

SUSTAINABLE TRADITION

THE BEAUTY OF THE NORTHERN
SEA OTTER IN ALASKA NATIVE ART



U.S. Department of the Interior
INDIAN ARTS & CRAFTS BOARD

in collaboration with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS,

Alaska Natives have used sea otter fur to make warm clothing, bedding, and ceremonial objects. Highly valued for its soft and insulating hair, today sea otter fur is used by Alaska Natives to create not only artwork, but also a wide range of products that can serve a functional purpose in everyday life, including hats, mittens, purses, vests, scarves, and blankets.

It was not always this way. In the late eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, Alaska sea otter populations were decimated by non-Alaska Native fur traders. Small remnant groups of sea otters living in remote areas managed to survive, and conservation efforts in the 1960s ultimately restored these and other sea otter populations. Sea otters are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972,* and other laws, and are carefully managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conserve them. As a result, their population in the region continues to grow.

Anyone can lawfully purchase Alaska Native handicrafts and clothing created from sea otter fur, but it is important to be an educated consumer.

* www.fws.gov/alaska/pages/marine-mammals-management



"You cannot live our culture without being an 'artist' of some sort. Respect and thankfulness are part of the hunting and artistic process, and I believe it is vital that we pass on our way of thinking."

- Jennie Wheeler, Tlingit



SEA OTTER: A SUSTAINABLE TRADITION

- Sea otter products are an economic and cultural resource for Alaska Native communities. These communities rely on subsistence hunting of sea otters and other marine mammals, and use such otters and other mammals for clothing, cultural traditions, and the sale of craftwork for key supplemental income.
- Because of this long-standing special relationship between Alaska Natives and sea otters, including management of the sea otter population as a sustainable resource to preserve both subsistence use and the traditional methods of creating Alaska Native handicrafts and clothing, the MMPA allows Alaska Natives to harvest them.



"My sea otter creations are inspired from skills passed down to me by my grandfather: a very talented man from Klukwan who carved totem poles and toured the world as a Chilkat dancer. I strive to be as proud of my work as I am of my heritage."

- Christy Ruby, Tlingit



TIPS FOR BUYING SEA OTTER PRODUCTS

- When purchasing Alaska Native sea otter products, choose a source with a good reputation, and request a written guarantee or written verification that it is an authentic Alaska Native-made product.
- Get a receipt that includes all the vital information about your purchase, including price, materials, maker, and maker's Alaska Native village or Tribe.
- Authentic Alaska Native sea otter products may carry a State certified "Silver Hand" symbol which features the words, "Authentic Alaska Native Art from Alaska." By contrast, items may carry a "Made in Alaska" emblem which means that the item was made in Alaska, but not necessarily by an Alaska Native.
- Recognize that authentic Alaska Native sea otter craftwork may be expensive because of the artistic skill and effort necessary to produce it. If the price seems too good to be true, make sure to ask more questions about the item and its maker.

TRANSPORTING SEA OTTER PRODUCTS

- Transporting sea otter products from Alaska to the Continental United States and U.S. territories is permissible under the MMPA.
- Canada prohibits the importation of sea otter products. Therefore, it is recommended that U.S. passengers, including those on cruise ships, travelling through or disembarking in Canada, mail their sea otter products home from Alaska.
- Transporting sea otter products across international boundaries may require additional permits. Please contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage at (907) 271-6198 to determine if an export permit is required, such as under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* or the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** In addition, check with the country to which you wish to take or send the product, as import permits may also be required based on foreign laws.
- Consumers are advised to keep receipts for the item(s) purchased with the name and address of the vendor clearly indicating the item was purchased in the United States. The receipt will be necessary if you need to apply for an export permit.

* www.fws.gov/international/cites/

** www.fws.gov/endangered/laws-policies/



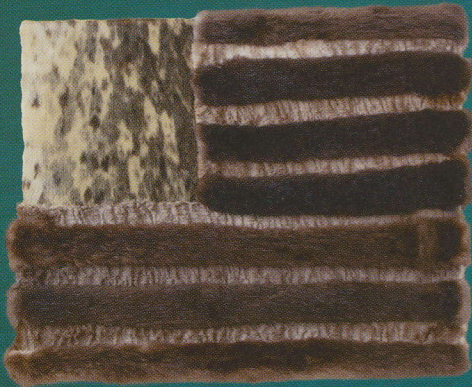
"Having learned from my mother Monica Riedel, I love working with sea otter fur for its warmth, luxurious softness, and durability. Sea otters are a plentiful, renewable, and important local resource."

- Diana Riedel, Eyak

"By hand-sewing garments, sculptures and paintings out of fish and marine mammals that I hunt, I bind the human, natural and spiritual realms into traditional and new artforms, creating a capsule of Indigenous knowledge."

- Peter Williams, Yup'ik

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WHAT IS THE LAW ON CREATING AND SELLING SEA OTTER PRODUCTS?

- Alaska Natives are the only people allowed under the MMPA to create and sell products made from sea otter hides. To qualify, these hides must have been significantly altered into Alaska Native handicrafts or articles of clothing.
- Significantly altered means an otter hide that is no longer recognizable as a whole hide and that has been substantially modified into handicrafts or clothing, such as through weaving, carving, stitching, sewing, lacing, beading, drawing, or painting.
- Under the MMPA, an Alaska Native sea otter product may not be mass produced.
- The sale of any sea otter product as Alaska Native-made is also subject to the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA), a truth-in-marketing law which carries criminal and civil penalties.
- Under the IACA, it is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell, any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is produced by an Alaska Native or American Indian.
- The U.S. Department of the Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Law Enforcement jointly enforce the IACA.
- Complaints of potential IACA violations can be submitted online, www.doi.gov/iacb/act, or by calling 888-ART-FAKE (toll free).

SEA OTTER FACTS

- Sea otter fur is very dense and has a greater number of hair follicles per inch (~850,000) than any other animal.
- Sea otters are known to dive up to 250 feet for food and can hold their breath up to 5 minutes.
- They are the smallest marine mammal.
- They have powerful jaws and teeth adapted for crushing clams, sea urchins, and crabs.



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"I learned to skin sew at a very young age by observing my mother and grandmother. Skin sewing was very important for everyone during my grandmother's time with no stores to buy warm clothing. Every part of the animal is used, and every piece is functional."

- Eva Bryant, Yup'ik



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"The art of skin sewing has been passed down and refined over a millennium-long dialogue between the skin sewers and the hunters, whose survival depended on adapting to a changing environment utilizing the materials at hand."

- Dora Buchea, St. Lawrence Island Yupik

Take Home a Treasure from Alaska

Buy Authentic Alaska Native Art



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888-278-3253
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U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE
Marine Mammals Management
Anchorage, AK 99503
800-896-3075
www.fws.gov

ALASKA NATIVE SEA OTTER ARTISTS

- Indian Arts and Crafts Board Source Directory of American Indian and Alaska Native Artists
www.doi.gov/iacb/source-directory
- Alaska Silver Hand Artists
arts.alaska.gov/alaska-native-arts-program

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Diana Riedel, Native Village of Eyak,
Sea Otter Cape, Headband, & Sea
Otter Trimmed Leather Gloves,
©2019, Photography by Ashley Sloan.
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1. Jennie Wheeler, Tlingit, Beaded Moccasins, Sea Otter Fur Trim, ©2021*
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3. Christy Ruby, Tlingit, Red Sea Otter Totemic Scarf, ©2017
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*Indian Arts and Crafts Board Museum collection