

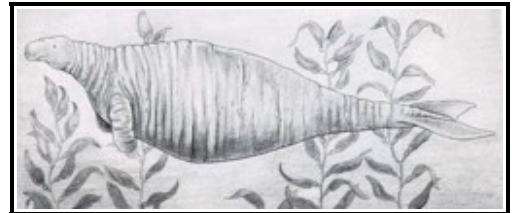
The Mysterious Sea Cow

by [Murray Lundberg](#), Wikipedia

To the crew of [Vitus Bering's](#) ship, *St. Peter*, shipwrecked off the coast of Kamchatka, Alaska in early November 1741, the huge, easily-hunted sea cow was a godsend that helped them to survive and return home. Thirty years later their countrymen had hunted sea cows to extinction.

Sea Cows looked rather like whales or sea lions. Feeding on sea grasses (primarily kelp), they were the only aquatic herbivorous mammals. Historically, about 1,500 - 2,000 sea cows lived off the coasts of Alaska & the Russian Far East.

Georg Wilhelm Steller, the naturalist and physician on Bering's expedition, recorded the first, and best descriptions of the sea cow. They were up to 28 feet long, and weighed as much as 7-8 tons; drifting just below the surface, they were often mistaken for overturned boats. With a heavy bone structure, they had huge midsections, a disproportionately small head, and a large, flat, twin-lobed tail. The wrinkly black hide was about an inch thick and very tough, covering a fat layer between 4 and 9 inches thick - that combination provided protection from the cold, pounding by surf, and rubbing against ice and rocks. Their external ear openings were only about the size of a pea, but the internal ear bones were very large, so excellent hearing can be assumed, although when they were feeding, they would completely ignore even a boat.



Here's Steller's description from his journal:

“These animals, like cattle, live in herds at sea, males and females going together and driving the young before them about the shore. They are occupied with nothing else but their food. The back and half the body are always seen out of the water. They eat in the same manner as the land animals, with a slow forward movement. They tear the seaweed from the rocks with the teeth and chew it without cessation... During the eating they move the head and neck like an ox, and after the lapse of a few minutes they lift the head out of the water and draw fresh air with a rasping and snorting sound after the manner of horses.”

During the ten months that Steller and the other survivors of Bering's crew spent on what would later be named Bering Island, Steller was able to gather considerable information on the habits of the sea cow, as well as an extensive set of measurements of various parts of the sea cow's anatomy.

The meat of the sea cow was similar to veal and remained fresh much longer than any other available meat source, making it extremely valuable to the Russian sailors and hunters. The fat was described as tasting like sweet almond-oil. Although Bering's crew only killed their first sea cow six weeks before their escape in August 1742, the meat was crucial in restoring their strength during the final stages of building a new boat from the wreckage of the *St. Peter*. When they left, they took a supply of meat and fat, and stories of the incredible riches of the islands. Fur hunters flocked to the area, and in 1768, explorer Martin Sauer entered in his journal an account of the death of the last known sea cow.

There is still a chance, though, that the sea cow isn't extinct. In the years since their generally-accepted extinction in 1768, there have been occasional reports suggesting that small colonies may have survived by moving to areas away from the Russian hunting grounds. In the mid-1800s, such reports were not unusual, and as recently as 1962, the crew of a Russian whaler reported seeing six animals that resembled sea cows, feeding in a bay in the Gulf of Anadyr. In 1977, a fisherman in Kamchatka reported actually touching a drifting animal that matched the description of a sea cow. But for now, those reports are just considered to be rumors, fuel for yet another Northern myth.