

now some natives can catch seals with a harpoon at sea. To show how tame they used to be, one of the old voyagers wrote as follows of the seals on Mas-a-fura in 1767: "We went ashore, but could hardly set a foot down, the seals lay so thick. . . . We had to kill a notable number of them, because they were continually running against us." And, again, "The seals on the southern islands were so tame that they played fearlessly about the men who were skinning those they had just killed." That was only a hundred and fifty years ago; and, with millions of such seals as those, there is not a shadow of a doubt but that five hundred or a thousand years ago the natives could have followed them and caught them in the ocean for food when on their voyages of discovery.

In the year 1798 a million sealskins were taken from the neighbourhood of Mas-a-fura to Canton, and three millions and a half were taken before they were exterminated on that one island. No one will ever know how many millions were taken from our southern islands, because, what with Americans and others, whose interest it was to keep their successes secret, one-tenth of the skins taken may not have been recorded.

Most of the facts stated in the following are gathered from the report of the Behring Sea Commission.

The Commander and Pribyloff Islands, when first discovered, in 1741 and 1786 respectively, were entirely uninhabited by man; nor has any evidence been found since on either group that man had previously visited them. They were the only islands in the North Pacific that were not peopled or visited by man, and this was evidently the sole reason why the seals had chosen them for breeding-places, because the fur-seal when resorting to the land for breeding is practically defenceless, and is incapable alike of resistance or effective flight, while its flesh and fat are highly prized by all native tribes as food.

To quote from the report: "If further evidence be required, it is furnished by the facts relating to the fur-seal of the Southern Hemisphere, where all the notable breeding-places or rookeries were discovered on insular lands to which man had never come, and on which, during this critical period of the annual cycle of its life, the fur-seal was also exempt from the attacks of other terrestrial animals to which it would have been an easy prey. . . . This being granted, it is, perhaps, a legitimate subject for speculation what the conditions . . . of all the islands in the world were before their occupation by men."

Seals may have inhabited the world for ages before man, and have had a hereditary knowledge of all the islands in the sea. They may have been as numerous as man is now, for they would not care for land animals so long as they had sacred breeding-places on islands off the coasts; and we may have no idea of the number of seals that existed before man started to butcher them.

The report from Cape Colony says, "Upon several islands, especially in the Ichaboe group, are to be found the remains of vast numbers of seal, probably the effect of an epidemic disease at some distant period. In many places the hair, which is practically indestructible, has been found mixed with earth to the depth of several feet, and this, when sifted, gives a fair percentage of ammonia and phosphates, probably the residue of the bones and bodies of dead animals." Those islands are on the coast just below the Tropic of Capricorn, so that the natives would hardly need the skins for clothes; and the "epidemic" was probably the clubs of the northern fur-hunters.

Norfolk Island is a mere dot in the great ocean, and about five hundred miles away from anywhere; and, to show how hard a thing it is to find a small island like that, we may cite the hunt our swift steamers had for the "Perthshire," and they might be as long finding Norfolk Island if they did not know where it was located; yet the old canoe-men found it, and lived there for a while, although they had all left it before Captain Cook found it in 1774. Perhaps Norfolk Island is Hawaiki (the traditional starting-point of the Maori), but we cannot tell, as there was no one there to tell us the name of it. From its lonely position I have no doubt it was once a great seal-rookery, and that the natives found it by following the seals when they were going home to breed, and lived there until they were all eaten or driven away. After the seals had gone, the natives, who were accustomed to the fleshpots, would say, "Our soul abhorreth bananas and fish; there are plenty of splendid trees; let us make a lot of big canoes and follow the seals to the south-east at their next breeding season." This might account for the Maori migration to New Zealand, because, with the prevailing winds, they could hardly miss it from Norfolk Island.

Before the advent of man, New Zealand, being without any offensive land animals and having abundance of fish, was probably the greatest old seal-rookery in the world, and would have been quite easy to find by those who could keep afloat in canoes; but such people would never have been able to go back to Hawaiki if there were no seals going to point them out the way; and for the same reason they would not go willingly to Australia. The "darkies" were too handy with their spears to suit the seals.

The Sandwich Islands were still more lonely, for they were about a thousand miles away from anywhere; yet the old natives found them, and, I think, brought pigs there. They must have known where they were going, or at least were confident of finding land somewhere. Those islands were almost sure to have been seal-rookeries, and the seals may have been so tame and got so used to the canoes that they would come alongside within reach of the clubs and spears.

If this theory be correct, it would put the whole mystery of navigation in a nutshell, because it would supply chart, compass, and provisions.

Even now some Indians and Esquimaux catch the timid seals with harpoons, so that in the early days it would have been only child's play.

In this way all the lonely islands may have been discovered and populated. In the case of Easter Island, where we find the old temples and ruins, the people may have wisely farmed the seals, and have thereby flourished for centuries, until some civil war allowed the seals to be murdered as they were elsewhere, and then the people would dwindle away.