

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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1938- Southern Sea Otters Not Extinct

On May 19, 1938, five days before the three young pirates left Santa Cruz on the pirated boat for the South Seas, my father, who had just graduated from UC Berkeley, received a letter from his closest friend and college roommate. Jim Parsons, who had graduated in geography and was working as a reporter on the Ukiah Redwood Journal, wrote “*300 sea otters discovered off San Luis Obispo recently*”.

After 19 years of construction, California State Route 1, originally named the Roosevelt Highway, had just opened up the Big Sur coast the year before. It’s not completely clear from reading through the newspaper articles from the spring of 1938 who first spotted the otters, how many they actually saw and exactly where they were. What is clear is that the California sea otter population was widely thought to be extinct as a result of severe hunting throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and that there had been no reliable report of the southern sea otter’s existence since 1915.

The earliest local story was dated April 9, 1938, and states that the “*herd*” (raft) was first discovered “*a few days ago*” near Hurricane Point, when game wardens counted 60 otters. With more observation the number soon increased to 84 animals. A week later, a Sentinel article quoted a long-time local resident, Floyd

Uhden, who said he had seen them sunning on the Soberanes Rocks in Big Sur the spring before.

On April 17, the otters were reporting languishing near Bixby Creek, and State Fish and Game authorities were standing guard 24 hours a day because “*the skins of the 100 animals are worth from \$100,000 to \$150,000.*” A news article a week later listed 91 otters at Pt. Sur from a State Fish and Game count. Dr. Harold Heath of Hopkins Marine Station believed that the otters have been there all the time, but they weren’t seen until the new Highway 1 was opened.

What was believed to be the first photograph taken of the newly found group of sea otters was published on April 26, 1938, showing them floating in a kelp bed at Rainbow Bridge (presumably the Bixby Creek Bridge), about 15 miles south of Carmel.

Surprisingly, the caption under the photograph states that the congregation is “*valued at about \$150,000 for their pelts*”. When a species long thought to be extinct is suddenly rediscovered, and is being guarded by game wardens 24 hours a day, why would any newspaper provide a value of their pelts? Not to be outdone, an article two weeks later led with the headline “*Night, Day Patrol Guards \$150,000 Herd of Otters*”.

Another article on the same day reported that the first sightings of the otters came from the Seventeen-Mile Drive off Bird Rock “*sporting in the surf and basking on the rocks*”. While they were initially thought to be fur seals, “*zoological experts*” upset this idea and confirmed them as southern sea otters. The number of otters

seemed to be increasing weekly, and the sightings stretched 20 miles from the 17-Mile Drive to Pt. Sur. The southern sea otter was not extinct.

I have that original 1938 sea otter discovery letter from my father's college roommate, who went on to get a Ph.D. in geography and teach at UC Berkeley for 40 years. He was a legend in the profession and at Berkeley. On my family's month-long summer camping trips, after driving from southern California we always spent our first night with Jim Parsons and his family in their wonderful old Craftsman house in the Berkeley hills.

He was a remarkable man who told us wonderful adventure stories at bedtime and had a house full of books and neat stuff he had collected on his travels and adventures throughout Latin America. I decided at about age 10 on one of those stays that I wanted to follow in his footsteps and become a professor.

So I asked my dad what Jim had to do to get a doctor's degree? My dad replied, "*He had to write a book!*" Well, a Ph.D. dissertation is a book of sorts, but for a wide-eyed but naïve 10-year old, this was pretty discouraging news to hear. I crossed that dream and profession off my list.

With that discouragement of 65 years ago in mind, I wanted to let all of you readers know that I finished two new books this past summer, "Coasts in Crisis-A Global Challenge", and "The Edge-The Pressured Past and Precarious Future of California's Coast", the latter with a friend and co-author, Kim Steinhardt. Don't give up on your dreams.