

Sea of Japan Exhibit: King Ryanko

This impressive creature, nicknamed “King Ryanko,” is the world’s only taxidermic specimen of an adult male Japanese sea lion—a species now believed to be extinct. He was caught in 1931 on the Liancourt Rocks, a small group of islands halfway between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago. “Ryanko” is an approximation of “Liancourt,” a name that was given to the islands after a French whaling ship named *Le Liancourt* nearly wrecked itself there in 1859. King Ryanko’s name was given to him by local fisherman, who found him to be an intimidating and occasionally dangerous tyrant of the island who reportedly “tore up their nets and attacked their boats” and “did not flinch at their bullets.” He is estimated to have weighed approximately 750 kilograms when he was killed.

Once numerous throughout the Sea of Japan, Japanese sea lions (*Zalophus japonicus*) were commonly seen along the coast of Shimane, among the Oki Islands, and on the Liancourt Rocks. They became the target of large-scale commercial hunting in the first decade of the twentieth century, and on the Liancourt Rocks alone, as many as 3,200 were killed in a single year. These tiny islands were the last-known breeding ground for the species, with the final recorded sighting there in 1953. In 1974, a juvenile Japanese sea lion was captured north of Hokkaido, but there have been no confirmed sightings since. The species remains classified as Critically Endangered in Shimane Prefecture’s Red Data Book of endangered species, but for all practical purposes it is believed to be extinct.

Once considered a subspecies of the California sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*), the Japanese sea lion was reclassified as a separate species in 2007. Males were larger than their California cousins, averaging 2.4 meters long and weighing an average of 490 kilograms. King Ryanko’s high, domed forehead is caused by his sagittal crest, a thick, protruding skull ridge that male sea lions develop upon reaching maturity.