

Sea otters restocked in old home

AEC prepares Amchitka for a test blast, moves otters south

by Christopher Weathersbee

The Atomic Energy Commission has never been the darling of conservationists. It does things with too much of a bang.

When the AEC first cast its eye on the island of Amchitka as a possible site for the testing of underground nuclear explosions, howls of anguish went up; the island is part of the Aleutians National Wildlife Refuge, created to preserve the colonies of nesting birds and some 2,500 sea otters that live there.

There once were many more, but by the turn of the century fur hunters had brought the otters to the verge of extinction. Once the otters had been numerous from the Aleutians to Baja California. Diligent conservation efforts over the last 50 years have taken the once-threatened population off the critical list, but they still are not plentiful.

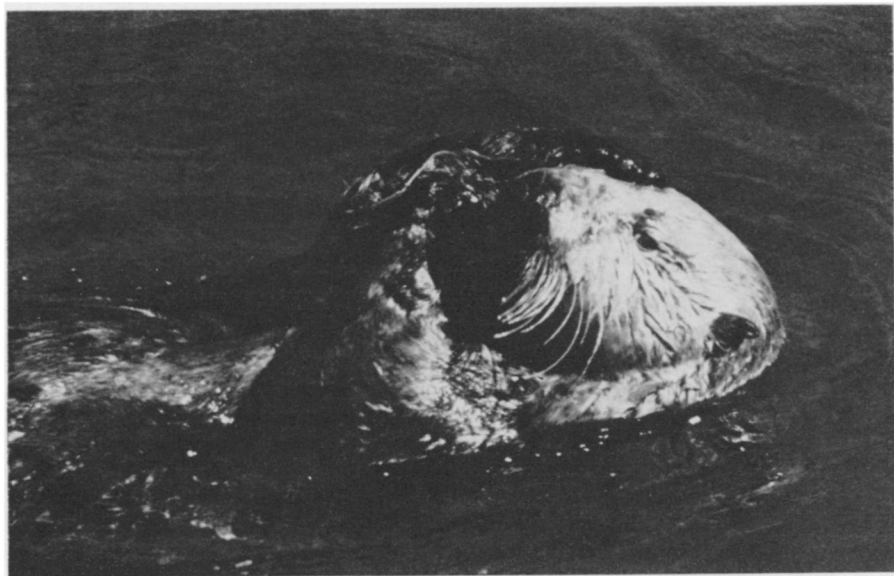
The AEC may emerge from the Amchitka confrontation as at least a demihero. For reasons of its own, the agency has made possible the transplanting of some 360 sea otters from Amchitka to seven former habitats where otters have not been seen for a century. Hopefully they will breed and restock the areas.

Thus, while the short-run outlook for the otters near the test site is still being debated, the species as a whole may benefit from the attentions of the AEC.

Some \$200 million has been spent so far to make Amchitka an underground nuclear test site.

It was originally selected because it is geologically similar to the Kamchatka Peninsula where Soviet nuclear tests are conducted, a similarity expected to lead to better interpretation of seismic rumblings from Kamchatka.

Now, depending on the outcome of geological studies still under way, four



Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game

Transported otter relaxes and preens in ancestral range in Sitka Sound.

of what are reported to be the largest underground tests yet have been tentatively scheduled, and Amchitka is in the way of becoming a test bed for antiballistic missile warheads.

The move to remote Amchitka was made, as one AEC official put it, "because we were breaking too much glass in Las Vegas." Also, venting of radioactive gas in populated areas is feared.

The Amchitka tests that began in 1965 did not harm the wildlife populations. But the risks increase as the planned shots get bigger.

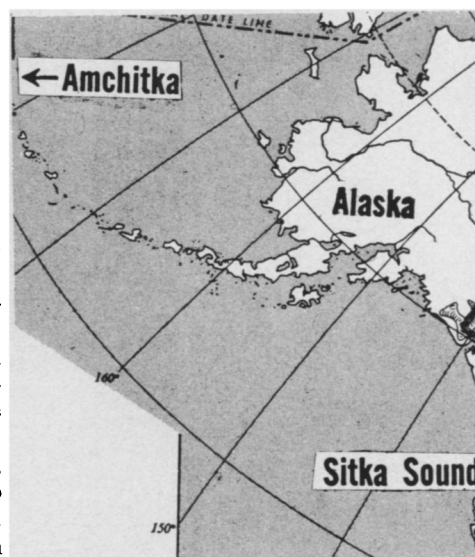
Coincidentally, the state of Alaska, owner of the sea otters, has wanted to transplant some for quite a few years. The Amchitka population has grown too large for its food supply. Last year the state was forced to kill some otters to ensure adequate food for the rest; it will have to thin the colony again this year, despite the 360 transplantations.

Adult male otters around Amchitka are reported to be running about 20 pounds under their proper 80-pound weight. The creatures need a plentiful food supply; at maturity they eat about a quarter of their own weight a day in fish and shellfish.

Catching and transporting enough otters for a restocking effort calls for more time and money than Alaska could afford, however. The otters have to be netted from small boats in the heavy kelp beds where they feed, then flown 2,000 miles to southeast Alaska, the area being restocked.

The official explanation of AEC participation is that by happy coincidence it was on hand with manpower and big cargo planes that, once they unloaded, had been flying south empty.

However, the agency has spent a



Amchitka otters stock southern coast.

considerable amount of money on the project, building holding tanks and other installations. Privately it is conceded that everything possible is being done to assist on the wildlife front in an effort to placate the conservationists.

Nevertheless, there may be rows over the fate of the animals left behind.

The AEC says tests run for it by Battelle Memorial Institute show that the maximum possible underwater shock wave from the biggest blast contemplated will not harm the otters; this is supported by earlier experience. But officials of the National Audubon Society and other conservation groups are not so sure that the tests run in pressure tanks can be extrapolated to real life.

While it is conceded that 1965's Operation Longshot did not harm the otters, it is pointed out that the Defense Department test then was much smaller than those the AEC is now planning.