

# Bringing Back a Relative:

## *Sea Otter Reintroduction on the Oregon Coast*

ROBERT BAILEY & PETER HATCH

Watch > [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyYH4KBHKU4&ab\\_channel=ElakhaAlliance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyYH4KBHKU4&ab_channel=ElakhaAlliance)

Through uncounted generations our ancestors shared Oregon's shoreline with sea otters, called *Elakha* by Clatsop and Chinook people, a name carried by the Elakha Alliance in its mission to return sea otters to Oregon.

Since the beginning of time, when our Peoples' footprints first marked the sands, we coexisted with *Elakha*. The stories of our Ancestors recognize sea otters as our respected kin, and instruct us to preserve that kinship among all our relationships to the natural world around us, so that we might forever enjoy the abundance that the ocean has to offer for our sustenance and prosperity.

Valued for their beauty and unique waterproof attributes, the wary and agile otters only rarely gave their bodies up to hunters. A sea otter robe, supple and shimmering, ranked among the most valuable things a person could own: an expression of a headman's stature; a gift to unite two families in a marriage pact; even currency to establish bonds of trade and influence, or to settle a dispute.

The calamities that befell Oregon's coastal Tribes and sea otters during the 1800s were devastating; although the Indigenous Peoples of Oregon's coast

found ways to survive, persist, and adapt, *Elakha* did not. Even after a century of absence, the heritage of Oregon's vanished sea otters lives just below the surface of everyday awareness, in the names of ancestral hunting places (Otter Rock, Otter Point, Otter Crest, among others), among the bones and tools at sites we have used for millennia, and certainly in the oral histories, traditions, and practices of Oregon's coastal Indigenous People today.

One day, *Elakha* will once again swim along Oregon's shores. It is our duty, responsibility, and hope—as our Ancestors would have it be—to encourage and assist the work of the Elakha Alliance in manifesting this renewal. A renewal not only of old ways and old traditions, but of the necessary balance between human needs and the needs of the natural world upon which human life depends. One day, if we can hand down this renewal to our grandchildren, the 100-year absence of *Elakha* from Oregon's coast will be dimly remembered as only a tragic but brief interruption.



In partnership with all the other users and stewards of our ocean, we want to bring that day as soon as possible.

In this seven-minute video, produced by the Oregon Zoo in 2021, Peter Hatch, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and board member of the Elakha Alliance, explores the cultural significance of sea otters and what their return would mean to all people. The video may be accessed on the Elakha Alliance YouTube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyYH4KBHKU4&ab\\_channel=ElakhaAlliance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyYH4KBHKU4&ab_channel=ElakhaAlliance)

The **Elakha Alliance**, an Oregon non-profit, seeks to return sea otters to Oregon and restore them to their place in Oregon's marine ecosystem and restore the ancient connections between Indian people and sea otters.



#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Robert Bailey and Peter Hatch  
Elakha Alliance Board of Directors  
PO Box 704  
Siletz, Oregon 97380 USA  
[bob@elakhaalliance.org](mailto:bob@elakhaalliance.org)  
[PeterH@ctsi.nsn.us](mailto:PeterH@ctsi.nsn.us)



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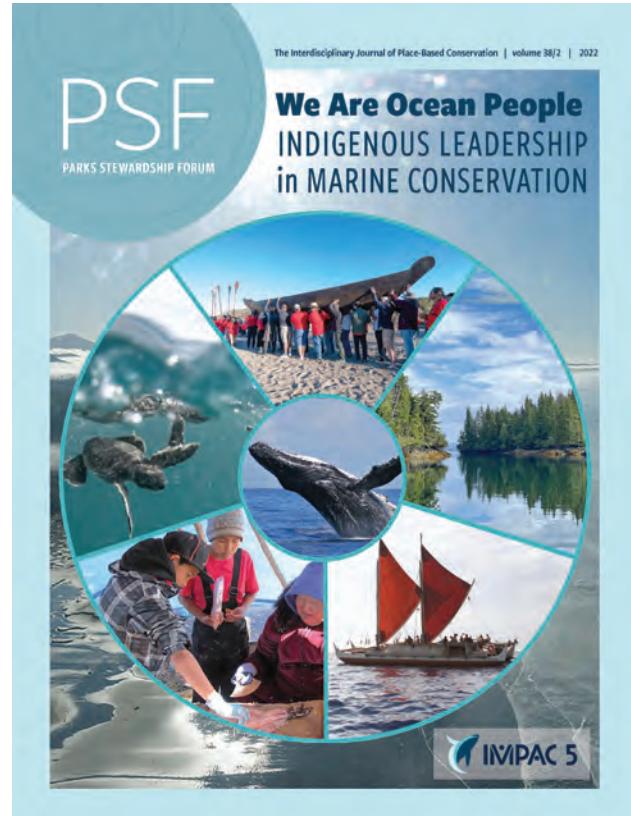
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#### On the cover of this issue

CIRCLE DESIGN, clockwise from top:

- Northern Chumash ceremony | ROBERT SCHWEMMER
- Haida Gwaii | CINDY BOYKO
- The Polynesian Voyaging Society's voyaging canoe Hōkūle'a | NOAA
- Elder teaching youths, northern Alaska | US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
- Baby Honu (sea turtles), Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | NOAA
- Center: Humpback whale, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | NOAA

Background: Pacific Rim National Park Reserve | PARKS CANADA