

Slaughter of the sea otters on coastal Baja California by Americans and Native Alaskans in the early nineteenth century

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Abstract

Beginning as early as 1798, American ships visited the coast of Baja California and San Diego, intent on obtaining valuable furs of the southern or California sea otter (*Enhydra nutris nereis*). Since the official Spanish government policy made it difficult to trade for these furs, the sea captains hit upon another idea, which was to enlist the support of the Russian American Company in Alaska to provide Alaskan native hunters and their light kayaks, called by the Russians *baidarkas*, to do the actual hunting. In 1803, Joseph O’Cain first entered into such a contract with RAC manager Alexander Baranov to supply the hunters, kayaks and two Russian overseers to accompany them. The tremendous success of this venture in the waters off Baja California down as far as Isla de Cedros led to numerous other hunting ventures over the years. Since this activity was illegal in Spanish California, there were several incidences of armed conflict between the Spanish soldiers and the hunters. This article provides data on the extent of the hunting activities and the devastating destruction of the sea otter population within a short period of time and suggests other ecological aspects of this slaughter.

Protohistoric sea otter hunting

Archaeological deposits from all over the coast of the Californias attest to the fact that sea otters had been successfully hunted by the Indians well before the arrival of Europeans on the coast (see the article by Andrea Guia from this volume). The usefulness of the sea otter for both its wonderfully warm fur as well as the meat made it one of the constituents of the diet of the coastal Indians. An ethnohistoric account written originally by Fr. Miguel Venegas in 1739 from a report by Fr. Sigismundo Taraval mentions sea otter exploitation on Cedros Island in 1733 (Des Lauriers and García-Des Lauriers 2006:132; Ogden 1941:2). It is generally thought that the prime method was to club or shoot the animals with arrows when they hauled out on the shore. However, Dominican Father Luis Sales, who was at Mission San Vicente Ferrer in the late 1700s, described another method. An Indian would paddle out in a tule reed boat and approach a baby sea otter on the surface while its mother was swimming down to the bottom for food. He would attach a noose around the foot of the baby. The noose had a couple of hooks attached. He would then move back away from the baby and give the rope a tug. The baby would cry for its mother, who would come to its aid and try to get rid of the noose. However, in doing so she would get caught in the hooks. The Indian would then pull in closer to the animal and kill her with a wooden cudgel (Sales

1956:19-20). Sales reported that this sort of hunting was a very time-consuming process and might only result in one or two sea otters being caught in a day. He also mentioned that the sea otter might be caught while asleep on the water or while resting on the shore.

Spanish-era exploitation of sea otters

During the late eighteenth century, the Spanish continued the hunting and at one point were even planning a major program of harvesting sea otters to sell their skins in China. The Spanish were in need of quicksilver (mercury) to process the gold and silver ore in the mines, and China had a plentiful supply. However, one of the few items of trade that interested the Chinese was sea otter skins. Vicente Vasadre y Vega proposed to the Spanish viceroy of New Spain as early as 1784 that these skins be obtained in California and brought to Acapulco each year by returning Manila galleons. They would then be shipped across the Pacific to exchange for mercury. In 1785, the Spanish king approved the plan, and Vasadre was authorized to go to California to begin collecting sea otter skins. In the first year in California (1786), he took away 1,060, and in 1787 there were 1,750 sea otter skins (of which 1,133 came from Baja California) obtained from soldiers, Indians and missionaries from Monterey south to the missions of Rosario and San Fernando in Baja California (Ogden 1941:16). The official rate paid for the skins ranged from 10 pesos for a prime, well-tanned skin down to 3 pesos for a small and poorly tanned one (Ogden 1941:15-17). In order to induce the Indians to hunt the sea otters, it was necessary to import brightly colored items such as beads and cloth to pay them for their work. Fr. Sales (1956:21) reported that the missionaries would give the Indians “wheat, tobacco, ribbons and small articles of clothing.”

A French sea captain, Jean François de la Pérouse (1989:100-101) who visited Monterey in 1786 wrote of meeting Vasadre y Vega and being impressed with his energy and enterprise. He also spoke with the governor, Pedro Fages, who was enthusiastic about the sea otter hunting plan and suggested that the Spanish should set up at least two or three settlements north of San Francisco to be bases for additional sea otter hunting. Fages believed it would be possible to take 20,000 hides a year, and if they got control over the area north of San Francisco, as many as 30,000. He was also worried about the Russians coming down from Alaska to exploit the rich California waters. It is interesting to contemplate what a difference it would have made to the future history of California if the Spanish had kept control of their sea otter exploitation in the Californias and not given the Russians the opportunity to establish themselves at Bodega Bay and Fort Ross.

Although the Vasadre Plan resulted in 9,729 otter (and some seal) skins being shipped to Manila between 1786 and 1790, it ran into a number of difficulties, including a turf war with the powerful Philippine Company in Manila over the trading rights with the Chinese (Ogden 1941:24). In the period between 1790 and 1794, the viceroy of New Spain, the Count of Revilla-Gigedo, actively sought to control the Pacific coast otter trade at least as far north at Nootka (on Vancouver Island), both for the financial returns and as a way to keep out the increasing foreign presence of ships going to the northwest coast. For a while, the Spanish were particularly successful in trade with the northwest coast natives by providing quantities of copper and abalone shells which the Indians valued highly, even more than the iron brought by the English, but eventually Spain was forced to cede its hegemony over the region in the Third Nootka Convention signed by Spain and England in 1794. After this time, the northwest region was considered open to any nationality that wanted to trade there.

American ships in the sea otter trade

By the end of the eighteenth century, many American ships were sailing the north Pacific. A number of them stopped in California on the pretext of needing supplies or repairs for their ships. Naturally, it was not long before various individuals living in California sought to avoid the regulations that required all the sea otter skins be delivered directly to the government and that a fair price be given to the Indians. Some soldiers were accused of abusing the Indians who hunted the sea otters in order to obtain the pelts for themselves. José Francisco Ortega of Mission Rosario on September 13, 1787 wrote to Pedro Fages about abuses of the soldiers toward the Indians in the acquisition of sea otter pelts (California Archives n.d.:3:437; see Beebe and Senkewicz 2002:80). Fr. Palou, the president of the missions in California, also complained about the treatment of the Indians by unscrupulous soldiers (Ogden 1941:21-22). Various soldiers and some of the priests engaged in secret contraband trade with the American ships. On occasion they were caught, but there must have been many successful transactions.

In 1800, the *Betsy*, an American ship, came to San Diego and managed to trade for a number of sea otter skins (Taylor 2007). We will probably never know all the ships involved in this clandestine trade, but one, the *Mercury*, is known to have traded with various missionaries in Baja California in 1807. The ship's documents mention acquiring 158 otter skins at Santo Tomás from Padres Raimundo and Vicente, 142 at Cape Colnett from Fray José, 597 at Rosario from Fray Raimundo and 68 from Fray Pedro González at the Bahía de Todos Santos (Miller 2001:19).

The vigilance of the Spanish authorities in trying to prevent American ships from purchasing sea otter skins had the unintended consequence of leading the sea captains to look for other means to obtain the pelts. In 1803, Captain Joseph O'Cain visited the Russian American Company (RAC) headquarters at Kodiak, Alaska and entered into a contract with Alexander Baranov, the manager of the RAC, to take Alaskan natives and their kayaks (called by the Russians *baidarkas*) on his ship, the *O'Cain*, down to California to hunt for the animals. Thanks to their very seaworthy skin boats and their well-developed hunting techniques, the Alaskans were very efficient sea mammal hunters. O'Cain returned to the area of San Diego in December of 1803. He brought with him 20 *baidarkas* and about 40 Alaskan natives under the command of two Russians, Afanasi Shvetsov and Timofei Tarakanov (Farris 2007:31; Owens 2006). Having been turned away at the port of San Diego, the *O'Cain* continued further south and visited several ports of Baja California, anchoring in the bay of San Quintín for several months. The Alaskan native hunters (called *Codiacas* by the Spanish) prowled around the various islands along the coast and brought in 1,100 sea otter pelts. In addition, O'Cain traded with various people along the coast to gain an additional 700 otter skins. Following this hunting expedition, Governor Arrillaga reported to the Viceroy on March 4, 1804, that "there is not an otter left from Mission Rosario to Santo Domingo" (Ogden 1941:46). This was clearly an overstatement, since successive voyages continued to find large numbers of sea otter in the area, but it may indicate that the ones that would frequent the coast where the Indians and Spanish could easily hunt them had been wiped out, although there may have been a large number still hiding out near the offshore islands that were more accessible to the Alaskan native hunters. A number of Spanish documents from early in 1804 went back and forth between the military commander of the presidio of San Diego, Lieutenant Manuel Rodríguez, and Governor Arrillaga in Loreto speaking of the *O'Cain*. Several of them mention that there was a deserter from the ship by the name of Brown (Beebe and Senkewicz 2002:335, 337) who provided the authorities with information about the ship and its activities.

In June 1806 the *O'Cain* returned again to Baja California, this time under the command

of Jonathan Winship. He brought with him from Sitka, Alaska (New Archangel to the Russians) 49 kayaks and about 112 native Alaskans. The Russian detailed to oversee the Alaskan natives this time was Sysoi Slobodchikov. He was accompanied by three other Russians. Winship landed his hunting parties at San Quintín and also on Cedros Island and nearby Vizcaíno Bay (Giesecke 2007:56). A number of these hunters were left on various islands while Winship sailed north with his furs to New Archangel.

Also, on July 4, 1806, Joseph O’Cain, now as captain of the *Eclipse*, with another group of Alaskan hunters had returned to Baja California. He established himself at Bahia de Todos Santos. Corporal Juan Maria Osuna (Farris 1995) was sent to Todos Santos from San Diego along with four soldiers to attempt to arrest O’Cain. However, O’Cain had a larger number of well-armed men. When O’Cain met Osuna on the beach, he beckoned him over, saying that he was simply there to obtain water. Then the Americans brought out their guns and took Osuna and his soldiers prisoner. O’Cain released the soldiers and Osuna after some days and sailed out of Todos Santos, but he remained on the coast for several more weeks before returning to New Archangel (Ogden 1941:49-50).

Early in 1807, Winship once more sailed south in the *O’Cain* and is reported to have brought 70-80 kayaks and 150 Kodiak hunters whom he spread among the islands of Guadalupe, Natividad, Cedros and Redondo, while other gangs were stationed on some of the islands to take fur seals (Ogden 1941:51). In March 1807, Indian fishers from Mission Santo Domingo reported seeing three large vessels at sea and men in a “canoe” hunting at night. José Ignacio Arce was sent down with some soldiers to San Quintín but found the Kodiaks had just left. He then went further down to Mission Rosario where he found 10 hunters in a nearby bay who informed him that they were from the *O’Cain*. Arce was unable to capture them because they were well armed. He stationed a soldier to keep an eye on them, and the Alaskans agreed to paddle out to the island opposite there (Isla San Geronimo?) to await their ship (Ogden 1941:51).

By early June, Winship was satisfied with the results of the hunting and sailed down to Cedros Island to pick up the various hunters he had left there the previous year. He brought back 95 *baidarkas*, 149 Alaskan men and 13 Alaskan women who had been working on the islands. There were three Russian supervisors, of whom we know only one name, Verkhovinsky. The return voyage to New Archangel carried a total of 192 people (including the Boston crew) back in the 93-ft.-long ship (Giesecke 2007:58-59)!

By this time, two other ships, the *Peacock* and the *Mercury* (mentioned above) were also sailing along the coast, although these two ships were trading with people along the coast for otter skins obtained by the Indians.

Discussion

Hunting sea otters on the Baja California coast had been going on for hundreds or thousands of years before the arrival of the Spanish. However, the acceleration of the hunting first under the plan of Vasadre y Vega in the 1780s and 1790s and later to meet the demands of the American traders was enormous. In addition, the introduction of the Alaskan sea otter hunters brought down in American ships but under the direction of Russian overseers increased the volume of the slaughter manyfold. It is interesting to consider the impact of this focus on sea otter hunting in the area.

In order for the Spanish to obtain so many otter skins, the labor of a number of Indian men must have been diverted from other activities. In turn, there was an increase in the trade goods

provided to the Indians to induce them to undertake the arduous methods of hunting, which might result in a man working a whole day to capture one otter. This was probably the first introduction to the Indians of this area of Baja California to a type of market hunting focused only on the skin to be used not for their own direct use as in traditional hunting, but to be exchanged for foreign articles. The destructive effects of this kind of hunting to traditional societies elsewhere has been pointed out by Calvin Martin (1978) in his book, *Keepers of the game*.

The fact that a sizeable community of Alaskan natives resided on several of the islands off the coast of Baja California, principally on Isla Cedros, could very likely be found in archaeological contexts. Matthew Des Lauriers (2005, 2007) has previously mentioned finding evidence of a sea otter hunting camp on Isla Cedros, though he suggested it was of a later vintage (ca 1840s). It is interesting to note that not only Alaskan men, but also women were included in some of the voyages, and so artifacts that relate to women's activities may also be found. One such artifact is a crescent-shaped slate hide-scraping blade called an *ulu*.

The ecological effects of the destruction of the sea otter population eventually would be felt on the Pacific coastal areas of Baja California. Since the sea otter's main prey are abalone and sea urchins, both of these creatures may have suddenly become more available on the coast. With the increase in sea urchins, however, there would come a greater destruction of the kelp beds, since sea urchins feed on these plants (see Farris 2007:29).

The story of the importance of sea otter exploitation on the Pacific coast of Baja California is a subject that deserves greater attention because of its implications into historical, ethnographic and archaeological research.

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