

Elakha: Keystone of the Pacific

Range of Elakha Populations

- Original distribution
- ▶ Remnant colonies when hunting was banned in 1911
- Translocated colonies



“The most potent keystone species known in the world may be the sea otter

(*enhydra lutris*). This wonderful animal...once thrived among the kelp beds close to shore from Alaska to Southern California. It was hunted by European explorers and settlers for its fur, so that by the end of the nineteenth century it was close to extinction. In places where sea otters disappeared completely, an unexpected sequence of events unfolded. Sea urchins, normally among the major prey of the otters, exploded in numbers and proceeded to consume large portions of the kelp and other inshore seaweeds. In otter times, the heavy kelp growth, anchored on the sea bottom and reaching to the surface, was a veritable forest. Now it was mostly gone, literally eaten away. Large stretches of the shallow ocean floor were reduced to a desert-like terrain, called sea-urchin barrens.”

– Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*



“Elakha” is a Chinook word for what is commonly called the sea otter. Photo by Adrian Dorst.

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