

HUMANE OBSERVER REPORT
PRIBILOF ISLAND FUR SEAL HARVEST

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INTRODUCTION

For almost 200 years the Pribilof Islands have been a focal point for fur seal study and harvesting. Approximately three-quarters of the world's fur seal population breeds on the Pribilof Islands. Thus, St. Paul and St. George Islands have become the seasonal or permanent home for researchers and the Aleuts. However, because of the seal's economic importance to the resident Aleut population and the impact the seal harvest has had on society as a whole, the taking of fur seals has and always will be a topic of international, traditional, moral and emotional conflict.

Commercial harvesting has taken place on the Pribilof Islands since their discovery in 1786. But since 1985 the harvesting of fur seals has only been for native subsistence. Subsistence meaning the utilization of the meat, viscera and pelage by Alaska natives for personal use and not for c
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OVERVIEW

This report covers the harvest from July 14th until August 8th, during each

weekday of that period. In the 1985 subsistence harvest approximately 200 animals were taken each day. In 1986 the number of animals taken each day was determined by individual orders given to the Sealer Foreman from the Aleut people. This process of taking the number of seals desired per family or person seems to be much more efficient than the process used in 1985 when animals frozen for community use. This method also decreases the chances of wasting meat (carcass waste was a problem last year).

The harvest was run five days per week from a different rookery location each day. Personnel from the TDX (Tanadgusix) Corporation, the City of St. Paul and the Aleut community of St. Paul participated in the harvest; that is, they drove, herded, stunned, stuck, ripped and sometimes took care of any further processing of the carcass. The native people who had ordered meat were obligated to come out (or send a "proxy") to the killing field to claim and "dress-out" each carcass desired. The primary parts taken for consumption were: fore-flippers; ribs; shoulders; chests; hearts and livers. Occasionally kidneys, backbones, rear flippers and tongues were also taken but their use was less frequent. A brief overview of the daily harvest will follow. This is to aid anyone not familiar with the seal harvest.

Each day the harvest crew would drive out to a pre-selected rookery and separate into two or three groups depending on the number of animals needed for that day's harvest. The men would then proceed to either side of the rookery to try and separate out sub-adult males from the breeding animals and pups. From there the seals were driven over to a designated area where they were to be held until stunning. At this point all seals that had been driven up from the "haul-out" area were united into one large group. During and after the drive the animals were allowed to rest to prevent overheating. Next, two men known as "pod cutters" would separate a smaller group of five to eight animals by using "traditional" noise makers (i.e. empty 5 gallon

tin cans on top of a stunner's club), to drive the animals towards the stunners. There were four to five men using "seal clubs" (a 2 meter hardwood club), who then stunned the animals. The animals were struck at the back of the skull and rendered unconscious. The "sticker" then had the responsibility of exsanguinating the animal. He accomplished this by using a knife to penetrate the ventral thorax to pierce the heart and/or sever the great vessels; this rapidly exsanguinated the animal and caused physiological death. The animals were then skinned by four or five workers before they were given to the waiting people. Any males which were too large or too small (2 and 3 year olds seemed to be desired choice) and any females that were in the pods were released unharmed to return to the ocean. This process was repeated until ten to fifteen animals had been stunned and then time was allotted for all these animals to be butchered and claimed before the whole process is started again. This sequence was repeated until the required number of animals for that day was obtained.

I was personally present at each harvest where I was able to evaluate and insure the humanness of the operation. I observed how methodically and smoothly the operation ran and noted where, if any, problems arose.

RESULTS

Driving

Historic drive sites were used, probably due to their easy access to transportation and to keep the actual driving distance and times as short as possible. The drives were always organized by one of the older and more experienced men. There was always a conscious effort to drive the haulout areas and not to disturb the breeding areas. Also, during the drive unharvestable animals (i.e. very large males, females and animals that presented any physical weakness or tired rapidly) were culled

from the group whenever possible. The seals were allowed to move at their own pace and when necessary were permitted to stop and rest before continuing the drive. The drives were usually of a short duration and distance. The longest was approximately 250 yds (228m) and 25 minutes long. The average distance driven for the entire harvest period was 137 yds (125m) with an average time of 10.7 minutes. No animals were lost in the drives this season.

HERDING

Herding, or the grouping of animals upwind from the stunning site, is probably the only time during the harvest that the animals are in "contact" with human intrusion for long periods of time. The herders were usually younger men with less experience. This was evident when, due to lack of attention, the animals would start to escape and had to be re-grouped. However this was of minor importance and only seem to occur at the beginning, before the animals had settled down.

POD CUTTING

The men doing the pod cutting were efficient and seemed to handle the animals well. They continually culled the harvestable animals from the non-harvestable animals. The pod size usually varied from five to eight animals and the pod cutters always drove the animals directly toward the stunners.

STUNNING

This is the event that has traditionally caused most of the furor and controversy. The stunners were all experienced and showed this in their ability and technique. Most animals were stunned on the first blow and care was taken to insure that the animals were unconscious before they were stuck. If a second blow was needed there was never any hesitation. There were only two incidences of animals being accidentally hit or mishit and allowed to escape to the ocean. One animal was found dead the next day and necropsied. The results indicated that the animal had died of cerebral edema with extensive hemorrhage. However this type of injury is expected with this method of stunning. Larger pod numbers may potentially increase the incidence of this occurring.

STICKING

Sticking was done immediately and accurately. The Sealer Foreman made sure that each animal was stuck as soon as possible to facilitate exsanguination. Even when there were a large number of animals being stun, the sticker adequately kept up.

RIPPING and FURTHER PROCESSING

Ripping (the process of removing the skin) occurred only after fifteen to twenty animals had been stunned and stuck; so no animal was ripped before it was brain dead. Further processing included the removal of the edible parts, head and internal viscera. Many of the animals were processed by the crew for the elderly and those who could not come out to the killing field.

STRESS

Stress was evaluated both subjectively and objectively. I recorded random temperatures of animals which had just been stunned and stuck. It is important to bear in mind that seals do not use their sweat glands as a primary source of heat exchange, so any extended period of excitement can result in hyperthermia. During the drives I watched for any signs of hyperthermia (i.e. labored or extreme panting respiration, lethargy, seizures and "star-gazing"). I obtained rectal temperatures from approximately one of every ten animals taken. The range in temperatures varied from 94°F (34.4°C) to 105°F (40.6°C), with the mean temperature being 100.6°F (38.1°C). Each day at the beginning of the harvest I took the environmental temperature. The daily temperatures ranged from 45°F (7.2°C) to 55°F (12.8°C) with an average temperature of 49.6°F (9.5°C). As environmental temperatures increased body temperatures also increased. But the one factor that seem to most affect body temperature was the amount of moisture on the terrain. The flippers of fur seals are highly vascularized; this feature accommodates a much faster exchange of body heat. Therefore it stands to reason that the faster the flippers can be cooled, the more comfortable the animal will tend to be. So any combination of very wet grass and breezes would be very beneficial to the animals ability to dissipate heat. The sun could also have been a factor, but it appeared only once during the harvest period with any significant warming. During most of the harvest days the weather was cloudy or foggy (or both) and there was usually a slight to moderate breeze present. All temperatures were taken using a hand held thermometer (both rectal and environmental).

The duration of the daily harvest could also have been an important factor

and was taken into account. The period from when the seals were first driven until the quota for the day had been reached was recorded daily. These times ranged from 25 minutes to 2 hours and 45 minutes. The average time was 1 hour and 20 minutes.

COMMENT

The harvest this year was of a very relaxed attitude. It began everyday at 2 p.m. and was usually thru by 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. If future harvests are to be of a subsistence nature, then this year's harvest was a good model. It was very organized and handled well. There was a total of 1228 fur seals taken and only 3 of those were female. This demonstrates how attentive the foreman was in maintaining a professional level of control at all times. He also kept "on top" of the younger and less experienced workers to insure they performed their jobs correctly. He determined which animals would be taken from each pod, and how fast the harvest would progress. The foreman and crew were very patient with my measurements and provided any information that I requested. He also made sure that all visitors, reporters and photographers were kept well away from the killing field. This was not only important for their own safety, but also for the safety and efficiency of the workers.

Considering the methods used and the efficiency of the harvest on St. Paul Island, the harvest activities I observed must be judged as humane.

TABLE 1

Environmental Conditions, St. Paul, AK, 1986

<u>Date</u>	<u>Temp</u>	<u>Wind</u>	<u>Precipitation</u>	<u>Cloud Cover</u>	<u>Terrain Moisture</u>
7/14	45°	moderate	foggy/misty	overcast	slightly wet
7/15	55°	moderate	none	partly cloudy	dry
7/16	49.5°	moderate	none	overcast	damp
7/17	53°	slight	none	intermit't sun	damp
7/18	53°	strong	foggy	overcast	dry
7/21	49°	slight	foggy/misty	intermit't sun	damp
7/22	51°	strong	none	overcast	slightly wet
7/23	47°	slight	foggy	overcast	very wet
7/24	46°	slight	foggy/lt rain	overcast	very wet
7/25	51°	slight	none	overcast	slightly wet
7/28	50°	slight	foggy	overcast	very wet
7/29	48°	slight	none	overcast	very wet
7/30	47°	slight	very foggy	overcast	very wet
7/31	47°	moderate	foggy/lt rain	overcast	very wet
8/1	48°	slight	none	overcast	damp
8/5	52°	moderate	none	overcast	damp
8/6	50°	slight	lt rain	overcast	very wet
8/7	55°	moderate	none	intermit't sun	slightly wet
8/8	47°	strong	raining	overcast	very wet

temperatures in degrees fahrenheit

TABLE 2

Rectal Temperatures, St. Paul, AK, 1986

<u>Site</u>	<u># Ani'ls Taken</u>	<u># Observed R</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Aver. Rectal Temp.</u>
Reef	50	6	96°-100°	97°F
Zapadni	19	4	98°-103°	101.2°F
Little Zapadni	51	9	97°-103°	100.5°F
Polovina	51	11	102°-105°	103.3°F
Northeast	64	9	99°-103°	100°F
Reef	49	6	98°-104°	100.3°F
Lukanin	96	9	100°-104°	101.8°F
Little Zapadni	31	6	100°-104°	102°F
Polovina	54	8	97°-103°	100°F
Northeast	102	7	101°-104°	101.7°F
Reef	60	7	99°-103°	101°F
Lukanin	59	6	100°-104°	102.3°F
Little Zapadni	27	3	99°-101°	100°F
Polovina	33	4	97°-99°	98°F
Northeast	56	5	99°-101°	100°F
Reef	83	8	101°-104°	101.8°F
Zapadni	82	9	100°-103°	101.6°F
Little Polovina	80	9	99°-104°	101.5°F
Northeast & West	181	15	97°-101°	100°F

Note: normal fur seal temperature is 100°F (38°C)