a furry FUTURE

Despite their ecological and cultural significance, sea otters haven't inhabited the Oregon coast since the early 1980s. Is it time to bring these lovable mammals back?

Written by **OLIVIA BENNETT**
Photographed by **KAI KANZER**

Along Route 101 on the Washington coast, almost 200 miles west of Seattle, tourists and locals can stop to look out into the Pacific Ocean. They watch as waves go on for miles. Rocks tower from the ocean floor and sea lions rest atop their surface. Seagulls fly in the air, circling the ocean waters.

While many come for the vast views, there are some at these spots in search of what rides past the waves. Dr. Shawn Larson is one who makes the 156-mile drive from Hansville, Washington, to Washington's coast. The senior conservation research manager at the Seattle Aquarium monitors sea otters and the ever-changing habitat. As Larson looks through her telescope at the Kalaloch Lodge in Olympic National Park on a windy, March afternoon, she spots what she came for.

"There's a raft of about 200 to 300 sea otters," Larson says, pointing out into the ocean.

To the naked eye, what Larson sees seems like a small brown dot riding over the waves. But with a telescope, she observes hundreds of sea otters, some foraging for food, others holding their pups and all of them riding the Pacific's waves.

Once a month, Larson travels to different locations along the Washington coast to track both the number of sea otters and their activity, including their eating habits. Besides the research, Larson says she enjoys looking at sea otters in their natural habitat.

"No matter what they are doing," Larson says. "Whether they are eating, sleeping or playing with other otters or pups, it's just great."

From La Push to Neah Bay, towns that span the northern Washington coast, sea otters can be spotted in the ocean floating on their backs or gliding through the waters. In Washington, the sea otter population is upward of 3,000. In the waters of southeast Alaska, the numbers are even greater, with roughly 25,000 sea otters. And from Monterey Bay to Baja California, sea otters have become an attraction in recent years.

But on the Oregon Coast, there are none.

"Every time I see an otter out on the outer Washington coast, I'm reminded of their history and that

The Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport is one of the few places in the state to see sea otters. After a morning of activities, Oswald rests on his back and basks in the sun.

we are so lucky to have them here," Larson says. "Oregon and northern California aren't so lucky, but there's efforts to reestablish the sea otters there."

It's hard to look at sea otters and not instantly *awe* at their cuteness. The majority of the time, this sea mammal floats effortlessly on its back. After diving down into the ocean to find their meal, sea otters come up to the surface and use tools, like rocks, to smash open different shellfish and then quickly devour them. Their fur looks silky as they swim through the cold waters.

Sea otters' fur is what has made for such a rich history along the Pacific Northwest coast. Sea otters have the thickest fur of any sea mammal, and during the fur trade from 1741 to 1867, they were overhunted for their fur. In the 1970s, a program was launched to reintroduce the sea otters, but by the early 1980s they were all gone.

Now, more than 40 years later, another plan to reintroduce the creature is under serious consideration.

Since 2018, the Elakha Alliance, a nonprofit organization formed by tribal, nonprofit and conservation leaders, has worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to bring sea otters back to the Oregon coast.

The Alliance has been showcasing the benefits of reintroducing sea otters to schools, fishing communities and aquariums. Chanel Hason, the alliance's director of outreach and community relations, goes to schools and retirement centers and even holds a beer festival to help educate people about sea otters and their significance.

"They are way more than just a cute, super furry critter in the ocean," Hason said. "They play a large role in the ecosystem and for tribal culture."

Sea otters are an example of a keystone species. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, such species, even in small numbers, "can have a large impact" on their environment. In shallow water ecosystems, sea otters can be a predator as well as protector of the environment. The sea otters' role in the ocean's kelp forest habitat is an example.

Kelp forests grow from the ocean floor; some species can reach a height of 150 feet. Research shows kelp can absorb carbon emissions. But kelp's carbon-eating ways are endangered by sea urchins that feed off the brown algae. Michele Zwartjes, field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said sea otters help increase the density and coverage of kelp forests because they prey on urchins. Zwartjes said that sea otters can have "extremely positive impacts in the areas where the [habitat grows]."

As a keystone species, sea otters "have so many cascading beneficial effects on multiple species, and increases in biodiversity and bringing back sea grasses and kelps," Zwartjes said. "So, all of those things would all flow from just this one animal coming back."

Bringing them back to the Oregon coast could help restore a balance that was lost years ago. In British Columbia, with the presence of sea otters and an expanding kelp forest, there has been an "increase of 4.4-8.7 million metric tons worth" of carbon storage, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

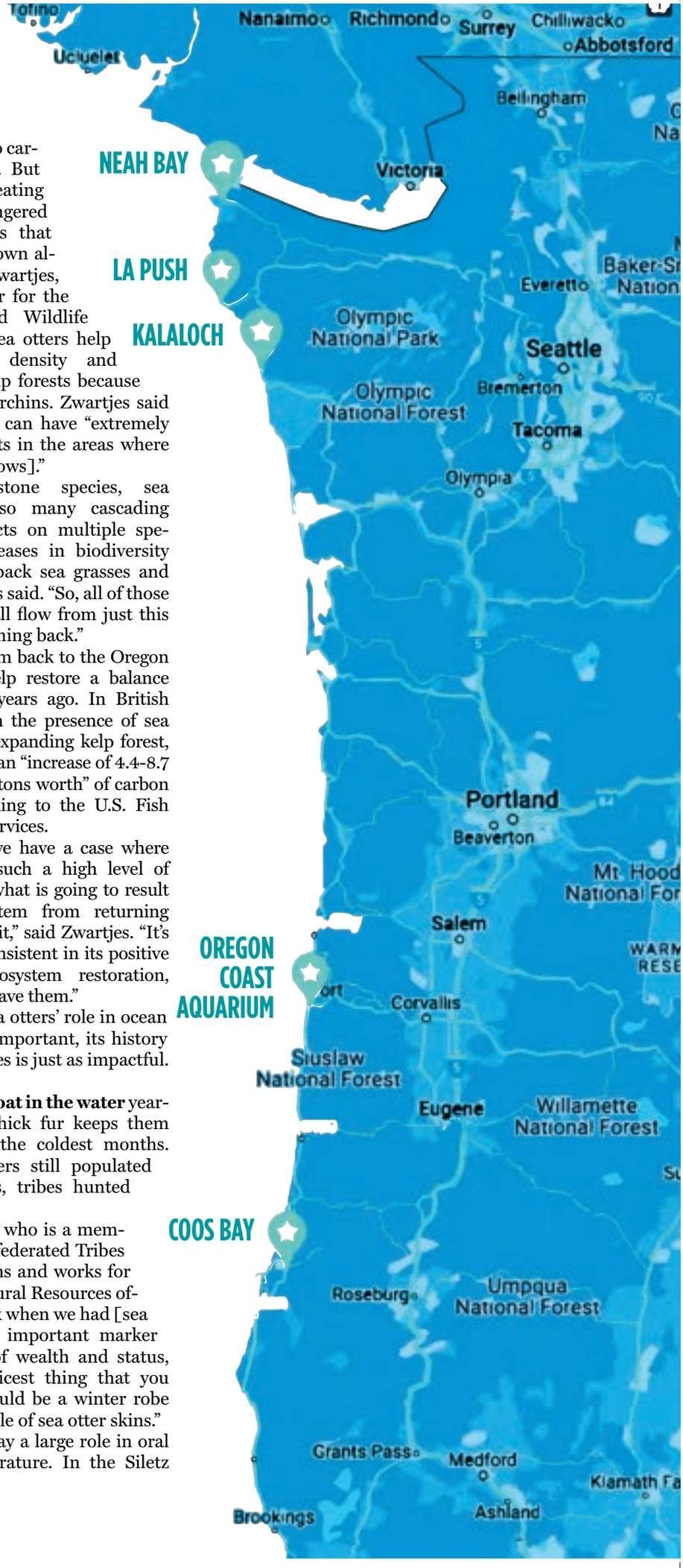
"Rarely do we have a case where we can have such a high level of confidence in what is going to result in the ecosystem from returning that animal to it," said Zwartjes. "It's just been so consistent in its positive effects on ecosystem restoration, wherever you have them."

While the sea otters' role in ocean ecosystems is important, its history in tribal cultures is just as impactful.

Sea otters float in the water year-round; their thick fur keeps them warm during the coldest months. When sea otters still populated Oregon waters, tribes hunted for their furs.

Peter Hatch, who is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and works for the tribe's Cultural Resources office, said, "Back when we had [sea otters], a real important marker for a person of wealth and status, kind of the nicest thing that you could own, would be a winter robe made of a couple of sea otter skins."

Sea otters play a large role in oral traditional literature. In the Siletz



tribe there is a story of a young Coos woman going out to live with the sea otter people and marrying them. That interrelationship story traveled down generations and "ensures the prosperity of both," said Hatch. He described this genre as showing the "boundary between human people and animal more fluid than most people see it as today."

This genre is present throughout tribes in the northwest and it affects the approach tribes take with these animals and how they treat them. It can become obvious in these stories that otters are more than just a resource for the tribe; they are "relatives," Hatch suggested.

When Hatch was growing up in Portland, Oregon, in the late 1990s, he and his father, Dave, were building a sailboat. Wanting to give the boat a name, the two searched in the Gill's Dictionary of the Chinook Jargon and came across the word E-lăk'-ka, which means sea otter.

> ***"They are way more than just a cute, super furry critter in the ocean."***
>
> ***— Chanel Hason***

"That sent dad down the path of inquiry," said Hatch. In the succeeding years, his father would advocate for the return of the sea otter. But it wouldn't be until 2018, and after Dave Hatch had passed away, that the Elakha Alliance was formed as a nonprofit. The Alliance is trying to "restore the ancient cultural connections between sea otters and coastal Indigenous people."

The extinction of the sea otter in Oregon "is a recent thing humans did and that humans can undo," Hatch said. "So, we should try."

Crates stacked with bags of Dungeness crabs move throughout the docks at Hallmark Fisheries in Coos Bay, Oregon. Their claws poke out of the bags as they are prepared to get shipped around the world. In Oregon, Dungeness crabs make up one of the largest commercial fishing businesses. Over the past 10 years, their catch value, the amount of money fishermen receive from their catch, has ranged from $33 to $74 million annually.

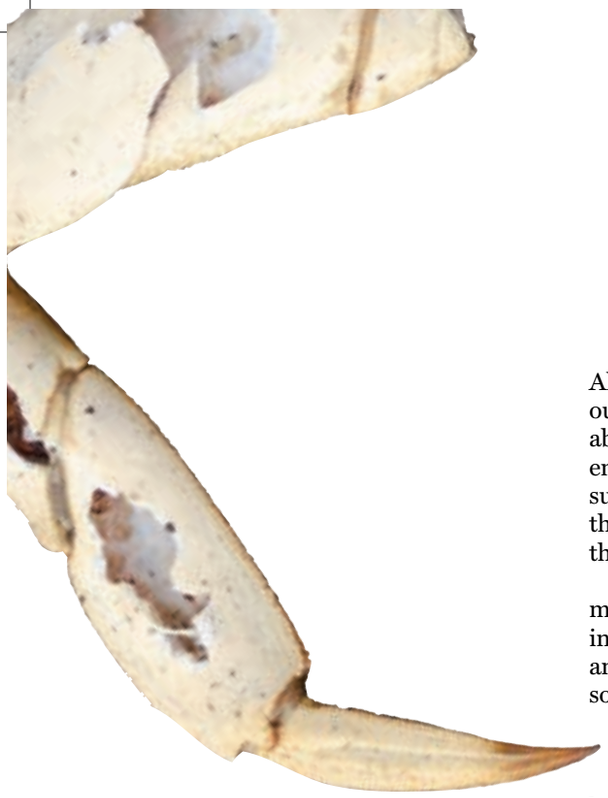
These crab markets are one of the "most valuable single-species fisheries in Oregon," according to the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission. Crabs are also one of the sea otter's favorite meals. Sea otters eat about 20-30% of their body weight a day.

Story continues on page 34.

The bulk of the northwest sea otter population resides in Washington. Researchers are looking to reintroduce otters along the Oregon coast.

Sea urchins endanger carbon-eating kelp.

At the Oregon Coast Aquarium, tall pieces of kelp sway in tanks. They can provide shelter and combat global warming for nearshore ecosystems.



Since the creation of the Elakha Alliance, its members have reached out to communities to inform them about what the reintroduction would entail. The Alliance wanted to make sure those who could be affected by the reintroduction were included in the conversation from the start.

"It's really about engaging community members on a monthly basis, including with various stakeholders and community organizations," Hason said, "just to make sure everyone is on the same page. We answer their questions and concerns with factual data and evidence based on other relocations."

Tim Novotony, executive director of the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission, said that the Elakha Alliance has heard his concerns involving the crabs and fisheries, but that the commission is still "trepidatious."

To preserve a sustainable fishery, the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission follows certain rules. It doesn't harvest female crabs and it makes sure not to harvest underage male crabs. "Obviously we don't expect sea otters will adhere to those same rules, and that becomes a concern," said Novotony.

> ***"There is going to be some impact to the fishery regardless."***
>
> *— Tim Novotony*

One reintroduction model that the commission could look to was when sea otters were placed in southeast Alaska. The population of sea otters grew more than expected, and the mammals decimated the crab population.

"There is no history of our fishery ever interacting with a large amount of sea otters," said Novotony.

Novotony said he wants the Dungeness Crab Commission to be heard throughout this process and protections put in place ahead of time. "There is going to be some impact to the fishery regardless," said Novotony.

In Neah Bay, Washington, local fisheries were affected by the growing sea otter population. Jonathan Scordino, the marine mammal biologist for the Makah tribe, said that the sea otter population is at carrying capacity, referring to the number of species an environment can hold. Scordino said these sea otters have affected people's fishing businesses. There used to be several families who had sea urchin fisheries in their area, said Scordino; now, there are none.

Scordino said he understands that there are ecological benefits to reintroducing sea otters, but humans need to be a part of the conversation.

"That's where you get the impacts to people's livelihoods and cultures," said Scordino. "That's where your cost starts to outweigh the benefits."

In order for sea otters to be reintroduced along the Oregon coast, it would take several years of research and planning to determine the most suitable locations for the sea mammals. Once locations are picked, an environmental impact statement would be written.

From that point, another five to six years would be needed before sea otters would be placed into the ocean. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services estimates the reintroduction process would take 13 years and cost between $26 and $43 million. It would take time to see the effects the mammals would have on Oregon's ecosystem.

Each time Shawn Larson makes her way to the Washington coast, she is watching the effects of the reintroduction that occurred there in the 1970s. "It's always changing out there, and there is still so much that we need to understand," Larson says. "It's important to be out there and observe what is happening."

On this March afternoon, she stands on a cliff, binoculars to her eyes. Larson stands next to Brittany Blades, a curator of marine mammals at the Or-

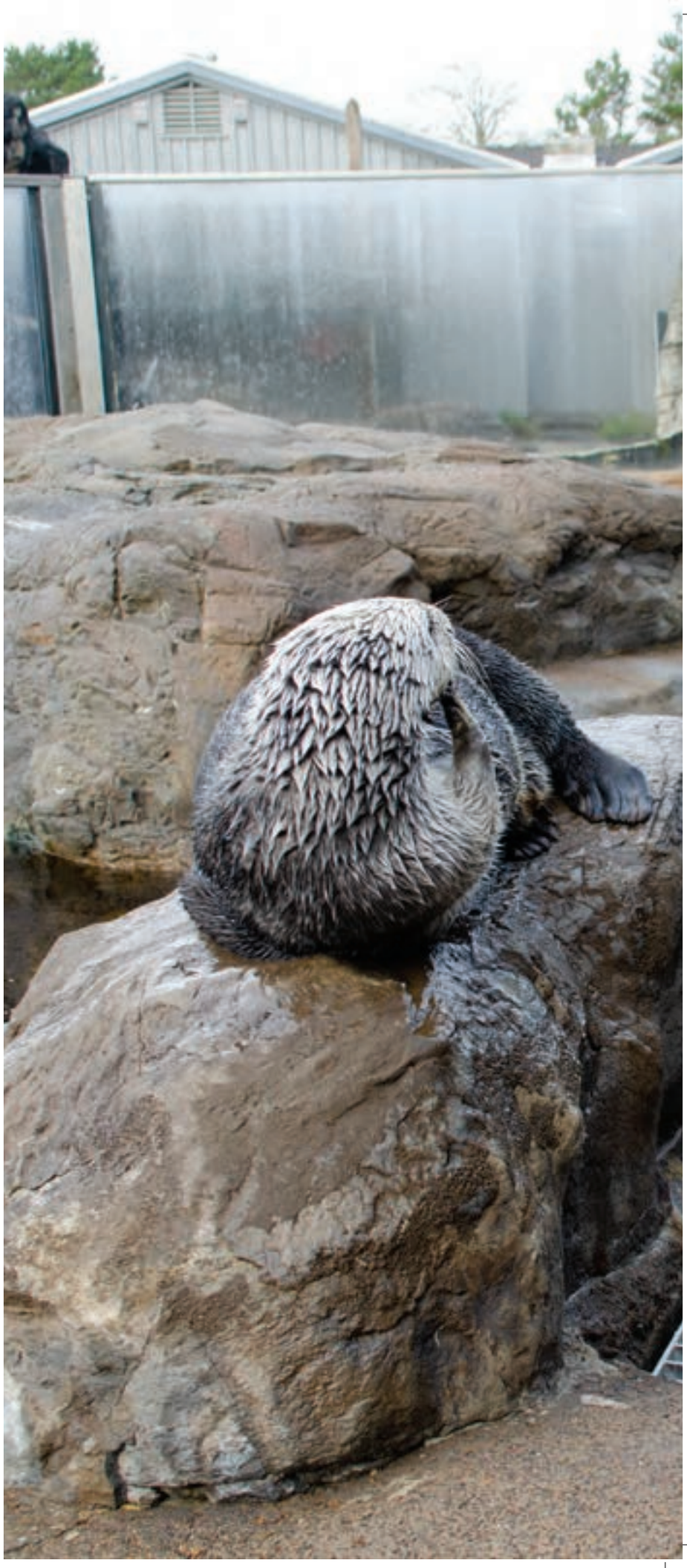
On the docks in Coos Bay, fishermen raise their nets full of crabs. Crabbing is one of the most profitable industries in the state, reeling in over $91.5 million in 2022.

egon Coast Aquarium. The pair are tracking a lone sea otter as it forages for food, keeping the time it stays underwater and the type of food it brings up.

Larson calls out, “It’s up,” indicating the otter has come back to the surface. Blades stops the timer, jots down the time and waits for Larson to say what the otter is doing. For Blades, this is only her second time getting to make the six-hour drive to Washington. The only place Blades can observe sea otters in the wild is in Washington.

Getting to survey and witness sea otters, Blades says, is “really cool” and helps with her work at the aquarium.

After a few minutes pass, Larson yells, “It’s down!” and Blades starts the timer. Neither knows when the sea otter will resurface, but they keep their eyes glued to the water, waiting to see when the creature will pop back up.



Brittany Blades, who has worked at the Oregon Coast Aquarium for 12 years, prepares the next activity for the morning.