

### ***Segment 3: The golden fur***



At 600,000 hairs per square inch, sea otter fur is a protective necessity for a small, warm-blooded mammal trying to make its living in the cold upwelling water of the California coast. It is a typical evolutionary conundrum: The cold water produces a bonanza of seafood. But those same currents sap the warmth from a small otter's body. Other marine mammals layer themselves with insulating blubber. Sea otters found a different solution in the fine hairs of their fur. These hairs trap so much air that they keep the frigid water off an otter's skin, cloaking the animal in a thin silver bubble that allows perfect freedom of movement and perfect access to the larder of the kelp forest.

La Pérouse knew of these animals. "Here sea otter skins are as common as in the Aleutian Island and those of the other seas frequented by the Russians," La Pérouse announced in his journals. But then he scoffed, "It is perfectly unaccountable that the Spanish . . . should have been hitherto ignorant of the value of this precious trade of furs."

Such voracious fascination with otters was driven by high prices for otter fur in China, each pelt being worth \$30 to \$40 in many years and up to \$100 in banner seasons. Compared to the price of a house in San Diego, \$96, every otter wore a small fortune.

#### ***Doomed by Yankee Ingenuity***

In the late 1700s, otter pelts had become the "royal fur" of China "Ladies in high social standing wore otter capes," historian Adele Ogden wrote. Otter skin robes were "the style of the day for Chinese Mandarins." Soon, the coast of California became a destination for a highly profitable, illegal foreign otter hunt. The English merchants had been prevented from trading in California by a treaty signed in 1790, but American ships soon began arriving in Spanish ports, mysteriously in need of urgent repair or supplies. On August 25, 1800 the *Betsy*, out of Boston, sailed into San Diego harbor announcing a

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dire need for water and wood. Captain James Rowan declared he had been in the North Pacific and Hawaii and was on his way to China. But his letters back to Boston recounted his real itinerary: a trading venture along the California coast, illegally stocking up on otter furs.

Other captains were bold enough to purchase otter pelts right under the nose of Spanish authorities, in Spanish ports. In March 1803 the *Lelia Byrd* arrived in San Diego, pleading the need of supplies, and was given 5 days to arrange them. The night before their impending departure the Spanish guard on board woke to the sound of a boat being lowered over the side.



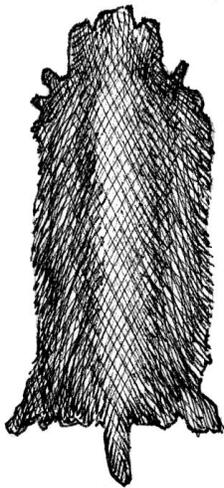
“Where is that boat going?” he demanded.

“We are searching for one of our crew who did not return from the hunt today,” came the reply from the quickly rowed boat as it disappeared into the night.

Later, another splash roused the guard. The ship’s launch had been readied. “Why?”

“To look for the first boat!” The launch vanished.

The first boat returned soon with a load of otter skins, and the crew of the launch was confronted in the act of buying more on the nearby beach. Arrested by Spanish officials, the launch’s crew were brazenly rescued by the *Lelia Byrd*’s captain at the point of a pistol and hustled out of San Diego on the dawn wind, pursued by futile Spanish bullets.



Many Yankee ships played this cat and mouse game, cutting year by year into the otter population along the coast. The catch varied by vessel, but often a captain and crew could succeed handsomely. All in all, an estimated 17,000 furs were exported from California to China in 1803, 1804, and 1805. This level of exploitation did not prove to be sustainable, and soon ships began reporting bad years when otter pelts could be obtained only in the hundreds, not the thousands. “I do not think we shall get 600 in all on

the coast,” reported Captain John Rogers Cooper in 1833. By then an estimated 100,000 southern otter pelts had been sold.

### ***The End of the Otter Hunt***

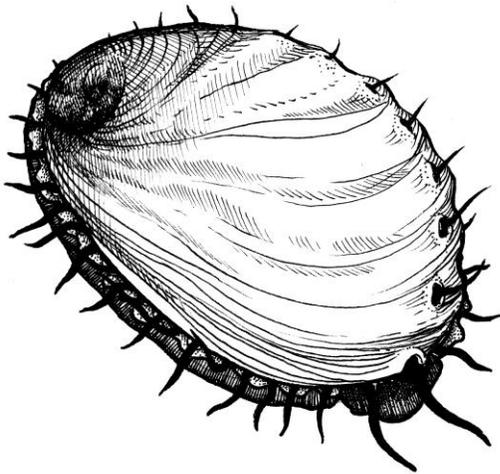
In general otters were in such steep decline by the 1830s that laws were passed (though widely ignored) restricting otter hunting to Mexican nationals. Instead, ships from Hawaii occasionally appeared in the decade after 1830, crewed by *contrabandistas* who secured neither permission nor licenses to hunt. These boats, studded with cannon and crammed with guns, were happy with catches that the previous generation of ship

captains would have scoffed at. One such vessel, the *Griffon*, considered itself to be unusually lucky when it “after two months obtained 300 sea otter skins!” This success too was fleeting, and hunts of only 100 skins a season soon became more common, so little that “the owners will not lose or gain anything by the voyage.” Eventually, in 1841, even the Russians abandoned their outpost at Fort Ross, north of San Francisco. Although otter hunting continued until the California Gold Rush eclipsed other forms of extractive wealth, the decade from 1840 to 1850 saw the end of the commercial otter enterprise.

Much had changed politically in California as well. The old mission system was largely gone, decayed into adobe ruin when the Spanish Empire fell and Mexico won its 1821 independence. But war between the former colonies of the United States and Mexico was coming and would shift the ownership of land out of Mexican hands. By 1848, California left the Mexican republic and was incorporated into the United States. Such a period of upheaval left many land tenure records shattered and lost, with disastrous consequences to the Ohlone and to the former Spanish citizens who had settled in California. It was a time of transformation from the old to the new.

### ***Far-Reaching Effects***

The hunters went off to other trades, and the Chinese lost their taste for otter fur. The ships no longer came to California to trade for furs, and the native culture was slipping away. Up in the Sierra the first hints of gold galvanized the attention of the whole frontier. Hope turned inland.



But along the coast the extraction of otters from kelp forests created an unexpected and unobserved cascade of ecological effects. No longer roiling with rafts of otters, the quiet coves and inlets of the coast might have seemed quiet on the surface. But beneath the long ocean swell, a revolution was taking shape that changed the coast for more than a century to come.

Red sea urchins, some the size of basketballs, began to thrive in the absence of their major predator: sea otters. Smaller purple sea urchins that could fill a large man’s hand also bloomed. Beside them crawled a new generation of cold water snail, the abalone, that until the disappearance of the otter lived out their lives crammed into protected rock crevices. Freed of rocky confines, these plate-shaped snails grew to extraordinary size and soon began crowding one another off the rocks.

Urchins and abalone eat seaweed, especially the long, luxuriant giant kelp plants that normally grow in abundance along the California coast. Without otters to keep them in check, the sea urchin and abalone populations skyrocketed, and these herbivores, in turn, chewed into the kelp forests. Where once stood thick stems of kelp reaching a hundred feet from ocean bottom to the surface, now there persisted mere wisps of kelp,

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growing quickly toward the light until the horde of herbivores crawled over and chewed them down.

No one recorded this transformation; it fell to later generations to discover the domino effect caused by the otter hunt. And the otter hunters themselves turned their view toward other targets: gold in the mountains and other prey in the sea. Other marine mammals frequented the coast of California, and the captains who profited from the otter trade also consorted with the whaling fleets that wintered in Hawaii. Otters no longer brought in enough money to make a captain happy or a boat owner wealthy. But there were whales in Monterey Bay.

