

Chapter 2. History of Prior Sea Otter Translocations

J.L. Bodkin, J.A. Estes and M.T. Tinker

Introduction

Translocations or reintroductions of wildlife are often employed as a tool to mitigate the direct or indirect effects of human activities that result in the loss or reduction of species in all or parts of their historical habitat (Griffith et al. 1989, Seddon et al. 2014). Following a growing recognition of the important role that keystone species – often apex predators – can play in the structure and function of ecosystems (Paine 1966, Power et al. 1996), the goals of translocations and reintroductions have come to include the restoration of ecosystems (Moritz 1999, Hale and Koprowski 2018). Most recently, establishing genetic connectivity and recovery of genetic diversity within species and across habitats has become a desired attribute and explicit objective in the reintroduction of species, particularly those with a demonstrated loss of genetic diversity (Larson et al. 2015, Zimmerman et al. 2019). A rich history of sea otter recovery following the North Pacific maritime fur trade and translocations since the mid-19th century (Table 2.1 and Figure 2.1) provides powerful demonstration of each of these complementary benefits (Estes and Duggins 1995, Bodkin et al. 1999, Bodkin 2015, Hughes et al. 2019).

Translocation success often depends on a variety of recognized factors including an appropriate number and health of founding individuals, suitable habitat, adequate food resources, and realized reproductive potential and survival rates (Griffith et al. 1989). However, it is becoming evident that other, less well recognized factors, such as movements and behavior, can contribute to the success, or failure of reintroductions (Batson et al. 2015, Berger-Tal et al. 2020). The history of sea otter translocations and the knowledge gained from research during the process of recovery from depletion illustrates many of the biologic, ecologic and behavioral aspects that will play a role in the success of future translocations. Assessing the feasibility of reintroducing sea otters to the Oregon Coast will benefit from a comprehensive review of prior sea otter translocations and allow for evaluation of achieving specific translocation goals.

History of Sea Otter Translocations

The first documented translocation of sea otters was conducted in Russia, in 1937, when nine sea otters were captured at Medny Island, in the Commander Islands, for transport to the Murman coast in the southern Barents Sea, more than 5000 km from their natural distribution in the north Pacific (Barabash-Nikiforov 1947). The intent of the translocation was the establishment of an additional colony to supplement Russian fur production through captive and wild rearing and included developing techniques to hold sea otters in captivity prior to translocation. Although the Russian translocation was outside the historical range of the sea otter, we describe the effort here because it was the first recorded translocation of the species. Several aspects of this initial effort are particularly relevant in considering future translocations. The first is the recognition of the need for, and documentation of suitable environmental conditions and habitats with adequate and appropriate prey resources at the release site prior to translocation (Barabash-Nikiforov 1947). The second is that animal husbandry practices appropriate to the species are critical to translocation success, particularly while in transport. The third is that holding of animals in captivity is feasible, and acclimation of animals at release sites could contribute to translocation success. Unfortunately, only two males survived the long and complex journey, which occurred first by ship and then by train, but these two survivors lived in captivity and in

the wild for more than four years, thus demonstrating the feasibility of translocating and long term holding of this species in captivity (Barabash-Nikiforov 1947).

Initial efforts to restore sea otter populations within their historic range along the coasts of North America began in 1951 (Kenyon and Spencer 1960, Kenyon 1969). Between 1951 and 1959 five attempts to translocate 86 sea otters (in groups from 5-35 individuals) from Amchitka Island in the central Aleutians (Figure 2.1) to the Pribilof Islands (total of 81) in the Bering Sea and Attu Island (total of 5) in the western Aleutians failed. Fifty-three of the animals captured in these early translocations died in captivity prior to transport and almost none of the animals released are known to have survived following their release. These early attempts at husbandry and translocation apparently failed due to several different factors (or combinations of factors), including inadequate holding facilities and husbandry practices prior to and during transport, long transport times by ship that resulted in high rates of mortality (in some cases up to 100%) and, in two cases (5 to Attu in 1956 and 6 to the Pribilof Islands in 1957), an inadequate number of individuals (Kenyon 1969). The 1959 relocation to the Pribilof Islands was novel in being comprised exclusively of tagged animals and being partially successful, as at least one of seven juveniles relocated in 1959 was sighted two years after release. It is also possible that the Pribilof Islands, lying near the northern extent of the sea otters' range, provided less than optimal habitat.

Concurrent with both the Russian and US early translocation attempts, work was undertaken to develop animal husbandry methods that might increase survival of sea otters in captivity (Barabash-Nikiforov 1947, Kenyon and Spencer 1960, Kenyon 1969). High mortality during holding and transport in both Russian and American initial attempts identified the critical need for sea otters to maintain the integrity of their fur to achieve thermal neutrality. Early husbandry practices also included inadequate quantities of food (< 10% of their body weight/day) and provisioning of atypical foods (e.g., meat of waterfowl and seal). Access to clean water and appropriate food and space while in holding and transport proved to be instrumental in reducing mortality prior to introduction and improving future translocation success. While early translocations resulted in high mortality and largely failed efforts, insights gained would eventually lead to what would become a highly successful marine conservation effort (Bodkin 2015).

The first successful North American translocation took place in 1965 when 41 sea otters were captured and moved by amphibious aircraft from Prince William Sound to southeast Alaska. Twenty-three of these animals survived to be released to Chichagof Island in southeast Alaska (Kenyon 1969). Although pre-release mortality was high (0.44) due to overheating in flight, possibly related to tranquilizing, at least some individuals were re-sighted in 1966. This was the beginning of 13 separate translocations of 708 individuals from Amchitka Island and Prince William Sound to various locations, between 1965 and 1972 (Jameson et al. 1982). Fifty-five individuals were moved to the Pribilof Islands in 1968; 389 to six release sites in southeast Alaska from 1965 to 1969; 89 to the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia from 1969 to 1972, 59 to the Olympic coast of Washington from 1969 to 1971 and 93 (63 females and 30 males; 44 adults and 39 juveniles, with 10 of unknown age) to two release sites on the coast of Oregon in 1970-71 (Jameson 1975, Jameson et al. 1982).

The series of translocations and reintroductions between 1965 and 1972 had mixed success. Sea otters persisted in the Pribilof Islands for at least ten years, with sporadic observations of independent animals until at least 1976 (Schneider 1981), with some suggestion that their continued presence may have reflected immigration from otters reoccupying historic habitat along the north Alaskan Peninsula. In

addition to the eventual failure of the Pribilof translocation, the other translocation that ultimately failed was to Oregon: surveys reported declining abundance from the initial 93 animals that were reintroduced, until only a single animal could be found by 1981 (Jameson et al. 1982). However, the presence of pups provided clear evidence of successful reproduction in the Oregon population during the decade after 1971. It seems likely that post-release mortality contributed to the failure of the Oregon translocated population to become established, but it is also likely that at least some of the Oregon animals dispersed north to Washington, thus contributing to the eventual success of the translocated Washington population and possibly even the British Columbia population (Jameson et al. 1982). The eventual failure of the Pribilof Islands and Oregon efforts highlight two key points: 1) the success or failure of reintroductions may take a decade or more to become manifest; and 2) frequent and systematic monitoring of post-release populations during the first decade could help inform management actions to influence successful establishment, perhaps through enhancements to survival, reductions to mortality, or augmenting abundance via supplementary introductions of additional animals.

The reintroductions to southeast Alaska, British Columbia and Washington clearly established the feasibility of reintroductions as a tool to enhance the recovery of sea across their range. In southeast Alaska, the 412 animals translocated by 1969, resulted in more than 25,000 by 2011/2012 (Bodkin 2015, Tinker et al. 2019). By 2013, nearly 7,000 individuals resided along British Columbia (Nichol et al. 2015), and more than 2,000 along the Washington coast in 2017 (Jeffries et al. 2017). Today it is likely that sea otter abundance from translocations alone exceeds 50,000 animals (based on observed recent rates of increase of about 10% annually), a number that may represent more than a third of the current overall number of sea otters in the North Pacific Ocean.

Between 1987 and 1990, the US Fish and Wildlife Service conducted the most recent translocation of 139 animals from the mainland central California coast to San Nicolas Island, 110 km off the coast of southern California (Rathbun et al. 2000). This was the first translocation to explicitly aid in the recovery of the ESA listed southern subspecies of sea otter. It was also the first translocation to rigorously evaluate the health of individuals, define specific age and sex of animals to be moved, and closely monitor the translocated animals post release. While plans and pens were constructed to acclimate animals at the release site with the intent to encourage retention (Ames et al. 1986, USFWS 1987), sea conditions compromised the safety of the penned animals and they were released within a few days of transport to the island. As with all previous translocations, the number of animals remaining at San Nicolas Island declined dramatically during the post-release population establishment phase – to just 16 animals by 1991 (Rathbun et al. 2000) – and reached a nadir in 1993 of 12 animals observed. However, counts of sea otters at SNI began to increase in the late 1990s (10 years after the translocation), and the most recent census reported a population of 121 animals in 2019, with a five-year average annual rate of increase of 0.10 (Hatfield et al. 2019). While not assured, the long-term viability of this latest translocation now seems likely.

The differences in outcomes of previous translocation events, as well as some of the similarities, suggest several key factors that may contribute to successful reintroductions. While adequate food resources are obviously essential to successful translocation, it is not clear that prey abundance was a factor in the failure of the Oregon effort, or any of the prior failures, or indeed to the delayed success of any of the successful translocations. Both the initial Russian and the San Nicolas translocation dedicated significant effort to assuring that suitable and abundant prey were available at release sites (Barabash-Nikiforov

1947, USFWS 1987). But while abundant prey resources do not ensure rapid and successful establishment of any introduced population, it would nonetheless be essential to assure that appropriate and adequate prey are available at and near the locations of any future sea otter reintroductions. Other considerations include a sufficient number of individuals of the appropriate age and sex classes; the existence of protected areas for resting and pup rearing (e.g., reliable kelp beds or protected bays/inlets); minimal levels of disturbance from human activities (e.g., commercial and recreational boat traffic or tourism activity); and low levels of threats such as toxins, fishing gear entanglement or disease vectors that could lead to elevated mortality during the establishment phase (see Chapter 6 on habitat suitability and Chapter 10 on health and welfare considerations).

Although not a reintroduction in the traditional sense of moving sea otters into unoccupied historic habitat, the most recent managed introduction of sea otters involved the release of captive-raised juvenile sea otters into a coastal estuary in central California. Between 2001 and 2017 a total of 37 stranded pups were raised in captivity at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, with older female sea otters acting as surrogate mothers (henceforth surrogates). Once these pups reached typical weaning age (6-8 months), they were transported and released into Elkhorn Slough, an estuary at the head of Monterey Bay, California (Mayer et al. 2019). Originally the selection of Elkhorn Slough was made based on logistical considerations, as it was easier to monitor the rehabilitated juveniles within the enclosed estuary and recapture them if they required supplementary care. A secondary objective of this reintroduction was to enhance the local sea otter population (Mayer et al. 2019). This effort is notable for several reasons. First, it engaged captive adult female surrogates in the rehabilitation and raising of stranded juvenile sea otters explicitly for release over time. Second, animals were held and raised in captivity for extended periods of time during their development, a step that may have facilitated socialization and development of bonds among the animals that would eventually be released. Third, in contrast to all prior translocation release sites that were in or near outer coastal rocky reef habitats, these animals were released into a sheltered, soft sediment estuarine environment. Also relevant is the fact that the juvenile sea otters were added to an area that already had been occupied by otters for at least two decades, although in limited numbers and primarily by males (no reproduction had occurred in the Slough prior to the reintroductions, and the first females observed with pups within the Slough were in fact rehabilitated females). Perhaps most importantly, this reintroduction process, although often requiring recapture of juveniles and further rehabilitation in captivity prior to subsequent re-release, did not incur the large-scale losses of individuals due to emigration or mortality that were ubiquitous in earlier translocations.

Methods of Sea Otter Translocation

In general, methods employed in all sea otter translocations consist of capture, holding, transport and release of individuals, either as a single group in early translocations, or more recently, in a series of individuals or groups over time. Various methods are employed to capture free ranging sea otters, including tangle nets set in water near where animals reside and using long handled dip nets on haul-outs or in open water when they are at rest. Most recently, specially designed diver operated traps (Wilson traps) are used to capture otters from under water (Ames et al. 1986, Monson et al. 2001). The capture of sea otters is highly regulated by federal and state/provincial governments and requires adherence to stringent permitting conditions. In the US, sea otter permits fall under the purview of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Management Authority. Acquisition of permits is predicated on demonstrating expertise in the safe and humane capture and handling of sea otters, meeting animal

health and welfare requirements, and describing how proposed activities benefit the species' conservation and management. Obtaining necessary permits for a translocation will be dependent on the status of source population(s) and the proposed release sites, and may take several years.

Once captured by tangle net, dip net or scuba-operated Wilson traps, otters are transferred to specially designed boxes or kennels for transport to holding facilities where the animals are accumulated in pools and prepared for transport to the release site. Transport is usually accomplished by van or truck to either ship (in the earlier translocations) or aircraft (in translocations since 1965). Over time, methods of capture, handling, holding, transport, and release have been refined to the point where serious injury or death has become an exceedingly rare event, but even with the greatest care, some small rate of morbidity should be expected when handling large numbers of sea otters. Additional detail on current capture, holding, transport and release procedures can be found in Chapter 9 of this report (Logistical and Implementation Considerations) and in Ames et al. (1986).

Lessons Learned from Past Translocations

Over the past 80 years nearly 1,000 sea otters have been captured, held, transported, and released into unoccupied habitats to restore populations. It is evident from the earliest translocations that inadequate attention was given to the physiological needs for the sea otters to maintain the integrity of their pelage, and that high mortality resulted from poor animal husbandry practices during holding and transport (Barabash-Nikiforov 1947, Kirkpatrick et al. 1955, Kenyon 1969). Since their early efforts, improvements in capture, husbandry and transport have nearly eliminated pre-release mortality (Ames et al. 1986, Rathbun et al. 2000, Mayer et al. 2019). In all translocations for which there are data, the numbers of sea otters reintroduced appeared to have declined rapidly following release, and in most cases appeared to stabilize at 10-50% of the original number released. We have limited understanding of the causes behind this rapid diminishment following introductions, due to the limited follow-up surveys after most translocations. Post-translocation surveys and marking of individuals moved to San Nicolas Island provided new insight into this phenomenon. Intensive post-release surveys at San Nicolas and throughout California documented that at least 26% (36 of 139) of the translocated animals returned to their original capture locations (Rathbun et al. 2000, Carswell 2008). An additional but unknown number of animals may have perished during an attempt to return to their original home range (Carswell 2008), a phenomenon that may explain post-release movements and declines after other translocations (Jameson et al. 1982). This finding demonstrates the strong individual affinity in this species for their established home range, and the associated likelihood of post-release dispersal that occurred at San Nicolas despite its selection as an appropriate release site based on suitability of habitat and abundance of prey (Rathbun et al. 2000). Further, the decision to translocate predominantly subadult sea otters did not appear to prevent an initial loss of animals at San Nicolas (Rathbun and Benz 1991), although there is some indication that the youngest animals were less likely to disperse (Carswell 2008). This further indicates that factors other than prey can be important in determining the behavior of species being translocated, and suggests that social, behavioral, and cultural attributes should be considered carefully. These considerations may be particularly relevant for sea otters, as they occupy small home ranges (Tarjan and Tinker 2016), exhibit specialized prey preferences that may be learned or culturally transmitted from other sea otters (Estes et al. 2003, Tinker et al. 2008), and demonstrate long-term relations among individuals within shared ranges (USGS, unpublished data). Sea otters translocated into vacant habitats appear unlikely to remain where released, despite the general

suitability of habitat and abundance of prey, because of their affinities for specific habitat features, prey preferences and social interactions associated with their original home ranges.

Systematic surveys of early translocated populations were rare, usually occurring only after populations became established, and this resulted in uncertainty about founding population sizes and early population growth rates (Bodkin et al. 1999). However, once fully established, translocated populations generally demonstrated growth rates that were at or near the maximum rates feasible for sea otters (Estes 1990), averaging ~20% per annum, and significantly greater than growth rates observed in remnant populations (~10%; Bodkin et al. 1999). One recent exception to this was the 1987 translocation to San Nicolas Island (Rathbun et al. 2000, Carswell 2008), where, following 3 years of consecutive translocations the founding population of 139 quickly declined to 16 individuals, and then remained essentially unchanged for almost a decade (Hatfield et al. 2019). The pattern of post-release decline at San Nicolas Island was similar to other successful translocations to southeast Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington, but while these earlier translocations soon achieved annual growth rates of 20% or more, the annual growth rate at San Nicolas from 1999-2009 was only 6%. Rates of reproduction appeared adequate to sustain growth (pup:adult ratios were as high or higher than the mainland California population), and adult survival rates of tagged animals were very high (Bentall 2005), suggesting that sub-adults were being lost from the population, either through emigration or, more likely, fishery-related mortality (Hatfield et al. 2011). Interestingly, after 2009 the annual rate of population growth at San Nicolas increased to ~12%.

The history of the San Nicolas translocation provided new and important information regarding factors important to translocation success. First, abundant habitat and prey resources are not by themselves sufficient to ensure high retention rates of introduced animals. Second, behavioral and cultural factors, likely related to familiarity with established home ranges and social relations, contribute to initial losses. Third, unanticipated sources of mortality (such as fishing gear entanglement) can adversely affect growth rates, particularly when population size is small. And lastly, one of the legal conditions imposed on the San Nicolas translocation was that an “otter free” zone would be maintained through the capture and removal of sea otters outside San Nicolas between Point Conception and the Mexican border on the California mainland. After many years of trying to comply, in 2012 the USFWS abolished this requirement by declaring the translocation a failure (USFWS 2012), thus demonstrating the difficulty in spatially managing the distribution of sea otters by non-lethal means.

Conclusions

Several lessons can be gained from past experiences with translocating sea otters to aid their conservation. First, the basic biology of the species is important to account for: early translocations were largely unsuccessful due to the lack of understanding of the basic physiology of sea otters and their dependence on maintaining a thermal balance through their pelage and an unusually high metabolic requirement.

Second, given suitable habitat, prey resources, and protection from human or other mortality sources, translocations have proved an important tool in sea otter conservation. Assuming consistent rates of change over the past decade, about 30% of the global sea otter abundance today can be attributed to the translocations to southeast Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington (Bodkin 2015).

Third, even successful reintroductions often undergo an establishment phase during which their ultimate success can be questionable. During this phase a variety of factors will tend to reduce the founding population to a small fraction of the initial number translocated. It appears that with sea otters, behavior may be more important than food in determining the retention rate at release sites. A careful consideration of the behavior and social structure within parent populations that may affect the probability of retention of individuals at a translocation site may aid in forecasting the success of future translocations. The success of recent reintroductions in Elkhorn Slough using stranded juveniles, raised with the aid of surrogate mothers (adult female otters) in captivity and released into protected estuarine habitats where recapture was practical, should encourage consideration of alternative approaches in future translocation proposals.

Finally, the role that translocations can play in restoring coastal marine ecosystem structure and function, from coastal rocky reefs to estuaries (Estes and Palmisano 1974, Hughes et al. 2013, Hughes et al. 2019), and in recovering genetic diversity and facilitating genetic connectivity among sea otter populations (Larson et al. 2015, and see Chapter 4 of this report), provide ample justification for considering future efforts to continue restoration of sea otters and coastal ecosystems.

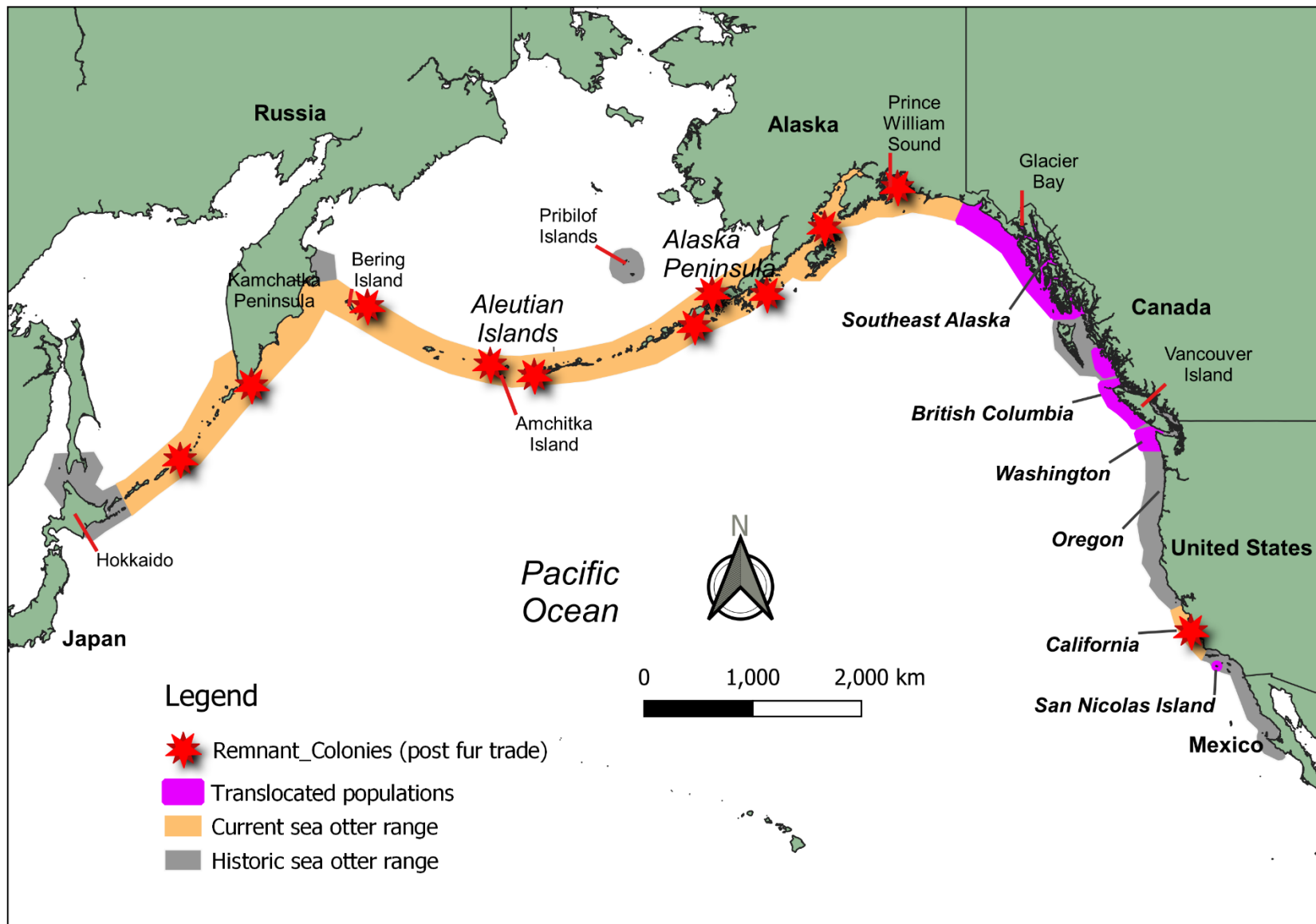


Figure 2.1. Map of the North Pacific showing historical and current sea otter range, the latter including translocated populations. Location of the remnant colonies left at the end of the fur trade (from which present-day populations are descended) are also shown.

Table 2.1 Summary statistics for ten previous sea otter translocation and reintroduction efforts.

Release Location	Year(s)	Source	Intended for release	Number released	Success	Approximate Founding number	Recent estimate
Murman Peninsula	1937	Bering Island, Russia	9	2	no	1	0
Pribilofs Is	1951	Amchitka, Alaska	35	0	no	0	0
	1955	Amchitka, Alaska	31	19	no	0	0
	1957	Amchitka, Alaska	8	0	no	0	0
	1959	Amchitka, Alaska	10	7	unknown	3	0
	1968	Amchitka, Alaska	55	55	temporary	unknown	0
Attu	1956	Amchitka, Alaska	5	5	no	0	NA
California	1969	California	17	17	no	NA	NA
North SE Alaska	1965-1969	Amchitka & Prince	297	297	yes	100-150	11,600
Central SE Alaska	1968	William Sound,	51	51	yes	30	13,200
South SE Alaska	1968	Alaska	55	55	yes	21	
SE Alaska - TOTAL			403	403	yes	150	>25,000
Amchitka & Prince William Sound,							
British Columbia	1969-1972	Alaska	89	89	yes	28	7,000
Washington	1969-1970	Amchitka, Alaska	59	59	yes	10	>2,000
Oregon	1970-1971	Amchitka, Alaska	93	93	no	0	0
San Nicolas Is, CA	1987-1990	California	142	139	yes	12	121
Elkhorn Slough, CA	2002-2016	California	37	37	yes	37 + ~25 wild	120

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