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THE OTTER IN NEW ZEALAND - DID SUCH AN ANIMAL EXIST?

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Accounts of the possible existence of an otter species in New Zealand are reviewed as a stimulation to further debate on the subject.



There have recently been some renewed interests in the possibility that a species of otter existed in New Zealand. This short note examines the information available. It makes no attempt to evaluate the existence or not of such an animal, rather it is presented to perhaps further discussion on the matter.

New Zealand was reputed to have had an indigenous mammal living in the lakes and rivers of South Island at the time of the first European settlement (see COOK, 1777, Vol. 1: p. 98 for example). No specimen was ever collected, the information being based primarily on second-hand Maori accounts and other unsubstantiated observations.

Early reports from 1844, referred to beavers living on the east side of Lake Wanaka (HOCKEN, 1898), but MANTELL (1851), describing accounts of this animal by the local Maoris, concluded that *altogether the account pointed to an animal resembling the otter or badger, rather than to the beaver*. Von HOCHSTETTER (1867, p 161) mentions a letter received from a Julian Haast in 1861, in which the author wrote *I frequently saw its tracks They resemble the tracks of our European otter - only a little smaller*.

An early dictionary (TAYLOR, 1848), translated the Maori word *waitoreke* as *otter (uncertain seal)*; but a more recent standard Maori dictionary (WILLIAMS, 1957) omits *waitoreke* altogether; the word being considered ungrammatical (KRUMBIEGEL, 1950).

With the revised interest in the "*New Zealand otter*" in the mid 1900s, WATSON (1960) reviewed all the available literature and concluded that: *there is very little ground for any belief in the animal's existence; nevertheless a shadow of doubt remains and it would be unwise altogether to ignore the possibility however remote it may be*.

The possible existence of the New Zealand otter is discussed, because if such an animal ever existed, its importance and significance could hardly be exaggerated. DARWIN (1888, vol. 3: p 6) said of the animal, should one be found it might "*turn out something like the Solenhofen bird*" (*Archaeopteryx*).

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