

# THE BERING SEA

## SLAVES of the fur seal HARVEST

For decades, federal fishery agencies force Pribilof Aleuts to toil without pay

For two centuries, the Native Aleuts who live on the Pribilof Islands were exploited by both the Russian and U.S. governments.

“Our people were wards — some say slaves — of the United States government until fur seal harvesting was abolished in 1984 due to national and international environmental politics,” says Ron Philemonoff, chairman of TDX Corp., a village corporation on St. Paul Island.

Freedom guaranteed to all U.S. citizens somehow failed to reach the tiny islands off the coast of Alaska. Of course, they always harbored hope their dreams of enjoying the “fruits of freedom and free enterprise” might be realized, if only because 75 percent of the Bering Sea’s rich resources are within 200 miles of their home.

But they were living on tiny islands thousands of miles from the nation’s capitol, too far away, apparently for anyone in government to care.

And now, with slavery gone, the Pribilovians still have reason to think they are still too unimportant to matter.

“With such abundance within close proximity, we were optimistic that an equitable share of those resources would be made available to us to meet the economic needs of the Aleut people of the Pribilof Islands,” Philemonoff told a U.S. Senate hearing in 2003.

Instead, he claims the North Pacific Fishery Management Council with giving the Pribilovians’ future away to an “already well vested group of influence-peddling large fishery resource owning companies.”

### “Slavery still exists”

On September 9, 1741, a Russian ship “silently appeared on the Aleut horizon and entered Adak harbor unannounced,” begins a chapter in the book, *Slaves of the Harvest*.

Written in 1980 by Barbara Boyle Torrey, *Slaves of the Harvest* is a history of extreme hardship at the hands of Russian and American captors. From 1911 on, the U.S. government held the Pribilovians in slavery, the book claims.



Young dancers wear traditional dress at an event in the Community Hall. Photo by Paul Koberstein/Cascadia Times

The Russian ship was under the command of Capt. Vitus Bering, an elderly Danish officer in the Russian Navy. Among those on board was a German scientist, George Steller. Bering would give his name to the sea between the U.S. and Russia; Steller would give his name to the Steller sea lion, Steller eider and Steller albatross (now known as the short-tailed albatross). All three are listed as endangered species.

In 1786, navigator Gerasim Pribilof followed fur seals from the Aleutian Islands through the fog to discover St. George Island, the southernmost rock in what became known as the Pribilofs.

By the time the U.S. purchased Alaska, the Pribilof Aleuts enjoyed full rights as citizens of Russia, were literate in two languages, were paid fairly for their labor in the fur seal hunt, and retained their traditional systems of governance, according to tribal history.

Ironically, just as the U.S. government was eliminating slavery in the South, it was instituting slavery in Alaska.

Helen D. Corbett and Susanne M. Swibold, writing in *Endangered people of the Arctic: Struggle to Survive* (Greenwood Press, 2000), say Aleut treatment got worse after the U.S. government took over the fur seal industry in 1910. The government’s agenda, they write, amounted to “seals, profits, and people-in that order.”

“The Aleuts lost the rights they had held as Russian subjects and

were now treated as wards of the U.S. government,” Corbett and Swibold wrote. “Every aspect of their lives was interfered with: language, political structures, wages, religion, freedom of movement, and even their choice of marriage partners. This state of servitude to the U.S. government reached its apex in 1942 when the Pribilof Aleuts



The Russian Orthodox Church in St. Paul keeps watch over the Bering Sea. Photo by Paul Koberstein/Cascadia Times

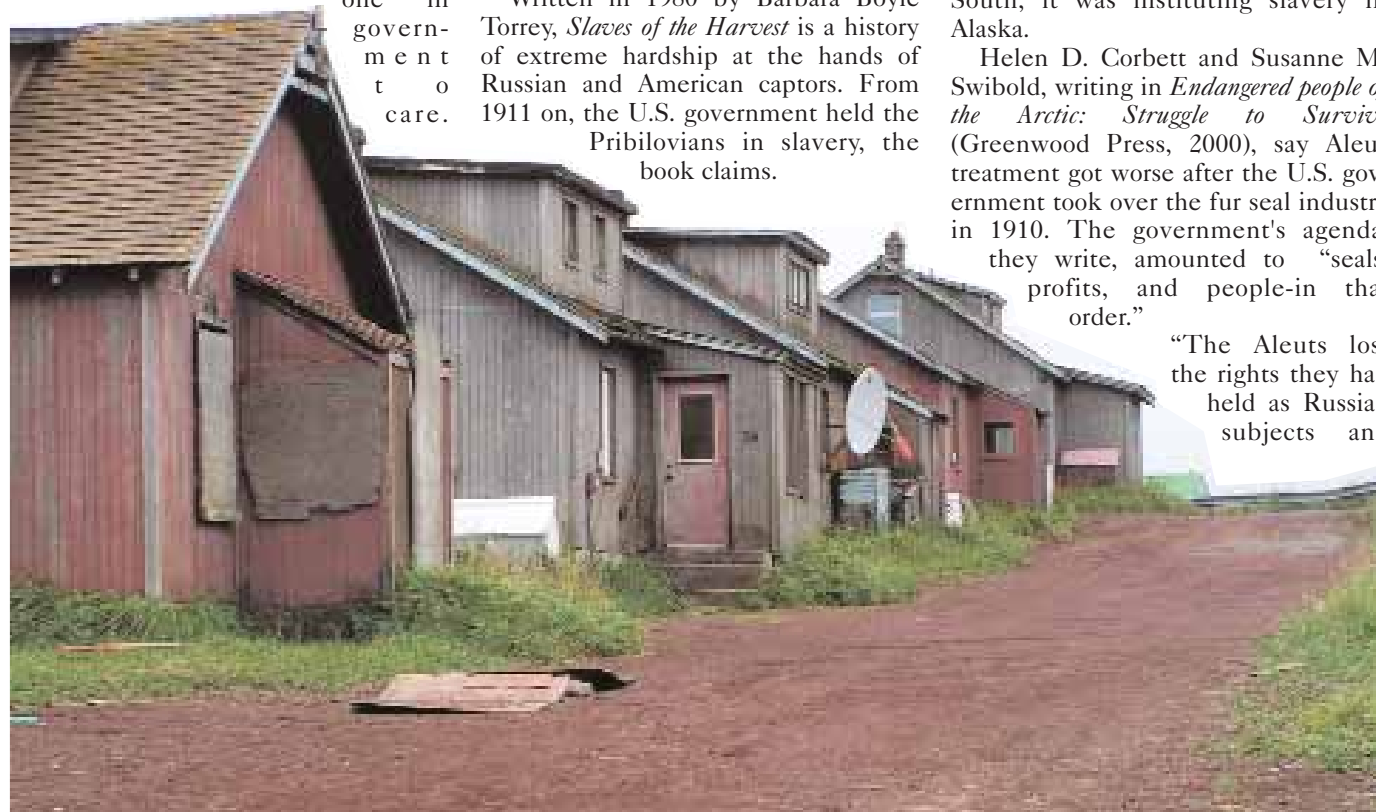
were evacuated and interned in dilapidated fish canneries in southeastern Alaska until the end of World War II. Many Aleuts died in the substandard conditions, lacking adequate food, water, sanitation, medical treatment, and shelter.”

During this time, the islands were governed by the U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, a predecessor to the present day NOAA Fisheries, an agency that co-manages Bering Sea fisheries with the North Pacific Council.

The Bureau of Fisheries refused to grant civil rights to the Pribilovians, believing that they were non-citizens.

The islands were a federal reservation, covered by the international fur seal treaty, and controlled from a Seattle office. Profits from the fur seal trade went to the federal treasury, not to the Pribilof Aleuts.

At the end of World War II, Pribilovians were paid in food, not cash. They complained they did not have



A residential street in St. Paul. The red street is made of volcanic rocks. Photo by Paul Koberstein/Cascadia Times



**ARCTIC FOX** — An Arctic fox, a native species in the Bering Sea region, is said to have reached the Pribilof Islands by traveling across sea ice in the winter. *Photo by Paul Koberstein/Cascadia Times*

when the commercial fur seal harvest was brought to an end.

### The Halibut Crisis

**I**nvoluntary servitude has ended, and Pribilof Aleuts are looking to build their economy.

With federal aide, they have built a deep harbor to service the needs of the commercial fishing fleet. They have built a plant to process crab and halibut.

But both the crab and halibut are crashing around the

Pribilofs. Pribilof leaders say actions by the North Pacific Council and NOAA Fisheries are responsible. The federal officials have allowed the commercial fishing fleet to shift vessels into waters around the islands. Their vast nets trawl bottom or midwater areas, and every halibut and crab they catch must be thrown back. Many are thrown back dead.

The Council, which writes rules for the Bering Sea fisheries, has allocated increasing shares of resources around the Pribilofs to the Seattle-based fleet. And now, with the halibut declining, the council is now considering a plan to let those Seattle boats move on to other areas. This action will shift those boats with most fishing power away from the area most needed by the small Aleut fleet near the islands.

This bycatch of halibut has significantly reduced the number of young halibut in the Bering Sea, says Bruce Leaman, executive director of the International Pacific Halibut Commission. Since 1990, 36 million halibut have been thrown back, often dead, by vessels in search of pollock or sole in waters near the Pribilofs, according to Kevin Kennedy, marine operations manager for TDX Corp., a village corporation on St. Paul Island.

Poaching, or the violation of fishery

laws, may have also been a factor in the halibut crash. This year NOAA Fisheries prosecuted a trawler for removing or “pre-sorting” halibut bycatch from its conveyor belt before observers had a chance to count them.

The vessel, the Rebecca Irene, was fined \$240,000. The Rebecca Irene's owners and operators were trawling for groundfish during the time of the violations. Halibut are incidentally caught in the trawl fishery. Pribilof Aleuts suspect many more vessels are illegally presorting halibut.

NOAA Fisheries relies on accurate data from the observers to minimize the halibut bycatch.

The bycatch has reduced the amount of halibut that can be caught by the Pribilof people, Pribilovians say. They have not been able to catch more than half their halibut quota because there's too few fish.

“Our people have no fish in their freezers,” says Richard Zacharof, president of the Tribal Government of St. Paul.

Indeed, the situation creates more than just economic hardship. The commercial fleet appears to be damaging subsistence foods for the Aleuts, such as northern fur seal, halibut and crab, all disappearing at alarming rates.

The Pribilof Aleuts, meanwhile, say they are paying a heavy price for the Council's failure to protect their fish, and are asking for answers.

In 1994, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council tried to protect the ecosystem around the islands by creating the Pribilof Habitat Conservation Zone, where all trawling is banned. The zone's main purpose was to conserve crab stocks, but the Council also intended to use it to protect other species, including halibut and fur seal.

But no one knows whether it has achieved any purpose at all. The Council never performed any baseline scientific studies before designating the zone, and has done no monitoring since then.

The Pribilof Aleuts still depend on northern fur seals for subsistence needs, but with the decline in the fur seal population, and restrictions on its harvest, seal meat is no longer the dietary staple it once was. In 1881, the average annual consumption of seal meat on the Pribilofs was 600 pounds per person. By 1981 this amount had dropped to approximately 284 pounds. Today the figure has fallen to about 40 pounds per person.

### “Resource Entitlement Plan”

**T**he Council has awarded one of the Seattle-based companies, Trident Seafoods of Seattle, the property right to process crab on St. Paul Island, even though



**ST. PAUL** — Fur seals lie on the beach near the village of St. Paul. *Photo by Paul Koberstein/Cascadia Times*

the Pribilof people own that plant.

The North Pacific Council denied TDX, the village corporation, the same rights as Trident. In fact, the Council awarded them no rights to process crab.

“Let's face it,” says Ron Philemonoff, CEO of TDX. “The so-called crab rationalization plan is a self-serving resource entitlement plan concocted under a democratic veil at the (Council), by an already well vested group of influence peddling large fishery resource owning companies, whose own interest already include a substantial portion of the crab catching industry.”

The Council, however, has refused to reconsider its plan, Philemonoff says, despite “the needs of those who live in the middle of the resource.” He said the Council should never give away a public resource to large industry “without considering the needs of those who live in the middle of the resource.”

The Council has not been altogether blind to the needs of Pribilofs Aleuts. Like all other Alaskan Bering Sea communities, they participate in a Community Development Quota (CDQ) program, which attempts to balance between the interests of local communities and corporate fish processors.

However, Philemonoff said the CDQ group has invested “not a dime” in crab processing on St. Paul Island, and instead is “consumed with political posturing and bureaucratic dithering. Aleut survival is much too important to base on our community participation on such a wobbly foundation.”

A group of community, industry and conservation leaders are meeting regularly to find solutions to these declines. Calling themselves the Pribilof Island Collaborative, they have met only twice, with a third meeting planned for January 2005.

While guardedly optimistic about this process, Pribilovians worry that the collaborative process will only delay necessary actions. Some believe it is time to invoke the Endangered Species Act to protect the dwindling population of northern fur seals. At an August meeting, member of the collaborative member Karen Holser of the Pribilof Islands Stewardship Council, was so concerned that the group would serve only to delay needed action that she walked out of the room in tears.

“These communities are in crisis,” she said. “Folks here don't even know if they can keep the lights on next month. If we need to apply for endangered species listing for the fur seal, we'll do it, if that's going to get us the action we need.”

enough or the right kind of food to eat. They could not vote, hold meetings to discuss federal policies, or leave the islands without the permission of the U.S. government. The federal administrator was said to visit homes with white gloves to intimidate the residents.

In 1950, the Pribilof Aleuts were finally given cash wages with civil service benefits instead of store rations and small annual bonuses.

In 1964, the Tundra Times, a Fairbanks newspaper, campaigned to gain freedom for the Pribilovians. “Most people think slavery in the U.S. was abolished with the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation,” the Tundra Times wrote in an editorial. “Yet today in the Far North, in Alaska, slavery still exists in milder form perhaps than existed in the Deep South, but slavery nonetheless. The Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands are today living in servitude.”

In 1966, with the passage of the Fur Seal Act, Congress finally freed the Pribilof slaves, a century after Congress ended slavery everywhere else in the Union.

In 1978, a 27-year-old lawsuit filed against the U.S. government for back wages for enslaved Pribilovians was settled for \$8.6 million.

Finally, the U.S. government ended its authority over the fur trade in 1984

### Halibut disappear off Pribilof Islands

**T**he map below shows where groundfish vessels kill halibut as bycatch, which they must return to the sea. The chart at bottom shows the catch rate for halibut near the Pribilofs. The catch rate, also known as “catch per unit of effort,” or CPUE, is an indicator of how much fewer fish are caught each year with the same amount of effort.

