R. Scott Byram, eds., *Changing Landscapes: "Sustaining Traditions," Proceedings of the 5th and 6th Annual Coquille Cultural Preservation Conferences* (North Bend, OR: The Coquille Indian Tribe, 2002), 82-84. (Kenyon's book is a "unabridged and corrected" reprint of his 1969 Fish and Wildlife Service report). The 1906 date in Kenyon is obscure, coming fourth-hand from sources identifying Newport, Oregon as the site of the kill. Therefore, as Kenyon intimates, the last remaining sea otters in Oregon may have been taken as early as the 1870s. Hatch provides additional information on sea otter hunters in Oregon in the late-nineteenth century.

[16] Kenyon, 183. See below for more on sea otter hunting in Southeast Alaska and British Columbia prior to this date.

the first decades of the 1900s represented the biological nadir of the species in the Eastern Pacific.

The Alaskan Purchase and the Alaska Commercial Company

A variety of historical factors threatened sea otter populations and drove up prices for pelts in the late 1800s. Activities that produced the near-extinction of sea otters in Alaska after 1867 have indirect but important links with the Civil War on the other side of the continent. According to Walter A. McDougall, one factor that worked to deny European support for the Confederacy—ensuring the South's eventual defeat—was the Union's friendship with Russia. The tsarist government viewed the United States as an effective counterweight against the British Empire. While relations between the two nations were unstable prior to the war, they evolved and facilitated northern industrial development in the Pacific. In 1863, Congress appropriated funding for a telegraph line across the Bering Strait and Russia provided a right-of-way through Siberia. By 1867, rugged elements on either extremity of the Strait and completion of the transatlantic telegraph effectively ended the ambitious plan.[17] Yet the end of the Civil War motivated Russian politicians to deal away their remaining North American colony to the expanding Americans. Conceptions of Russian America as an unprofitable fur outpost, as well as the Crimean War, meant that the tsar and a number of royal officials were more concerned with the Amur River and solidifying holdings in the Western Pacific. The

[17] McDougall, 303-306.

image of Alaskan settlements as crumbling and economically inefficient in the mid-nineteenth century was perhaps more myth than reality, but it had influential supporters.[18]

Minister in Washington D.C. Eduard de Stoeckl, after years of Russian consideration, signaled that should Americans wish to purchase Alaska, the offer would be entertained. Secretary of State William Seward initially offered $5 million but later increased the amount to $7.2 million. With the approval of Andrew Johnson's cabinet and a transatlantic cable communicating Tsar Alexander II's approval, Stoeckl and Seward moved quickly, signing a treaty at 4:00 a.m. on March 18, 1867 (March 30 on the Gregorian calendar). Their attempt to hurry the bill past political opposition did not entirely succeed, as Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives held up the purchase funding and criticized "Seward's Icebox" as a maneuver meant to deflect attacks on President Johnson, who the House impeached the following year. By July 1868 the Alaska bill finally passed, perhaps assisted by bribe money from the Russian ministry.[19]

Meanwhile, the official transfer of sovereignty took place. On October 18, 1867, with United States and Russian troops gathered in front of Baranoff's Castle in Sitka, the Russian flag was lowered and the American flag was raised. Land speculation and an often unruly military presence in the years that followed meant that many former Alaskan

[18] Black, 273-275. The Crimean War (1853-56), involving Russia and an alliance of England and France, was an ideological and political struggle over influence in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. During the conflict, Anglo-French naval squadrons assaulted and briefly captured Petropavlovsk, and these occurrences convinced some officials of Russian inability to defend their far-flung Pacific empire. For a recent review of Russian historiography of motivations for the sale of Alaska, see Andrei V. Grinev, Trans. Richard L. Bland, "Why Russia Sold Alaska: The View From Russia," *Alaska History* 19 (2004): 1-22. Grinev emphasizes the economic instability of the Russian-American Company and, more generally, the imperial, anti-capitalist state apparatus that supported its existence.

[19] McDougall, 306-307.

subjects of the tsar were dispossessed or robbed. Most others returned to Russia and natives became wards of the state.[20]

In a sense, one government-supported monopoly replaced another, as the Alaska Commercial Company took over major fur industry operations in the territory and for a number of years assumed the responsibilities of a de facto civil government. Alaska Commercial formed in 1868 as the merger of a number of competitors who purchased trading stations and other properties and secured hunting rights from the Russian-American Company. It was a mixed-race group of shareholders that included San Francisco businessmen and a former employee of the Russian-American Company.[21] In 1870, the ACC was awarded a 20-year lease by the U.S. Treasury Department for lucrative fur sealing operations on the Pribilof Islands, some 300 miles in the Bering Sea off the western coast of Alaska. As part of the agreement, Aleuts there "were guaranteed an annual ration of salted fish, their preferred staple, as well as housing, fuel, education, and health care." The Pribilof lease garnered huge dividends for investors during its run and brought at least $10,000,000 in rental and pelt fees to the Treasury.[22] Far from being an overplayed fur territory, Alaska remained a major provider of animal commodities through a combination of private initiative and a measure of involvement by Washington D.C.

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[20] Black, 285-287; Molly Lee, "Context and Contact: The History and Activities of the Alaska Commercial Company, 1867-1900," in Nelson H.H. Graburn, Molly Lee, Jean-Loup Rousselot, eds., Catalogue Raisonne *of the Alaska Commercial Company Collection, Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 22.
[21] Lee, 23-27.
[22] Lee, 28.

The history of the ACC is somewhat sketchy because valuable records were destroyed when the company headquarters suffered in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Nevertheless, Molly Lee has helped reconstruct Alaska Commercial's basic activities from available evidence. In addition to the Pribilof enterprise, she notes that the company operated a number fur trading stations, although it had none in southeastern Alaska and the Arctic coast. Native hunters were employed and offered items such as tea, coffee, clothing, and cookware to purchase. Western-style housing and education were also provided, often with beneficial results for Alaskan people.[23] The company's largest trading and supply posts were at Unalaska and Kodiak. It was at Kodiak and in the Aleutians that "the Company concentrated on the sea otter trade." The years of conservation practices in Russian-America, described in Chapter 1, allowed sea otter populations to gradually rebound by 1867. Alaska Commercial willingly tapped these supplies for existing markets.

What archival documents might illuminate—and what missing ones might have been able to—is the extent to which the company attempted to exploit sea otters for profit. Lee writes that the increase of the Alaskan population "proved too gradual to allow the Company to focus solely on the sea otter harvest."[24] Moreover, the granting of the Pribilof lease had its genesis partly in national worry about fur sealing competition in the late 1860s and its potentially destructive outcome. Limiting access to one group of investors was seen as an economically sound policy, and, in fact, it was *non-company* pelagic sealing, described later, that reduced fur seal populations in the North Pacific to the point of an international conservation crisis. To what extent was the Company

[23] Lee, 30-35.
[24] Lee, 33.

invested with and/or exercise any similar concerns over sea otters?[25] While it is currently difficult to know much about particular sea otter ventures in late-nineteenth century Alaska, natural history author Harold McCracken's indictment, dramatic though it is, of both the ACC "and other independent interests" is a sound enough assessment:

> The Yankee fur men quickly adopted their own peculiar methods to this pursuit [of Alaskan sea otters]—methods that have established the American as the greatest of all exterminators of animal life and natural resources. They employed large vessels on the decks of which baidarkas and Aleuts were carried from place to place along the coast. They provided the hunters with the latest models of rifles and organized the whole business to scrape systematically the bottom of the barrel. Some of these undertakings were quite successful, both from a financial standpoint and in exterminating the species in many areas.[26]

Although Alaska Commercial's presence was perhaps most responsible for facilitating Aleut sea otter predation,[27] all non-native hunting outfits played a part in reducing the Alaska population by 1900. Traditional killing methods were supplemented by firearms by the 1880s, and the combination of company-supported hunts and outside competition

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[25] The answer to this question lies partly in the record of Congressional attempts to restrict the hunting of fur-bearing animals in Alaska. An act approved on July 27, 1868 declared it "unlawful for any person or persons to kill any otter, mink, marten, sable, or fur seal, or other fur-bearing animal, within the limits of said territory, or in the waters thereof". Yet the July 1, 1870 law that set terms for and allowed the Treasury Department to grant the Pribilof lease focused exclusively on fur seals and did not explicitly include other species, despite having the general label of "An Act to prevent the Extermination of Fur-bearing Animals in Alaska" (*Appendix to the Congressional Globe* 40th Congress, 2nd Session: 568 and 41st Congress, 2nd Session: 675). The texts imply that sea otters were of less national concern at the time Alaska Commercial's management of the territory began.

[26] Harold McCracken, *Hunters of the Stormy Sea* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), 287.

[27] A chart produced for a Treasury report in 1897 lists sea otter takes by the Alaska Commercial Company in the Aleutian Islands between 1873 and 1896. A comparison with other estimates for roughly the same period suggests that the company rewarded natives for a significant number, if not the majority, of sea otter skins procured each year. See C.L. Hooper, *A Report on the Sea-Otter Banks of Alaska* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897), 16. However, since virtually no historical work that I know of has been done on independent otter hunting vessels, including a rough calculation of how many there were, it is difficult to know if Alaska Commercial's competitors were overall denied a majority of the trade, as C.L. Hooper believed.

was too much for recovering sea otter herds to bear.[28] According to one estimate, hunting in Alaska produced around 3,000 pelts a year in the late 1860s, 5,000 a year in the 1880s and, consequently, only 600 a year by the end of the century. By 1910 the per annum catch was just 34 and the value of a sea otter pelt had risen to approximately $1700.[29] One of the few vocal advocates for sea otters in the late-nineteenth century, nature artist and self-made naturalist Henry Wood Elliott, believed that the dedication of various business interests and *not* a natural increase in otters was responsible for the largest takes. He was, it seems, unaware of Russian-era conservation which was likely also a factor, if less so.[30]

Extensive schooner hunting of sea otters in the Aleutians by Americans was partly in response to the United States effectively lifting restrictions that had limited hunting in Alaska to natives or whites married to native women. The move encouraged competition and may have prompted Alaska Commercial "against their will" to expand their own operation.[31] Like their Russian predecessors, American entrepreneurs relied heavily on Aleut skill to extract furs from local environments and managed trading stations to exchange for goods desired by hunters. However, other than a general description of what independent ships engaged in the trade did, there is not a lot of information about

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[28] For a witness to Aleut sea otter hunters and their various methods in the late-nineteenth century, see Henry W. Elliott, *Our Arctic Province: Alaska and the Seal Islands* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), 127-144. Elliott discussed "surf-shooting" of otters in the islands, describing it as "heterodoxy…[that] has only been in vogue for a short time" (141). Yet he also realized the long-term affect it would have in the sea otter's "virtual extermination" (130). Hooper surmised that guns in Alaska, "while not more destructive than the spear," were perhaps more wasteful weapons that produced injured animals which eluded capture and later died (Hooper, 8).

[29] Paul Chanin, *The Natural History of Otters* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 141.

[30] Elliott, "The Sea-Otter Fishery," in George Brown Goode, ed., *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* Section V, Volume II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 486.

[31] David Starr Jordan, "Colonial Lessons of Alaska," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1898, 581. The impact of stationary white hunters on sea otters in Alaska after 1867 should be explored in the future. For a rare document containing Aleut complaints against such individuals, see Lydia T. Black, "The Nature of Evil: Of Whales and Sea Otters," in Shepard Krech III, ed., *Indians, Animals, and the Fur Trade: A Critique of* Keepers of the Game (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 138-139.

them. One reason for this is that otter hunting vessels, apparently like their cousin sealers, came and went without leaving much in the way of written records behind.[32] Also, while few seal ships took sea otters, according to Briton Busch, "otter hunters could and did take seals." Such extra-legal affairs may have placed many in conflict with officials attempting to enforce the government lease in the Bering Sea, further explaining the paucity of written material about their activities.[33] Future research on Alaskan sea otter hunting in this era may uncover more data about their movements and practices.

As various hunts depleted the Aleutian population, inhabitants of the islands were left without a vital source of income. C.L. Hooper noted in an 1897 Treasury Department report that a number of Alaska Commercial's stores on the islands were shut down due to declining catches. Natives in the western Aleutians were being transported by schooner to more productive hunting grounds to the east, such as around Kodiak Island. Hooper warned that the sea otter needed protection not only for its own sake, but "for the benefit of the natives who have been dependent upon it for more than a century, and who will be reduced to suffering and want without it."[34]

Other Pacific tribes continued their ancient pursuit of otters along the coasts of southeastern Alaska and British Columbia after 1850. As Russian-American Company historian P.A. Tikhmenev wrote in the early 1860s, "At present only the natives of Yakutat and L'tua [Lituya] Bays hunt sea otters, because there are more otters there than

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[32] See Briton Cooper Busch, *The War Against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery* (Kingston, Ont.: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 136-138, for the "skimpy" records of pelagic sealers.
[33] See Busch, 135-136. For sealers that took otters, see Peter Murray, *The Vagabond Fleet: A Chronicle of the North Pacific Sealing Schooner Trade* (Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1988), 209.
[34] Cooper, 12.

in other places along the northwest coast of America."[35] United States Navy Lieutenant George Thornton Emmons, who conducted ethnographic work in the area at the turn of the twentieth century, noted "four newly killed sea otter" at Cross Sound in 1889 and that Hoonah people in 1892 at Lituya Bay took some 60 specimens.[36] Evidence of hunting along these coastlines appears less frequently than it does elsewhere, in part reflecting the earlier toll taken on sea otters in the Northwest. Apparently similar to California, as discussed below, low-level hunting gradually reduced the remaining population into the early twentieth century. Unlike in California, sea otters in Southeast Alaska and British Columbia were met with Native American groups who traditionally pursued them, and, combined with pressures exerted by Euro-Americans in the Northwest, the species was eliminated locally during the first few decades of the 1900s.

Hunting in the Kuril Islands

As part of the new quest for sea otters in the 1800s, widespread hunting took place in the Kuril Islands. When whaling declined in the 1860s, a few British and American mariners plied the islands seeking sea otters as economic substitutes. This activity increased after 1872, when one Captain Kimberly out of Santa Barbara arrived at Hakodate in southern Hokkaido with approximately 300 pelts from Iturup.[37] Merchants soon thereafter swarmed the Kurils. These mostly-Western commercial outfits benefited

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[35] P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company* Trans. and Ed. Richard A. Pierce and Alton Donnelly (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 431.
[36] George Thornton Emmons, *The Tlingit Indians*, Ed. with additions by Frederica de Laguna (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 123.
[37] John Stephan, *The Kuril Islands: Russo-Japanese Frontier in the Pacific* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 99.

from the political instability caused by Russo-Japanese tensions leading up to the Treaty of St. Petersburg in 1875 and prior Japanese concessions of extraterritoriality.[38]

H.J. Snow, an Englishman working at a firm in Yokohama and who heard of Kimberly's fur take, decided to take up hunting in the Kurils. He became the most well-known sea otter hunter of the islands, writing two books about his exploits before his death in 1915. Snow and his crews launched small hunting boats from larger ships and pursued otters utilizing a triangulation method similar to both Aleuts and pre-Gold Rush white hunters in California. Most men who served with him were Japanese, although at one time he employed a number of Chinese sailors. Kuril hunts were time consuming and often very dangerous, as challenging sailing conditions and misplaced rifle shots accounted for a number of injuries and deaths.[39] Despite their illegality, neither Japanese nor Russian officials—the latter concerned with sea otter and fur seal poaching in the Commander Islands—were able to completely stop them, although Snow himself was arrested once by each party. Additionally, some Japanese and Russian schooners also hunted sea otters at this time. As a result, otters were depleted throughout the Kurils by the 1890s. Snow wrote that, "The old schooner *Diana* was the last to quit the business. She kept at it until 1893, when she also gave it up as being no longer a paying venture."[40]

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[38] Ian R. Stone, "Hunting Marine Mammals for Profit and Sport: H.J. Snow in the Kuril Islands and the North Pacific, 1873-1896," *Polar Record* 41:216 (2005): 47.
[39] Stone, 49-50; Stephan, 99-103.
[40] H.J. Snow, *In Forbidden Seas: Recollections of Sea-Otter Hunting in the Kurils* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), 296. Snow recorded that Ainu did some hunting of sea otter during this era, but native fur catches paled in comparison to those of the non-native enterprises in the islands. Snow complained that Japanese parties only became interested in procuring the animals after foreigners were involved, writing that "they then set about it in such a clumsy and unpractical way that but comparatively poor results were obtained" (293).

Kuril sea otters amounted to as much as 1/5th of the American market by the early 1880s. An October 15th, 1881 article in the publication *Pacific States Watchman* noted:

> The number of sea otter skins taken annually is not definitely known, but from the most authentic information we can obtain, the aggregate for the past three years has been 5,000, 1,000 of which came from the Kurile islands; and, valuing each skin at $50, amounts to the sum of $250,000.[41]

Overall, sea otters in the Aleutians and the Kurils survived the onslaught of this dark time partly because of the geographic realities of the archipelagos. Both chains are isolated and difficult for even modern sailors to navigate. Fog was particularly troublesome for Kuril hunters. Snow noted at one point that out of an 82 day stint in the islands, 65 had been too foggy to find sea otters.[42] A sizable remnant population of the animals existed at the Sanak Islands in the early 1900s, just south of the western edge of the Alaska Peninsula, and the area's especially dangerous reefs and rocks no doubt played a part in this.[43] One wonders what if any effect a more speedy adoption of steamship technology by Pacific merchants would have had on sea otter populations. Even with powerful vessels in addition to firearms, the creatures likely could still have found protected coves and islets to hide themselves.[44] Certainly the existence of the sea otter into the twentieth

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[41] "Hunting the Sea Otters," *Pacific States Watchman*, California State Library, Sacramento, CA.
[42] Snow, 81.
[43] See McCracken, 287-288.
[44] For American commercial shipping technology in the nineteenth century Pacific, see Gibson and Whitehead, 175-178. Also see relevant portions of K. Jack Bauer, "Pacific Coastal Commerce in the American Period," *Journal of the West* 20:3 (1981): 11-20. The few references I can find to steamships hunting sea otters (in Alaska) date to the very end of the century. By that time, with conservation efforts already underway, any effect steamers might have had in speeding the extinction of the species was lessened.

century is somewhat explained by the often foreboding natural conditions of its "Pacific" habitat.

Low-Level Hunting in California

While in less remote locations, California sea otters did not experience the degree of hunting pressure displayed elsewhere in the Pacific. Scammon was correct that records at the time he wrote were scarce, but there were attempts to procure skins along California shores in the latter half of the nineteenth century. George Nidever, who hunted in Mexican California beginning in 1834, continued to take sea otters until 1855.[45] Two of his sons, along with Santa Barbara businessman Eugene Rogers, hunted with schooners along Lower (Baja) California and the Channel Islands in the 1870s and early 1880s. Elliott cited a report on the Rogers outfit (which also oversaw abalone harvesting and pursued other marine mammals) claiming that 75 otter skins were taken in the Channel Islands in the year 1880.[46] Apparently some individuals were known in the central coast area of Big Sur as sea otter hunters at the turn of the century, including the younger George Nidever.[47] In all, sea otters were more regularly pursued on the Lower Coast, yet overall the California population was spared the type of determined and widespread human predation evidenced in other areas of the species' range. In addition to the reality that California otters were greatly reduced due to such efforts prior to the mid-nineteenth century, other factors account for this. The Gold Rush is an early

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[45] Raymond Dasman, "Environmental Changes Before and After the Gold Rush," *California History* 77:4 (1998-1999): 110.

[46] Eugene F. Rogers, "Memoirs," Joan A. Canby with Stella H. Rouse, eds., *Noticias: Quarterly Bulletin of the Santa Barbara Historical Society* 26 (1980): 47-50; Elliott, "The Sea-Otter Fishery," 487. Also see Michael Buxton, "The Sea Otter Hunters of San Diego and the Lower Coast, 1846-1903," *Mains'l Haul: A Journal of Pacific Maritime History* 43:3&4 (Summer/Fall 2007): 17.

[47] Jeff Norman, E-mail to author, September 7, 2006. Norman, a Big Sur historian, unfortunately passed away before I could further correspond with him and document these claims.

explanation. The few hunters left in California by the time of the Mexican-American War were, at least for a few years, drawn to the diggings over the coast for profit. In the summer of 1848 at Fort Ross, Nidever Sr. and his crew heard the news of gold. He later recalled, "The prospect of getting $16 a day when their monthly wages barely amounted to that was too great a temptation for our men, who insisted on leaving us at San Francisco."[48] Nidever joined them on the trip up the Sacramento River and to the mining camps.

Perhaps more importantly, the pursuit of sea otters in other locations diverted attention away from California. Both Scammon and Snow noted the presence of California-based ships in the Kuril Islands during the 1870s. For Snow's first season in 1873, he recalled that six other schooners were hunting at the time, all of which came from California. The following year near Iturup he counted nine from the state and three from Japan.[49] Like Captain Kimberly's *Cygnet* before them, many of these vessels carried independent traders seeking various opportunities in the Pacific. According to Snow, Kimberly was "an old otter-hunter" who originally sought to salvage whalebone from ships frozen in the Bering Strait. He also planned to search for fur seals near Hokkaido and sea otters in the Aleutian Islands.[50] Indeed, it was perhaps a significant number of the ACC's competitors for sea otters who were part of the close economic

[48] Quoted in Ogden, 139.
[49] Snow, 292-293.
[50] Snow, 52-53. For Kimberly's California hunting days, see Buxton, 13. Treasury Department reports from St. George Island in the Pribilofs described illegal fur seal hunting by the *Cygnet* in 1874 and identified its captain as "Samuel Kimberly" (also spelled Kemberly and, as noted below, this first name was apparently a fake). According to the reports, the ship was ordered to return the seal skins and Kimberly explained in part "that he was engaged in otter hunting, and had at that time 200 skins on board; that he was looking for a kelp patch to the west of the island" to hunt sea otters. That sea otter hunting in the area was apparently less important to officials again suggests that early management of Pacific fur seals by the United States distracted from the needs of otter protection. See David Starr Jordan, ed., *Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska* Volume 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), 74-78. Undeterred, the *Cygnet* returned to hunt fur seals in subsequent years. For more on Kimberly and his exploits, including his name of Martin Morse Kimberly, see Murray, 21-22.

relations that developed between California and Alaska in the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, sea-based and stationary traders came to the territory from across the Eastern Pacific.[51]

With commercial energies focused on productive grounds elsewhere, surviving otters in the Golden State were afforded a measure of respite. To be sure, hunters and opportunists who stayed in the area still occasionally killed them, thereby reducing their numbers and stunting their natural ability to rebound, and the species was exterminated from the coast of Baja California.[52] Chinese junks may have contributed to this. A report in the Santa Barbara *Daily Independent* for 1885 noted a Chinese fishing boat at harbor, and that it was "presumed by the Captain that they will be instructed to go south in seach [sp] of otter and whale."[53] Yet intermittent hunting was distinct from the coordinated and persistent efforts seen in the Aleutians and Kurils. Had California witnessed something approaching what occurred in these other areas then in all likelihood sea otters would have gone extinct from the entire coastline south of the Strait of Juan de Fuca as early as 1920. Ultimately, due to circumstances familiar to hunters who had to "quit the business" at one time or another, the California sea otter in the late-nineteenth century owed a deal of credit to the decades of Spanish and Mexican-era depredation that reduced its numbers to the point of making such pursuit economically unproductive. It also benefited from being displaced over a wider geographic range than sea otters in

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[51] Ted C. Hinckley, *The Americanization of Alaska, 1867-1897* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1972), 88-94.

[52] For what was apparently the last organized hunt based in California, hunting along the Lower Coast and stopping at Catalina Island, see "Unsuccessful Otter Hunters at Catalina Island," *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 1903, 7.

[53] "A Misconception," *The Daily Independent*, June 22, 1885. For Chinese fisheries in California, see L. Eve Armentrout-Ma, "Chinese in California's Fishing Industry, 1850-1914," *California History* 60 (1981): 142-157. To date I am not aware other reports of Chinese pursuit of sea otters in California or Mexico. That there apparently was a small demand from Chinese buyers in San Francisco may relate to future discoveries on the subject.

Washington State, which discouraged destructive stationary hunting and effectively delayed its total extermination.

Fears of Sea Otter Extinction

By the beginning of the twentieth century, *Enhydra lutris* was believed by many to be on the verge of complete extinction. An 1899 report on London fur sales informed buyers that "with a probability of a greatly reduced supply next year, and the possibility of the animal's early extinction, the advance is 50 per cent."[54] The famed Harriman Expedition to Alaska echoed a similarly bleak tone for both popular and scientific audiences. E.H. Harriman was a Gilded Age railroad executive from Illinois (ultimately president of the Union Pacific Railroad) who supported an impressive fact-finding venture to Alaska in 1899 that accompanied his family on a vacation to the West. Constructing a railroad across the Bering Sea was apparently another motivation for the trip, though philanthropic considerations were clear. When the expedition left Seattle in May, it boasted over two dozen scientists, artists and photographers, including California-based author John Muir.[55] The authorities on board Harriman's steamship realized that they were engaged for the most part in reconnaissance and not in depth study of the Alaskan territory, although the volumes they wrote in subsequent years made definite contributions to public education and science. Grove Karl Gilbert's *Glaciers and Glaciation* is "[p]erhaps the most profound volume in the whole Harriman series" and advanced knowledge of glacial geology.[56]

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[54] "Furs Are Dearer".
[55] William H. Goetzmann and Kay Sloan, *Looking Far North: The Harriman Expedition to Alaska, 1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 3-15.
[56] Goetzmann and Sloan, 201-206.

The Harriman reports say little about North Pacific sea mammals. While this is partly due to the fact that the expedition's coordinator and mammal expert C. Hart Merriam was kept busy trying to get other scientists to compile their information, Kathryn J. Frost intimates that the lack of animals on which to report was also a factor. Quoting expedition geographer Henry Gannett:

> The natural resources of Alaska are enormous…Some of these, however, have begun to suffer from the drain to which they have been subjected. The gathering of furs and skins, which has been in progress since the early Russian occupancy[,]…has been prosecuted so actively that the fur trade is now of comparatively little consequence…The sea otter has become very rare, and the fur seals… are now reduced to a small fraction of their former number.[57]

According to Frost, the expedition rarely encountered sea otters.[58] Prior to its completion, Harriman did manage to buy a pelt from a Native. Otherwise the unique exploration he funded left the impression that the animals were close to disappearing. At one point an ACC official ominously noted, "The beautiful sea otter…is practically extinct."[59]

The North Pacific Fur Seal Convention

Progressive Era conservation came to the aid of the sea otter. A burgeoning, broad movement of environmental preservationists and utilitarians worked to build

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[57] Quoted in Kathryn J. Frost, "Crosscurrents and Deep Water: Alaska's Marine Mammals," in Thomas L. Litwin, ed., *The Harriman Alaska Expedition Retraced: A Century of Change, 1899-2001* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 173.
[58] Frost, 174. A website dedicated to the volume in which Frost's essay appears claims that *nobody* in 1899 saw a sea otter, although this may be an exaggeration. See "Sea Otters in Alaska," Harriman Expedition Retraced: A Century of Change, http://www.pbs.org/harriman/1899/seaotters.html.
[59] Frost, 173.

support in the United States for scientific management of natural resources at the turn of the twentieth century. Conservation advocates often expressed conflicting motives and goals. Nevertheless, they ultimately succeeded in the implementation of various state, federal, and international statues meant to protect endangered wildlife. For fur bearing mammals in the Pacific, the most far-reaching support came with the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention of 1911. Unlike the granting of the Pribilof lease by the U.S. government, the sea otter was a beneficiary of this landmark measure for the fur seal, evidence yet again of the historical and environmental connections between the species. Hunters often turned to fur seals to supplement declining catches of otters in the nineteenth century; now Progressives included the sea otter in their call to save the seal. However, the protracted campaign for fur seal conservation may have distracted from sea otter issues as much as helped to highlight them. As already seen, 1911 came too late for some populations.

In relation to the reduction of sea otters during the heyday of the Pacific fur trade, the dramatic decline of the northern fur seal received a substantial amount of attention because it occurred during this period of national and international environmental awareness. Additionally, fur seal found markets both within the United States and abroad, unlike the pelt of *Enhydra*, which stirred key American interest in ensuring the vitality of the species. The crisis began during the 1880s. Despite the effective management of the ACC, the herd at the Pribilofs showed signs of weakening. Pelagic sealing—killing the animals at sea, including during their travels from wintering grounds off California—was an extremely destructive practice. Yet it was on the rise, particularly with vessels stationed in Victoria and Seattle. Schooners lost 50 to 80 percent of kills

from the dead creatures sinking after being shot. Also, mother seals and young females spent more time in the summer at sea, the former leaving island rookeries for international waters to find food for pups. Hence pelagic hunting decimated the breeding population and left future generations to starve to death on the Pribilofs.[60] When in 1886 Revenue Service ships began capturing Canadian sealing vessels in international waters, a diplomatic situation was born. Canada, under its own Constitution since 1867 but dependent on England for foreign policy decisions, benefited from the British view that oceanic hunting was a natural right and should not be interfered with. Yet the empire's Prime Minister Lord Salisbury also understood American economic and environmental claims, at one point writing, "The Canadians have the strict law on their side: the Americans have a moral basis for their contention which it is impossible to ignore."[61] The resources of the Pacific had once again spurred a global political conflict. Sealers contested national boundaries in their pursuit of quarry that existed naturally between such demarcations, and the United States ironically found itself in a position not unlike Russia in the years surrounding the Ukase of 1821 (Chapter 4). However, this time *conserving* resources was central to a final resolution.

Initially, American diplomats concentrated on a traditional argument involving seals as national property at a Paris tribunal in 1893. The United States lost this case, was ordered to pay damages for taking Canadian schooners, but won a sixty-mile buffer zone around the Pribilofs to be free from sealers and a ban on the use of firearms in pelagic sealing.[62] Yet without a complete ban on pelagic sealing, the Bering Sea herd

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[60] Kurkpatrick Dorsey, *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy: U.S.-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 111-115.
[61] Dorsey, 116.
[62] Dorsey, 119-124.

continued to decline. Moreover, Japanese hunting outfits, subsidized by their government, began to take a larger role in the crisis. Creatures that numbered over 2,000,000 in 1870 stood at approximately 140,000 by the end of the century. In response, the United States banned pelagic sealing by Americans, called for talks involving Japan and Russia, and began to rely more heavily on scientific arguments. Chief among American scientists working to build a case against pelagic but for continued land sealing was David Starr Jordan, then-president of Stanford University. Jordan was chosen by the Treasury Department to edit a four-volume study titled *Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska*, published in 1898. His Progressive utilitarian approach contrasted with the preservationist and sentimental impulses of the long-time seal and sea otter advocate Elliott, and their public clashes in the years that followed—fueled, it seems, by Elliott's sensitivity to criticism and his need for official recognition of his natural history work—may have delayed resolution of the issue.[63]

While scientists and politicians included the sea otter in their deliberations, the emphasis placed on fur seal conservation fostered a sense that the sea otter mattered only insofar as its tragic story foreshadowed what might happen to the seal. Both Jordan's collection of data on Pacific marauders like the *Cygnet* and the original reports themselves (noted above) leave the impression that such vessels were significant not because they were otter hunters, but because they also killed seals. Thus, whatever legal structures might have been able to protect sea otters around this time were afforded less attention. Treasury agent Joseph Murray was candid on this inherent weakness of American support for the species:

[63] For the disputes between Elliott and Jordan see Dorsey, especially chapter 5.

> Thus for a quarter of a century did the United States throw every possible safeguard of law around the seals and other fur animals of Alaska…while during the same period of time the sea otter, which, owing to its pelagic habitats, was necessarily left to the tender mercies of the pelagic hunter, who knows no law higher or holier than avarice and selfishness, has been practically exterminated.[64]

The plight of Pribilof Aleuts also garnered the attention of officials in the wake of pelagic sealing. Paid by the harvested skin, their real wages dropped after 1890 under the new government lessee, the North American Commercial Company. Declining fur seal numbers coupled with sustained high prices for company goods on the islands resulted in Treasury Department subsidies for native income by 1892.[65] However, some officials complained of the expanded government role in the lives of hunters, as goods were now allotted according to weekly necessity with no say from the purchaser. Agent Walter Lembkey wrote that the new payment method "prevents the progress that accrues from the superior skill or greater self-denial and makes a virtual almshouse of the Pribilof reservation".[66]

Directly on the heels of a preliminary Anglo-American ban on pelagic sealing in 1911, both Russia and Japan sent diplomats and scientific advisors to a four-power conference in Washington, D.C. After weeks of tough negotiations and the prodding of the Japanese emperor by President William Howard Taft, the American offer that took years to develop was officially accepted. Canada and Japan received $200,000 each to compensate their sealing industries, 15 percent of takes from American and Russian land sealing, and all parties signed a ban on hunting at sea. According to Kurkpatrick Dorsey, the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention succeeded "because each of the four countries

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[64] Jordan, *Seal and Salmon Fisheries* Volume 2, 60.
[65] Busch, 123-126.
[66] Quoted in Busch, 126.

accepted, sometimes grudgingly, the scientific and moral evidence that pelagic sealing had to end, even though it was legal practice."[67] United States Progressive reformers, politicians, and determined diplomats deserve most credit for this, and for the ultimate rebounding of the northern fur seal. The sea otter was included in Article V of the treaty. Unfortunately the brief clause symbolizes the limits of turn-of-the-century environmentalism, as does the feuding of individuals like Elliott and Jordan. A ban on sea otter hunting is lost in stipulations regarding international responsibilities for the fur seal.[68]

None of the above criticisms are meant to suggest that sea otter populations were simply victim of seal conservation and diplomacy. After all, *Enydra* is the only other animal mentioned in the text of the treaty, and after 1900 some of its numbers benefited from focus on the fur seal. But a greater effort prior to that time might have lessened the effects of late-nineteenth century depredations. Given that most hunting was done by American outfits and that after 1867 much of Pacific sea otter habitat was within territorial waters claimed by the United States, then conservationists could have underscored the long history of sea otter hunting and the need for an immediate halt to the practice, separate from international entanglements regarding fur seals and save perhaps for Aleut peoples who depended on the trade.[69] Unfortunately it was that very

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[67] Dorsey, 159.

[68] Article V states: "Each of the High Contracting Parties agrees that it will not permit its citizens or subjects or their vessels to kill, capture or pursue beyond the distance of three miles from the shorn line of its territories sea otters in any part of the waters mentioned in Article I of this Convention" ("Convention Between the United States, Great Britain, Russia and Japan for the Preservation and Protection of Fur Seals," Edwin Ginn Library Multilaterals Project, http://fletcher.tufts.edu/multi/sealtreaty.html#V). Article I included the entire historic range of the sea otter.

[69] In essence, this is precisely what Hooper argued and recommended in his urgent Treasury Department report in 1897. He also proposed a text for an international agreement should one be deemed necessary (Appendix, in Hooper, 15-16). I offer that had individuals supplementary to Elliott made similar

history that led someone as influential as Elliott to a romanticizing that belied the environmental needs of the otter. He was not the last but was one of the first authors to marvel at the accomplishments of Vitus Bering and Russian promyshlenniki, to colorfully describe Aleut hunters and lament their past treatment. Such natural history writings had the effect of framing the sea otter as a lost artifact from a bygone era, softening any message of urgency. To his credit, Elliott appeared self-conscious of the dilemma, writing:

> A truthful account of the strange, vigilant life of the sea-otter and of the hardships and perils encountered by its human hunters would surpass in novelty and interest the most attractive work of fiction. I mention this with much emphasis, because throughout the following narrative many instances will arise, coupled with the life and chase of the sea-otter, which may strike the reader's mind as the evolution of romantic thought.[70]

Seen in light of this and other cultural factors, and with pronouncements concerning the eminent demise of the species, Article V of the Fur Seal Convention can be read as both a harmonious call for saving the sea otter and as an obituary for the Pacific's historical and biological past. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the sea otter continued to receive important help that it long needed. The Aleutian Islands Refuge was established in 1913, offering federal protection to the primary habitat of Alaska's remaining population.[71] That same year California banned the killing of sea otters. In total, these protective measures provided the necessary legal safeguards that allowed the species to rebound in

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campaigns ten or more years before his report, then the sea otter may have entered the twentieth century in much better environmental shape than it did.

[70] Elliott, "The Sea-Otter Fishery," 483-484.

[71] "Refuge Establishment," Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, http://alaskamaritime.fws.gov/establishment.htm.

the Eastern Pacific. The Alaska population recovered most quickly. Naturalist Olaus Murie, working for the U.S. Biological Survey, described sea otters on the Alaskan Peninsula as early as 1925 and his expeditions to the Aleutians in 1936 and 1937, according to Kenyon, "were the first to reveal that otter populations at a number of islands were growing."[72] By mid-century Alaskan sea otters numbered around 10,000.

California "Rediscovery"

The low level hunting of sea otters in California had restricted them largely to the central-state coastline within Monterey County by the early twentieth century. In 1915, H.C. Bryant collected testimonies of sea otters seen near Monterey and Point Sur. Exaggerating a bit yet confident in recent conservation efforts, he wrote for *California Fish and Game* that "enforcement of [the 1913] law appears to be greatly benefiting the species."[73] Two reports for 1916 were published the following year, one describing 2 otters sighted in the Monterey area and 31 sighted south of Catalina Island.[74] Granting to some researchers that the Catalina group was later extirpated,[75] by 1920 a handful of authorities and locals understood that the California sea otter was recovering. Yet partly because these reports were not widely known prior to 1938, including, perhaps, Murie's studies in Alaska, news of a sizeable population in the Big Sur area was, and to some extent continues to be, susceptible to hyperbole.

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[72] James M. Glover, "Sweet Days of a Naturalist: Olaus Murie in Alaska, 1920-1926," *Forest and Conservation History* 36:3 (1992): 138; Kenyon, 1.
[73] H.C. Bryant, "Sea Otters Near Point Sur," *California Fish and Game* 1:2 (1915): 135.
[74] P.H. Oyer, "Sea Otters Near Monterey," *California Fish and Game* 3:2 (1917): 88 and G. Farnsworth, "Sea Otters Near Catalina Island," 90.
[75] See Stephen Leatherwood, Linda J. Harrington-Coulombe, and Carl L. Hubbs, "Relict Survival of the Sea Otter in Central California and Evidence of Its Recent Redispersal South of Point Conception," *Bulletin of Southern California Academy of Sciences* 77 (1978): 110. I do not believe there is sufficient evidence to surmise this simply because, as the authors contend, "enforcement in the insular area was difficult at that time."

It was at the mouth of Bixby Creek that Howard Granville Sharpe "discovered" the sea otter in March of 1938. A colorful account that he wrote the following year of the event is on the Friends of the Sea Otter website.[76] In the document, Sharpe tells of how he and others peered through a telescope from the porch of his seaside ranch and were astonished at what they saw. He equates sighting hundreds of California otters to discovering the extinct dodo and to finding dinosaur eggs in Mongolia. The genuine surprise of some officials was due more to the size of the herd at that time than the mere fact that the animals were present.[77] Sharpe's desire for self-promotion and economic gain appears to have influenced the announcement of something that area residents recognized for years. The completion of a portion of Highway 1 in 1937 connecting Carmel south to San Luis Obispo promised to bring more visitors to the remote location and across the recently-constructed Bixby Creek Bridge—precisely where Sharpe and his wife owned land and a small tourist stop. Nevertheless, even if Sharpe had it in mind to profit financially from breaking the silence about the sea otter herd, as Norman intimates, the publicity he generated did bring attention to protecting them.[78] In the meantime, the Monterey area happenings were dramatized in a pamphlet written the same year as a "Phoenix-like appearance" of the sea otter that "astounded everybody".[79] Such hyperbolic public responses helped bring the first high-profile attention to the species and cemented 1938 as a landmark year for otter natural history.

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[76] Howard Granville Sharpe, "The Discovery of the 'Extinct' Sea Otter," Friends of the Sea Otter, http://www.seaotters.org/Otters/index.cfm?DocID=8.
[77] Rolf L. Bolin, "Reappearance of the Southern Sea Otter Along the California Coast," *Journal of Mammalogy 19*:3 (1938): 301.
[78] Norman. For more on the local bridge and highway construction and the Sharpes' connection to it, see Renee Newland, "Bixby Creek Bridge," Monterey County Historical Society, http://www.mchsmuseum.com/bixbycr.html.
[79] Augustin S. Macdonald, *Pacific Pelts: Sea Otters Choose California Coast* (Oakland, CA: Unknown publisher, 1938).

Why did the sea otter recover more slowly in the early 20th century in California than it did in Alaska? The goal here is not to catalog ecological factors involved in sea otter recovery and decline. Biologists continue to wrestle with the intricacies of the issue, and since relatively few field studies were performed between 1911 and 1938 (at least until very late in the era), it is difficult to conclude with certainty if factors that played a role in later periods significantly affected otters at this earlier time. However, a few general observations are instructive and will hopefully spur further inquiry. If James Estes, Brian Hatfield, Katherine Ralls and Jack Ames are correct in that sea otter mortality "appears to be the main reason for both sluggish growth and periods of decline" for the California population, then how do the animals die?[80] Human predation continuing beyond the Progressive Era statues was likely an important cause. Once again, geography must be considered here, as it was simply easier for hunters—poachers after 1911 and 1913—to shoot otters along California beaches than it was to track them down in the Aleutian Islands. Kenyon argued that human killing of sea otters remained a concern in California more so than in Alaska at mid-century.[81] It is reasonable to figure that the same held true earlier and stunted the animal's growth in the state.

Great white sharks are known to kill sea otters. Bitten carcasses are found at times on California beaches and to a lesser extent elsewhere, corresponding well with the distribution of the white shark in the Pacific. The number of known shark kills in California has varied year to year in recent decades but is significantly higher during

[80] James A. Estes, Brian B. Hatfield, Katherine Ralls, and Jack Ames, "Causes of Mortality in California Sea Otters During Periods of Population Growth and Decline," *Marine Mammal Science* 19:1 (2003): 198-216.
[81] Kenyon, 282.

times of population decline.[82] That this was a limiting factor peculiar to sea otters in the state for most of the twentieth century seems likely, although killer whales have also been identified as occasional predators of sea otters in both California and Alaska. (Reportedly, the 1938 herd was scattered from Bixby Creek after a killer whale attack.) Lastly, but far from conclusive, the more dense human population of California may produce higher rates of otter death as a result of disease. Estes, Hatfield, Ralls and Ames note that a variety of infectious diseases are "the proximate cause of death in more than 40%" of fresh otter carcasses recovered in California, and they cite research suggesting "that organisms associated with humans and domesticated animals are significant contributors to disease-related mortality in sea otters."[83] While changes in this percentage apparently are not associated with recent periods of growth and decline, their study concludes that "infectious disease may well be an important factor for the overall depressed rate of population growth in California sea otters during the 20th century." In the end it may be a biologically-unfortunate but fitting tribute that the sea otter continues to thrive better in the wilds of Alaska, an area of the Pacific often popularized as the "last American frontier," than it does along the coast of the most populous state in the nation. The animal's significance as a frontier-shaping species will hopefully find resonance during the twenty-first century as we seek to better understand and provide for its fragile existence.

[82] Estes, Hatfield, Ralls, and Ames, 206. As the authors note, the number of shark-bitten carcasses have generally increased over time. For whatever reason, this might suggest that white sharks were less of a factor in early-twentieth century California.
[83] Estes, Hatfield, Ralls, and Ames, 212.

The partial recovery of the sea otter points in large measure to the successes of Progressive Era reform. While more could have been done to help the species in the late nineteenth century, its complete extermination (at least in the Eastern Pacific) was a real possibility had American scientists and politicians not eventually intervened. United States commercial forces, picking up and geographically expanding from where they left the Pacific fur trade prior to 1850, brought the sea otter to its low point in history. Yet without the initiative of United States government agencies and their push for international conservation measures, it is unlikely that otters would exist in the numbers that they do today. It is beyond my scope here to engage historiographic issues surrounding American Progressivism. Suffice to say that credit should be given to national developments at the turn of the twentieth century, no matter how limited or flawed they may have been, which played a major role in rescuing a unique and important species.

Epilogue: Conservation and Culture

"Wild beast, if you must go
let is not be we who betray you."
(from a poem in Victor Scheffer's *The Amazing Sea Otter*[1])

A YouTube video posted in March of 2007 shows two sea otters floating on their backs at the Vancouver Aquarium in British Columbia. The otters are "holding hands" through most of the one minute and forty one second clip, prompting responses such as, "Absolutely adorable!," and "Cute!," from observers at the aquarium. At one point the furry creatures float apart, only to drift back toward each other and re-connect their paws, followed by a chorus of "aww." One comment from a YouTube viewer cynically captures the video's gushy sentiment: "[M]y head will explode from cuteness."[2] "Otters holding hands" was viewed 1.5 million times in just two weeks after its posting, making it YouTube's most popular animal video at the time. According to a report on the Internet phenomenon, "Aquarium officials said they hope the internet audience learns that the otters are not only cute, but are an endangered species as well."[3] Such thoughts are not uncommon from individuals associated with sea otter exhibits and communicate tensions surrounding the popular perception of the animals today. Sea otter fur was once desired for its exquisite qualities; today the species falls prey to a less deadly type of objectification.

What follows is a brief critique of popular sources of natural history information on sea otters. My view is that recent representations of the species both advance and complicate conservation efforts. In ways similar to Henry Elliott (discussed in Chapter

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[1] Victor B. Scheffer, *The Amazing Sea Otter* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 138.
[2] "Otters holding hands," YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epUk3T2Kfno. The comment was made on April 8, 2009.
[3] "Vancouver sea otters a hit on YouTube," CBC.ca, April 3, 2007, http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2007/04/03/bc-youtube.html.

4), a naturalist at the turn of the twentieth century and one of the first American advocates for the sea otter, many authors romanticize and obscure the animal's past with man. Yet important differences exist between Progressive Era sentiments and more current trends in environmental awareness. For sea otters, the most potent of these are aesthetic and anthropomorphic qualities that are bestowed upon them. Simply put, the animals cannot help but be cute, as the YouTube video demonstrates. Sea otter "cuteness" has been a mixed blessing for the species, helping promote its environmental needs but leaving it vulnerable to renewed economic exploitation. Thus otters may literally save their skins but suffer indirectly from their cultural profile.

I focus on Monterey, California. If any locale in the Pacific Basin has adopted the sea otter as a symbol of its heritage and natural surroundings, it is California's colonial capital. In particular, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which opened in 1984, has done much to advance the image of the species both locally and abroad in recent years. Their exhibit and other sources of real and potential sea otter objectification and exploitation associated with the area are evaluated here. Part of this research was conducted at the Monterey Public Library's California History Room. The sizable collection of archival clippings and other material on the sea otter held there will hopefully be utilized for more detailed study of local history and culture than what I provide.[4] (I am largely indebted to Connie Chiang and her 2008 volume *Shaping the Shoreline* for historical information on the aquarium.[5]) Nevertheless, I offer that certain aspects of conservation efforts along the Central California coast exemplify larger liabilities of campaigns aimed at protecting sea

[4] I thank archivist Dennis Copeland for his assistance. Of particular interest to future researchers will likely be the collection of the late Margaret Owings, co-founder of the Monterey-area advocacy group Friends of the Sea Otter. Her material was recently donated to the library and is being organized by Dennis.
[5] Connie Y. Chiang, *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008).

otters throughout the Pacific. How this dissertation might be applied in order to promote refined public interpretations of the sea otter closes my discussion.

Sea Otter Russification

Although sea otter pelage as a high-demand fashion item has more or less faded today, sea otters are still affected demographically by their various connections with the human world.[6] Among cultural phenomena that continue to impact the species are writings that over-contextualize it within the Russian colonial past. According conception supported by such work, promyshlenniki (Siberian merchants) wantonly killed Pacific fur bearers, abused Aleut laborers in the process, and are major culprits in the near-extinction of the sea otter in the Pacific—basically, the sea otter's historical dilemma is a Russian one. Notwithstanding distinct truths included in this type of narrative, by linking the plight of *Enhydra* to a distant, romanticized past, authors downplay the immediacy of its environmental condition. As noted above, one of the first to encounter this tension was Elliott. Despite the key role he played in sea mammal conservation at the turn of the twentieth century, his writings tended to put the needs of fur seals above otters and viewed the latter as representative of a russified Alaskan heritage. Such an intellectual framing was one of a number of factors affecting sea otter populations into the early 1900s, when national and international environmental advocacy made stronger protection for the species possible.

[6] For current-day, legal (though controversial) Native American hunting of sea otters, see Glenn VanBlaricom, *Sea Otters* (St. Paul, MN: Voyageur Press, 2001), 65-66.

Harold McCracken's 1957 book *Hunters of the Stormy Sea* is probably the most prominent example of sea otter russification.[7] While a popular and outdated work that is not always cited in studies of the sea otter trade or of Russian America,[8] it did influence history and natural history writing in the late twentieth century. McCracken, who died in 1983, wrote a number of books on far western history and nature, and he was the founding director of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.[9] In colorful detail, and with a tinge of Cold War bias, he recounts the exploits of Russian fur hunters in the Pacific and the disastrous effects they had on natives and sea otters. The original book jacket for *Hunters of the Stormy Sea* includes the telling tag line, "The violent history of the sea otter hunters of Alaska." Although handicapped by dramatic flair and anti-Russian sentiment, the volume is one of the only book-length histories with the sea otter itself at its conceptual center. As such, it helped shape popular conservation literature on sea otters into the late twentieth century.

Support for this is found in a 1984 issue of the periodical *Pacific Discovery*, subsequently known as *California Wild* (and no longer in existence), a publication of the California Academy of Sciences. It contains two main articles on the sea otter, one scientific perspective and a piece by Elizabeth R. Hone on Russian hunting along the Pacific coast.[10] Hone's article reproduces artworks relevant to the Russian colonial presence in America, discusses the development of the outpost of Fort Ross in California, and closes with a lengthy quote from McCracken. Absent is any mention of geopolitical

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[7] Harold McCracken, *Hunters of the Stormy Sea* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957).
[8] For example, Lydia T. Black's comprehensive volume *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* does not list McCracken's book. See Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004).
[9] "Harold McCracken, 1894-1983," Buffalo Bill Historical Center, http://www.bbhc.org/hmrl/mcCracken.cfm.
[10] Elizabeth B. Hone, "Tales of the Sea Otter," and Sam Wilson. "California's Surviving Sea Otters," *Pacific Discovery* (July-September 1984): 10-15, 16-20.

and environmental effects of American merchants and hunters in California. Rather, the sea otter trade is presented as a "bloody," Russian tale. It represents a temporal and national disconnect with any United States responsibility for the sea otter's condition both prior to and since the Gold Rush, an unfortunate mischaracterization of history that is not entirely Hone's fault. Such written presentations of the sea otter and the fur trade have the effect, however unintended, of removing the U.S. as a central player in the environmental fate of Pacific marine mammals. This dissertation has hopefully offered greater clarity on American responsibility for the sea otter.

While he does not cite McCracken's book, author Roy Nickerson also emphasizes the otter's Russian connections.[11] In *Sea Otters: A Natural History and Guide*, he provides details on historical figures such as Peter the Great and Vitus Bering, Grigorii Shelikov, and Aleksandr Baranov. As with Hone's article, Russian hunting in California receives significant treatment. A large photograph of Fort Ross is framed on a two-page spread by ones of sea otters, signaling the importance popularly attributed to Russian colonialism for the animal's condition in the state. Also, Nickerson quotes a lengthy passage from historian Adele Ogden on Russian operations on the Farallon Islands and the coast.[12] To his credit, he cites primary sources on sea otters post-dating Russian America, most prominently Charles Scammon's study, *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America*. Showcasing such material in some ways foreshadows a new direction for sea otter natural and environmental history—Nickerson's data and narrative somewhat influenced my own research. Yet overall little is said about American or British activity during the sea otter trade. Aware of the

[11] Roy Nickerson, *Sea Otters: A Natural History and Guide* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1989).
[12] Nickerson, 28-33.

drawback in his own narrative, Nickerson correctly observes, "It may seem that the Russians have been made the villains in the near-extinction of the sea otter, but this has not been my purpose. The Russians were merely the first, and in some ways the most exotic, of the hunters."[13] Thus are facts about Russian sea captains and abused Aleuts utilized for their own strange beauty. They offer a window to view the "exotic" past of the sea otter, something other than our "usual" conceptions of the Pacific Basin.[14]

Too Cute For Their Own Good

More than the sea otter's often-romanticized linkage with Russian hunters, its physical appeal poses a problem for those interested in helping it today. As Kurkpatrick Dorsey notes, early environmental reformers during the Progressive Era at various times successfully combined science, economics, and sentimental regard for animals, while understanding that aesthetic appreciation and anthropomorphizing could be taken too far.[15] Since otters were not the focus of national and international attention in the lead up to the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention of 1911, they generally did not receive this type of comprehensive advocacy until later in the twentieth century. Following scientific studies in the middle decades of the century, the sea otter ultimately became a subject for general-audience books replete with stunning color photographs of the animals in their

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[13] Nickerson, 40.

[14] Gwenn A. Miller intimates that Russian America represents a type of "otherness" for scholars of American history, writing, "Russian Alaska offers an unusual perspective from which to explore the nature of colonial relations in early North America" (Gwenn A. Miller, "Russian Routes: Kamchatka to Kodiak Island," *Common-place* 5:2 (January 2005): http://www.common-place.org/vol-05/no-02/miller/index.shtml).

[15] Kurkpatrick Dorsey, *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy: U.S.-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 15-16. Dorsey discusses Elliott's anthropomorphizing of the fur seal on page 112.

natural habitat.[16] From these volumes, one cannot help but develop a liking for them as furry and playful. Wildlife photography and pop science combine to garner wide public attention for the species. Children are particularly targeted by current fiction and non-fiction literature on the sea otter. An online catalog search for my local public library reveals where the majority of its dozens of titles on "otters" can be found: the children's section.[17]

The sea otter's ability to use tools while feeding is often employed to foster childlike attachment to it. Consider the following selection from Glenn VanBlaricom's *Sea Otters* as he discusses how some otters place clams on their chests as anvils in order to eat other clams:

> One day I stood with a colleague on the public pier at the town of Pismo Beach, watching sea otters feed on Pismo clams. ...We saw a young male otter with one clam securely tucked into an axilla. He dove repeatedly, but could not find a second clam. Periodically he would stop to rest, bring the clam to his mouth, bite at the unforgiving shell and, in frustration, even pound the clam against his chest. Again and again he would dive, and again and again he would resolutely probe the equally stubborn clam in hopes of breaking through. Finally, just as the sun dropped into the western sea, the otter gave in. Resting quietly on the surface with his gaze averted, he released his grip and allowed the clam to slide from his chest. In the growing darkness he moved off to the north after an embarrassed glance in our direction.[18]

Beautifying and humanizing the sea otter not only helps sell books, but it also serves to attract tourists. Monterey, California, near where a large herd of otters was famously "re-

[16] For examples, see Nickerson; VanBlaricom. For summaries of mid-twentieth-century sea otter history, see Briton Cooper Busch, *The War Against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery* (Kingston, Ont.: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 198-200; Richard Ellis, *The Empty Ocean: Plundering the World's Marine Life* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003), 147-148.
[17] Some volumes, like VanBlaricom's *Sea Otters*, are held in both children and adult sections of the Stanislaus County Library.
[18] VanBlaricom, 26.

discovered" in 1938, saw the development of a robust tourist industry by the late twentieth century centered in many ways on its local population of marine mammals.[19] For example, a 1972 edition of the *Herald Weekend Magazine* dubbed the sea otter "The Teddy Bear of the ocean" and discussed recent sightseeing activity along the city's Cannery Row waterfront. According to the account, 375 "otter-watchers" responded to an invitation from the organization Friends of the Sea Otter: "Four boats made two trips each from Fishermen's Wharf and each spent about an hour among the otters while cameras captured their antics and visitors from as far away as New York and Florida 'oh'd' and 'ah'd' in admiration."[20]

Above all, the Monterey Bay Aquarium linked environmentalism, local tourism, and public regard for otters. The aquarium grew out of associations between the family of David Packard (of Hewlett-Packard fame), university professors, and Stanford University's Hopkins Marine Station, the last of which sold the deteriorating Hovden Cannery building in 1978 to a non-profit organization established by the Packards. The opening of the facility six years later was a large celebration heralded by the declaration "The Fish Are Back!," a reference to the city's early-twentieth century sardine industry.[21] As with the aquarium's other exhibits, planners and staff met a variety of challenges in attempting to present sea otters in their "natural" state. The first otters scratched the acrylic panels of their tank with shellfish shards and toys had to be introduced to prevent boredom. As Chiang writes, "The aquarium renovated the tank in 1993, adding other fish

[19] As shown in Chapter 4, the 1938 event first combined elements of economic profit, sea otter conservation, and central coast tourism.
[20] John Woolfenden, "The Darlings of Tourists," *Herald Weekend Magazine*, Sea otter clipping file, Monterey Public Library, Monterey, CA.
[21] Chiang, 155-157.

and new rockwork covered with algae and invertebrates, in the hope of creating an exhibit more true to the otters' habitat."[22]

Sea otters have become a star attraction for the internationally-recognized aquarium, "[the] closest thing to a 'celebrity' species," according to Chiang.[23] Visitors today are greeted with a myriad of otter stuffed toys, books, and children's material. It is not difficult to find additional tourist stops on Cannery Row selling t-shirts and sweaters depicting sea otters next to the name "Monterey." The animals have become, in effect, warm and furry emblems of the city. Fostering the local merchandising of the sea otter further allows the aquarium's many upper-middle class patrons to express green values via consumer culture.[24] Yet the degree to which any of the above produces a beneficial public perception for the species instead of blurring and trivializing its historic and current-day challenges is certainly open to question. Sea otter spectacle and commercialization in Monterey is no doubt less problematic than what Susan G. Davis describes as the "industrial nature magic" of Sea World theme parks.[25] Also, the many positive contributions that the aquarium has made to sea otter conservation cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, one dilemma planners continue to face is how to educate about an animal whose presence facilitates endearing affection. The sea otter milieu of Monterey at the very least borders on an unconstructive use of nature aesthetics.

To their credit, Monterey Bay Aquarium officials have recognized the inherent problems of exhibiting sea otters. A newsletter article in 1987 begins with the line, "Are sea otters too cute and loveable for their own good?" Concerns by staff regarding the

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[22] Chiang, 170.
[23] Chiang, 173.
[24] See Chiang, 156.
[25] Susan G. Davis, *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 28-39.

perception of rescued otters at the aquarium are communicated. In particular, the article warns that people should not think of the animals as tame. The complexities of otter rehabilitation are discussed, along with the admonition that "should you come across a seemingly abandoned otter pup on the beach or in the water, under no circumstances try to take it home as a pet."[26] Interviewed by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1994, the aquarium's chief otter researcher Marianne Riedman attempted to dispel the "cuddly image" of the sea otter. According to Riedman, "No doubt they're cute and fun to watch, but remember, they are, after all, wild carnivorous animals."[27] Among other less appealing facts of sea otter life, she notes that sea otters often steal food from each other and that females are commonly wounded during mating, sometimes with lethal injuries. The creatures "are immensely powerful—so strong, Riedman says, that it would take three strong men to hold one down."[28] Here otters become demoniacs, frightening beasts possessed by a wild spirit. Assisting in such "re-branding" of the sea otter are photographs which show mating wounds on the noses of females.

While biological data on sea otter wildness may challenge the myth of cuteness, historical and cultural information can also be employed. Photographs of sea otter pelts may help refine public reception of the sea otter.[29] Pictures taken after hunts at the turn of the twentieth century could be displayed near sea otter exhibits in Monterey or

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[26] Mary Rodriguez, "Significant Otters," *Monterey Bay Aquarium Newsletter*, Sea otter clipping file, Monterey Public Library, Monterey, CA.
[27] David Perlman, "Cuddly Otter Image in the Tank," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sea otter clipping file, Monterey Public Library, Monterey, CA.
[28] Perlman.
[29] For published and online examples, see H.J. Snow, *In Forbidden Seas: Recollections of Sea-Otter Hunting in the Kurils* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910); Victor Scheffer, "The Sea Otter on the Washington Coast," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 3 (1940): 370-388; Michael Buxton, "The Sea Otter Hunters of San Diego and the Lower Coast, 1846-1903," *Mains'l Haul: A Journal of Pacific Maritime History* 43:3&4 (Summer/Fall 2007): 8-19; "Sea-Going Capitalism," *Beyond the Map*, http://www.beyondthemap.ca/english/fur_trade.html.

Vancouver. These rare images have the potential to elicit responses more sympathetic to the sea otter's often *unattractive* heritage. Moreover, with proper scripting, patrons would be informed that they were not taken during the Russian colonial era. Aleuts and baidarkas are thus graphically displaced by schooners and Anglo and Native American workers standing next to collections of skins. This might help demystify sea otter natural history and link it in public imagination with United States commercial activity in the Pacific. To what degree pictures of sea otter skins can compete in the same physical space as playful creatures chewing on shellfish is certainly questionable. But if aquarium officials have not yet, they should consider some method of examining the sea otter's history at the turn of the twentieth century. At they very least, they would inform their visitors about an important time during which the species stood on the brink of total extinction throughout the Pacific.

In addition to exploring that history, I hope this dissertation has provided other opportunities to contest popular ideas about the sea otter's past. Russian activity in Alaska did indeed result in a dramatic decline of sea otter populations. Yet colonial conservation policies affected a partial rebound and stabilization of otter numbers in Alaska, facts that are not widely known. Also rarely recognized is that centuries prior to British and American trading operations in the Eastern Pacific, Japanese merchants and the Ainu pursued the animals in the Western Pacific. Hence, despite the importance for the sea otter of more recent American economic and environmental interests in the Pacific Basin, an accurate portrayal of *Enhydra*'s history—whether in a children's book, nature magazine, or aquarium exhibit—should reflect at least some of these complexities.

Conclusion

The dense fur of the sea otter ably protects the species from the chilling waters of the Pacific Ocean, yet this stunning natural property also speaks to significant historical realities. Sea otter pelts symbolize the establishment of global frontiers and the emergence of a Pacific World. They tell of the international dimensions of commerce, resource competition, and environmental conservation. The history of the sea otter is also an American story of far western expansion and nature degradation. Yet the same power which almost eliminated the animal within and beyond its national borders is also chiefly responsible for its survival and recovery into the twenty first century. Hence Old West and New West themes come together to forge a rich narrative of the United States Pacific frontier. American sea otter traders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the "Yankee vanguard in the Pacific Basin," laying groundwork for future expansionist forces.[1] In turn, United States geopolitical successes had distinct implications for marine mammals well after the "closing" of the fur frontier. Complex relationships between economic, political, and environmental factors define the sea otter's modern history and suggest a West that eludes simplistic characterizations of process or place.

Furthermore, the American narrative of the sea otter explored in this dissertation speaks to the broader question of Pacific integration. Mansel G. Blackford argues that World War II was central to the economic, political, and environmental connectivity of the modern Pacific Basin. In a recent study, he writes:

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[1] Arrell Morgan Gibson and John S. Whitehead, *Yankees in Paradise: The Pacific Basin Frontier* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 130.

> World War II, building on alternations often already under way, accelerated and intensified major changes in the Pacific, among the most important of which was increased geopolitical and economic integration. That integration—especially the trade ties and, in some areas, the rise of tourism—brought faster economic development.[2]

To be sure, Blackford does not ignore developments that facilitated distinct oceanic links prior to American successes in the war. Summarizing the work of scholars such as Paul D'Arcy, he mentions long distance voyaging and settlement by indigenous peoples in Oceania. He includes Captain James Cook and the maritime frontier inaugurated by EuroAmericans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Pacific. In a telling footnote, he writes that the work of David Igler suggests a "reintegration" of the Eastern Pacific for the period 1770-1850.[3] However, for Blackford the war and the post-war period represent the most significant Pacific developments, a time during which "America[n]...engagement with the region increased".[4]

I do not question the dramatic effect that World War II and its aftermath had on the Pacific Basin. Neither am I concerned with when and where the concept of "reintegration" makes sense. However, pre-war developments are more important than what is implied in Blackford's study. American otter traders established significant geographic relationships across the Pacific throughout the nineteenth century. While more research is needed on the political dynamics of the sea otter trade (specifically in regard to United States-Mexican relations in the wake of hunting activity along the Baja California coast after 1850, a topic left unexplored in this dissertation), American vessels,

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[2] Mansel G. Blackford, *Pathways to the Present: U.S. Development and Its Consequences in the Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 2.
[3] Blackford, 213-214.
[4] Blackford, 18.

sailors, and entrepreneurs intensified international interests in the Pacific and often left long-lasting impressions on national boundaries. Additionally, aspects of sea otter hunting and conservation in the roughly three quarters of the century before World War II also argue for an integrated Pacific Basin. The "opening" of the Kuril Islands by American and other commercial ventures accelerated activity in the ocean's northwestern portions, and Progressive Era environmental reform involved parties and interests from across the region. In short, the history of the sea otter before the 1941 points to a closely linked Pacific even as those connections strengthened and expanded later on.

There are a variety of ways in which the new approaches to the sea otter trade that I employed might be expanded. Future scholars could compare the trade with similar commercial developments in Atlantic or Indian Ocean contexts. The global aspects of fur exchanges might be further elucidated with greater attention to Asia than what I provided. For example, how do changes in Pacific fur trading relate to the "Chinese magnet" and the centrality of China in world history? This and other broad questions regarding Asian trade have yet to be investigated in sea otter trade literature in any extensive manner. Finally, the political themes of this study suggest the possibility of integrating fur trade diplomacy into the historiography more firmly. As I am not qualified to go more deeply in the field of diplomatic history, such an approach awaits another scholar. A good starting point may be Terrence J. Barragy's 1974 dissertation titled "American Maritime Otter Diplomacy," which is a source that has yet to be utilized in any major history of the sea otter trade.[5]

[5] Terrence J. Barragy, "American Maritime Otter Diplomacy," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1974.

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