Scott O’Dell’s famous young-adult novel, Island of the Blue Dolphins, tells the tale of a Native American girl named Karana. She lives alone on San Nicolas Island, one of the more distant of the Channel Islands off the coast of southern California. Early in the story, Karana stands on a cliff and watches men who have sailed here from a distant country:

The wide beds of kelp which surround our island on three sides come close to the shore and spread out to sea for a distance of a league. In these deep beds, even on days of heavy winds, the Aleuts hunted. They left the shore at dawn in their skin canoes and did not return until night, towing after them the slain otter.

The sea otter, when it is swimming, looks like a seal, but is really very different. It has a shorter nose than a seal, small webbed feet instead of flippers, and fur that is thicker and much more beautiful. It is also different in other ways. The otter likes to lie on its back in the kelp beds, floating up and down to the motion of the waves, sunning itself or sleeping. They are the most playful animals in the sea.

Scott O’Dell is historically and biologically accurate with much of his novel. He based Karana on the true story of a woman who was stranded on San Nicolas for more than 20 years in the early 1800s. But who were the Aleuts? What were they doing hunting otters here? And would someone in the 1800s have actually thought of sea otters as cute and playful—as so many of us do today?

The Aleuts, or the Aleutians, were native hunters from the Aleutian Islands, which stretch into the far North Pacific beyond Alaska. Russian sea captains who sailed past these islands on their way...
to the coast of North America recruited them because
the Aleutians were skilled in hunting all types of marine
mammals with spears from kayaks. The Russians wanted
seals, sea lions, elephant seals, and sea otters for meat,
blubber, and their beautiful and valuable pelts.

Russians began hunting seals and sea otters in the
mid-1700s, when they first began exploring the islands of
the North Pacific. They seem to have killed—and brought
home at great profit—far more animals than
the Aleutians or Native
Americans in the Pacific
Northwest had hunted
in previous centuries. As
animals grew more and
more scarce, they sailed
their ships farther and
farther south, until they
were nearly to Mexico.
They searched around
the islands off this coast,
such as San Nicolas. The
extraordinarily dense fur of the sea otter fetched an ex-
ceptionally high price at the time, especially when trading
with merchants in China.

In Island of the Blue Dolphins, Karana at one point
nurses a young sea otter back to health. She names the
otter “Won-a-nee,” or “Girl with the Large Eyes,” and goes
on to see her living back in the wild as a mother. Karana
says: “After that summer, after being friends with Won-
a-nee and her young, I never killed another otter. I had
an otter cape for my shoulders, which I used until it wore
out, but never again did I make a new one.” O’Dell wrote
this novel in 1960, about the time that Americans were
growing more environmentally aware—the first Earth
Day was only a decade away. This does not mean, though,
that people in earlier centuries did not consider the sea
otter as cute as a puppy. West Coast Native Americans,
according to one source at least, portrayed the sea otter in
stories as a playful trickster and even as symbol of good
luck.

Early Russian explorers also seem to have considered
sea otters as fun-loving, even while they hunted them. The
men of the Bering expedition in 1741 ate the meat from
hundreds of sea otters and
skinned them for their fur.
Naturalist Georg Wilhelm
Steller served up a baby sea
otter to heal his ailing ex-
pedition leader. Yet Steller
saw the otter as an “ex-
traordinarily beautiful and
pleasant animal, as well as
amusing and comical in
its habits.” Steller added:
“Not even the most loving
human mother engages
in the same kind of play-
ing with her children...when the young are taken from
them, they cry aloud like a little child and grieve.”

Can you think of any other animal today that we eat
and use for products, yet also think of as adorable?

Hunters and habitat loss rendered sea otters almost
extinct along the coast of North America by the late
1800s. Sea otter populations have since begun to return,
but slowly. They remain on the endangered species list.
Novels such as Island of the Blue Dolphins teach us about
our history with these animals—and remind us to protect
them.

In the next issue of Sea History: a Columbia River
dinosaur fish? For past “Animals in Sea History,” go to
www.seahistory.org.