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The Sea Otter Islands: Geopolitics and Environment in the East Asian Fur Trade

By Richard Ravalli, Ph.D.

Abstract

The origins of the sea otter trade can be traced to inter-Asian fur markets that developed centuries prior to the well-chronicled journeys of Vitus Bering and James Cook in the North Pacific. Japanese merchants and Ainu hunters traded for otter pelts as part of a larger system of exchanges in the Western Pacific. Russian entry to the trade by the early eighteenth century intensified territorial disputes in the Kuril Islands. A series of Russo-Japanese showdowns in the region helped forge an international borderland that lasted well into the nineteenth century. A comparison of the environmental effects of the Western Pacific sea otter trade prior to 1800 with other areas where otters were hunted and traded reveals limited degradation of otter herds in the Kurils.

What can a sea otter swimming in the frigid seas of northeastern Asia teach us about international relations in the Pacific? Quite a bit, even though studies of the global trade for sea otter pelts usually ignore the history of the Asian sea otter. As a whole, the species suffers under a EuroAmerican bias.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 by scholars as having pioneered the trade. 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 discussion offers an examination of the inter-Asian origins of the sea otter trade. Beyond accounting for the beginnings of Chinese commercial interest in the species, East 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 geopolitical context. For a variety of reasons, the trade involving Hokkaido and the Kuril Islands was not as significant a stimulus for the first extensive non-native activity there as the otter trade was for portions of the Eastern Pacific. Nevertheless, it did play a role in shaping the regional 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 effect of the Western Pacific trade by 1800 both reflects and differs from developments elsewhere. Hunting pressures reduced local otter herds in the eighteenth century yet not to the extent of other places and times (such as the depletion of sea otters in the Pacific Northwest during the early nineteenth century). In the Kurils, political dynamics and conservation efforts account for a stabilization of sea otter numbers by the mid-nineteenth century, which provided for a later influx of American hunters to the islands.

More broadly, events associated with the East 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, Igler continues, 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]

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 events in the Eastern Pacific central to 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 in all areas 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 sea otter fur to Chinese consumers 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 otter 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 pelage 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 by Chinese merchants (with perhaps the exception of the Russian sable).

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 are 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] 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]

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 fur 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 some 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' were traded in eastern Ezo. Later, in 1594, Kakizaki Yoshihiro reportedly offered three sea otter pelts as gifts to Hideyoshi, supreme military commander of Japan, 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, 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, (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 "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 were 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 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 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 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, furs collected by Russians were largely sent to European markets. Following the treaty, China became a major destination for the promyshlenniki, particularly considering the lucrative market established in Asia for sea otter, something they were then in position to exploit. The supply of Siberian furs ran low by the early eighteenth century, yet explorers advanced toward otter habitat in the Western Pacific, helping make the Kyakhta trade a very productive one. 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 supplies for Siberian outposts.[25] While Eva-Maria Stolberg suggests 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 provided one element 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 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

Figure 1: ***The Muller Map of 1754*** (Courtesy, James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota)

people named Dembei, a Japanese castaway held captive at Kamchatka. By the 1720s, daring individuals encouraged by the tsar 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 experience, 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 (Figure 1) is a generally accurate picture 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 (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 (Figure 2) graphically 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 demonstrates that the Eastern Pacific came into greater focus because of the numerous fur traders and explorers who ventured across the ocean for decades after Bering.

Russian Hunting in the Western Pacific

Procurement of sea otter on Kamchatka and among the Kurils suffers from a lack of historical attention and some misjudgment. Russian hunters often referred to them as

Figure 2: ***The Billings/Sarychev Map*** (Courtesy, James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota)

"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 accounts (in English) contribute a number of facts. The first Russian expedition to the northern Kurils in 1711 found no sea otters on Shumshu Island, but for an island beyond, the Russians 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 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 distinct 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 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 for facilitating trade with Japan. A series of Japanese rebuffs of trade 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]

Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Trade

While sailors had visited Urup for decades prior to 1794, the attempt to establish a colony on the island dates from this time. In that year the governor of Irkutsk recommended settlement of Urup and launched an effort by creating the Northern Company (later the Russian-American Company)

controlled by Grigorii Shelikov .[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]

Despite the failure to colonize the islands, Russians actively pursued furs throughout the Kurils and inched closer to Japan, while Japanese traders remained centered on Hokkaido. 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 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 relatively peacefully. Yet soon after, an outbreak of violence 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 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.[45] 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, burned structures, and stole temple objects at Sakhalin, leaving behind, as Walter A. McDougall writes, "a proclamation condemning the Japanese refusal to trade and threatening to lay waste all northern Japan."[46] 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—he was warned of Kvostov and Davydov's activities yet was 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.[47]

While a war was avoided, the series of events at the turn-of-the-century set a tone that affected the region geopolitically 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 assert Russian 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.[48]

A number of national and international issues were involved in shaping this Western Pacific zone in the nineteenth century. Yet the inter-Asian fur trade played an important part in influencing the 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 a stronger claim to certain 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 an effort to inhabit territory in response to the trade. This confirms the historical position that Europeans and Americans attempting to purchase Chinese goods were 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 article 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 these inter-Asian origins.

Environmental Effect of the Trade

Prior to 1850, the sea otter fared better in the Kurils than it did elsewhere in the Pacific. As researchers S.I. Kornev and S.M. Korneva summarize, "In the eighteenth century, hunting pressure was not high enough to result in population declines."[49] Support for this conclusion can be seen in the struggle 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 given to North American furs and colonial ventures by the latter half of the 1700s also meant that Kuril otters were not over-exploited. Nevertheless, this situation applies mostly to the central and southern Kurils, as hunting and tribute payments on Kamchatka and the northern islands during the eighteenth century did deplete populations of fur bearing mammals.[50] Tempered Japanese enthusiasm for the sea otter as a market item also explains the relative abundance of the animals by the mid-nineteenth century. Japan's involvement on Iturup apparently did little to reduce the island's herds. Englishman H.J. Snow, who hunted sea otters in the Kurils during the 1870s and 80s, noted the 1869 construction of a colonial office at Iturup but 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.[51]

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.[52] Experienced Aleut laborers were brought in and were working elsewhere in the Kurils by the 1830s. However, it was around this time that RAC officials introduced conservation efforts meant to buttress declining stocks of sea otters and fur seals throughout their Pacific holdings. To preserve 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 environmental methods implemented by the RAC, had the effect of stabilizing yearly catches after becoming official company policy in the 1830s.[53] Therefore, even with the return to Urup, Kuril sea otters never experienced the long-term exploitation by Russians as seen in the Aleutian Islands. The timing of rejuvenated hunting enterprises in the Kurils served as a check against environmental depletion.[54]

Ultimately, American hunters ventured to the Kurils after 1850 and harvested the islands' marine mammals beyond what the RAC, Japan, or the Ainu ever achieved. By the mid-nineteenth century, a process of Americanizing the remaining sea otter trade throughout the Pacific was under way. This included numerous visits to the proverbial birthplace of the Pacific fur trade, and independent American outfits paid tribute to the Asian sea otter in a manner that, at that time, they knew best. I discuss these developments elsewhere.[55]

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 commercial foundations by which the Russian Empire extended its reach over an ocean. Promyshlenniki were checked in this advance in a manner roughly 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 and the Pacific Northwest. Hence, human greed for the fur of the sea otter set in motion the linkage of oceanic regions and ultimately played a role in the non-native discovery and development of a sizable portion of western North America. These more recognizable historical occurrences in the Eastern Pacific were preceded by centuries of events surrounding the "Sea Otter Islands" that deserve greater recognition from historians of the American fur trade.

ENDNOTES

1. David Igler, "Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770-1850," *American Historical* Review 109:3 (June 2004): 695.
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.
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 had reached 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
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.
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.
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.
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.
20. Walker, 126.
21. Walker, 121.
22. Quoted in Takahashi, 42.
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.
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.)
30. McDougall, 57-58.
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 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.
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.
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.
43. Stephan, 70-71.
44. Walker, 176.
45. Officially, Nagasaki was the only open port open to foreign trade during the roughly two and a half centuries of Japan's closed door policy.
46. McDougall, 131-134.
47. Stephan, 79.
48. Stephan, 80-95.
49. 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.
50. See Stephan, 98-99.
51. H.J. Snow, *In Forbidden Seas: Recollections of Sea-Otter Hunting in the Kurils* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), 291.
52. 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.
53. 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; Black, 199.
54. 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).
55. See Richard Ravalli, "The Near Extinction and Reemergence of the Pacific Sea Otter, 1850-1938," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 100:4 (Fall 2009): 181-191.

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