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The Aleutian Islands region of southwestern Alaska is dominated by volcanic peaks, rugged coastlines, powerful oceans, and severe weather. It is also one with rich resources, so varied and abundant that people have thrived in the area for almost 10,000 years. The Native people of the greater Aleutian Islands region refer to themselves by two names, Unangaxˆ and Aleut, the former in their own language, Unangam tunuu, and the latter a name applied only after foreigners first came to the region in the mid-1700s.

Population and Territory

It is impossible to know precisely how many Unangaxˆ lived in the region before the arrival of Russians and other non-Natives beginning in the mid-1700s. When insights from Unangax oral history, archaeology, and early Russian period documents are combined, it is likely that about 12-15 thousand Unangax occupied a territory that included the western end of the Alaska Peninsula, the Shumagin Islands just south of the Peninsula, and the whole of the Aleutian archipelago from Unimak Island in the far east to Attu Island at the western tip of the island chain. Population was likely higher in the eastern portion of this territory due to the greater coastline available and a concentration of food resources.

The Commander Islands, west of Attu Island and now part of Russia, are geographically part of the island chain, but they were unpopulated when Russians first arrived there in 1741. Likewise, the Pribilof Islands, north of the Aleutians in the Bering Sea, were likely unpopulated until the Russian period, although Unangaxˆ oral history testifies to their knowledge of this island group in pre-Russian times.

Language

Unangam tunuu is one major branch of the greater Eskimo-Aleut language family. The linguistic relationships within this larger family affirm ancestral connections going back thousands of years among a range of Native people in Alaska today, including Unangaxˆ, Inupiaq, Siberian Yup’ik,

Sugpiaq (Alutiiq), and Yup'ik peoples. While related to these other languages, Unangam tunuu is its own distinct language, indicating that there has been a long period of geographical, cultural, and linguistic separation of its speakers from other Alaska Native groups. While it was once spoken throughout the region, today only about 109 individuals speak it fluently.

At the time of foreign contact, Unangam tunuu probably had multiple regional dialects—mutually intelligible, but with certain distinct features of structure and vocabulary. However, by the time the language was well recorded in the early 1800s, only three of these dialects remained. The Attuan dialect was spoken by Unangax[^] of the far western end of the archipelago, including those on Attu Island. The Atkan dialect was spoken in the central portion of the region, including today's village of Atka, the last surviving traditional Unangax[^] community in the area. From Umnak Island eastward to the Alaska Peninsula, the eastern Unangax dialect was spoken.

Natural Environment

The Aleutian Islands stretch westward for some 1,100 miles from the western end of the Alaska Peninsula to Attu Island at the far end of the archipelago. With the Bering Sea to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south, the Aleutians' sole connection to the rest of Alaska is with the Alaska Peninsula.

Geologically, the entire Aleutian Island region is a young part of Alaska. The active volcanic peaks of the Aleutian Range extend down the length of the Alaska Peninsula and nearly to the western end of the Aleutian archipelago. This area—the northern extension of the Pacific “Ring of Fire”—is especially geologically active, experiencing numerous earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis. Such environmental occurrences are realities with which people, both ancient and modern, have needed to contend.

Altogether, there are some 70 volcanoes in the Aleutian Range, about half of which have been active in the last 250 years. Island landforms vary from low, rolling hills to rugged mountains. Coastlines are often rugged, with sandy beaches infrequent. Steep cliffs and narrow, rocky beaches typically ring the islands. Though small in landmass, the islands' often highly convoluted shores nevertheless include about one-third of Alaska's coastline.

Dramatic as the volcanic landforms are, the maritime environment is the most crucial for understanding Unangax life in the region. The nutrient-rich waters of the North Pacific Ocean mix with those of the Bering Sea, supporting a particularly abundant and diverse food chain. Because the ocean rarely freezes in the winter, sea resources were available throughout the year. Only around the northern side of the Alaska Peninsula, at the far eastern end of Unangax territory, and in the Pribilof Islands does sea ice occasionally form in some winters. Summers are relatively cool, and winters are comparatively mild—with average high and low temperatures around 50° and 30°, respectively. This contrasts with all of the rest of Alaska, where land masses often produce a much wider yearly range of temperatures.

Animal life in the Unangax area is dominated by those of the oceans and coasts. Marine mammals generally found throughout the region include sea otters, Steller sea lions, and harbor seals. Northern fur seals occur in eastern Aleutian waters, but come ashore only in the Pribilof Islands, where they breed. A number of whale species, including finback, humpback, gray, and killer whales, tend to be more numerous in the eastern archipelago. Walrus are relatively rare, restricted to the extreme eastern end of Unangax territory.

Birds are especially abundant throughout the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian and Pribilof islands region, especially species of open ocean, lowland, lake, and near-shore environments. These include gulls, kittiwakes, auklets, cormorants, puffins, teals, pintails, mallards, and eiders. Many species nest in the region.

Like birds, fish occur in large numbers. Ocean fish, such as halibut, cod, and king salmon, and anadromous species (those that travel from the ocean to streams and lakes to spawn), such as several species of salmon, are the most important as traditional foods.

Land plants and animals of the Unangax̂ area are influenced by the climate and isolation of the islands. Common plants belong to “moist tundra” in lowland areas and, at higher elevations, “alpine tundra” communities; these include grasses, sedge, wild celery, crowberries, ferns, and lichens. Because of the cool growing season, large trees are absent. Land animals of any appreciable size are limited to caribou, wolf, wolverine, land otter, short-tailed weasel, and brown bear, but before Russians arrived in the mid-1700s these species were found only on the Alaska Peninsula and Unimak Island, not on the more isolated islands farther west or on the Pribilof Islands. Fox and lemmings extend as far west as Umnak Island. Except for just a few land bird species (such as ptarmigans and eagles), the remainder of the central and western Aleutians have no significant native land animals living on them. However, many species were introduced to various islands in the archipelago and the Pribilof Islands during the Russian and American periods; among others, these include fox, caribou, sheep, rabbits, cattle, horses, and Norway rats.

Earliest History

The earliest known human occupation of the Aleutian Islands region dates to about 9,000 years ago. Because archaeological sites of this age have been found only in the eastern Aleutians, it is clear that the first movement into the island chain occurred from the Alaska Peninsula westward. The first people who moved into the region were the descendants of the first migrants from Siberia into Alaska, who crossed the Ice Age land connection between the two hemispheres, the Bering Land Bridge, which existed until about 12,000 years ago.

The oldest sites are very few, and preservation of materials like bone and wood is almost nonexistent. Therefore, many details of life at this ancient time are unclear. A great deal is known, however, about the abundant and distinctive stone tools produced beginning about 9,000 years ago—tools very different from those of the last several thousand years. The first-discovered and best-studied site from this time period is on Anangula Island, in the Bering Sea several miles northwest of the contemporary village of Nikolski on Umnak Island. From this site comes the name applied to this earliest archaeological period, the “Anangula tradition.”

The Anangula tradition is defined largely on the basis of its age and its distinctive stone tool technology. At the Anangula site, and at a small number of sites on eastern Unalaska Island, stone tools are manufactured using a “core and blade” technology. Blades, relatively long and narrow stone flakes, are refined along their edges with small-scale flaking, or retouch. However, unlike in other areas of Alaska, this retouch is done only unifacially, that is, on only one surface, or face, of the tool. Tools made on blades during the Anangula tradition include, among others, a variety of skin scrapers, knives, and burins (gouging tools). Over a few thousand years, the Anangula tradition ends as the core and blade technology gives way to much different technologies. At the same time, however, certain technological continuities connect the Anangula tradition with later time periods; these include roof-entry semisubterranean houses (see the discussion of houses below), large stones for grinding paint pigments, stone bowls and oil lamps, and pumice abraders.

Following the Anangula tradition, occupation of the islands certainly continues, although relatively few archaeological sites are known until some 4,000 years ago. Some researchers see a “Late” Anangula period (from about 7,000 to 4,000 years ago) linking earlier with later materials. Whatever the precise nature of this transition, however, by 5,500 years ago it is clear that new types of tool-making are present in the Aleutian Islands, marking the beginning of the “Aleutian tradition,” which lasts until the Russian arrival in the region in 1741.

The most fully understood archaeological period in the region, the Aleutian tradition is seen at numerous sites throughout the archipelago. They are often characterized by deep deposits of midden, the bone- and shell-rich byproducts of daily life. Because of the chemistry of midden, bone artifacts and bone food refuse are preserved very well, meaning that far more information regarding Unangax culture can be discerned than in the earlier Anangula tradition.

Stone tool technology during the Aleutian tradition lacks the cores and blades of former times, instead focusing on manufacturing bifacially (two-sided) retouched tools. Unifacial retouching continues as well, with the two stone-shaping technologies producing a wide array of knives, scrapers, projectile points, and adzes (wood-working tools). In addition, bone and ivory tools are well represented in midden deposits; these include many kinds of barbed harpoons and spearheads for sea mammals, birds, and fish; handles for knives and scrapers; two-piece fishhooks; whale vertebra bowls; and items of personal decoration, such as nose pins and labrets. (In anthropological usage, a harpoon has a penetrating head that detaches from its shaft, a spear has a head fixed to its shaft, and a lance is a hand-held stabbing device.)

Unangax^ Culture Before the Russians

The Subsistence Economy

With an absence of winter sea ice in the region, it is understandable that technology related to sea ice hunting and overland winter travel, common in much of farther north coastal Alaska, was absent in the Unangax^ region. These absences include ice picks, snow goggles, and dog sled gear. Also absent was pottery, something present among neighboring peoples (although carved stone bowls and containers of wood and animal products were made).

Unangax^ directed most of their efforts in procuring food and raw materials to the sea and the coastal zone. Resources, only a few of which were found exclusively on land, were diverse and abundant in the Aleutian Islands region; importantly, while some were only seasonally present, many others were available year-round.

The richness of food resources of the Unangax^ region contributed to a distinctive characteristic of the food economy: Because many resources—in particular, marine invertebrates—were relatively easy to obtain, all but the youngest and the most elderly or infirm members of an Unangax^ community could make a significant contribution to acquiring food for themselves and their families. Because such foods were not found throughout Alaska, this ability is not something all Alaska Native cultures shared. In addition, Unangax^ used a wide range of non-food items as raw materials for making things.

As in all Alaska Native cultures, two essential features of the Unangax^ subsistence economy were cooperation and sharing. Obtaining certain resources required that people work together. Netting fish along the shore, for example, could not be done alone, nor could halibut fishing,

where hauling in a large fish from a skin boat could only be done when men in two kayak-style bidarkas stabilized themselves with their paddles. Many other hunting, fishing, and gathering pursuits were undoubtedly undertaken in groups for a variety of reasons, including safety, learning, and friendship.

Sharing of resources was also absolutely indispensable for Unangax[^] survival. Beyond the obvious reasons for giving food to certain people (infants, the sick, and the elderly), Unangax shared with one another for food security. For example, because there were no guarantees that a particular hunter would be successful, it would be to his and his family's benefit if a successful hunter shared his catch with him. The successful hunter, in turn, knew that he, too, would be taken care of someday when (not if) he came home empty-handed. In short, Unangax[^] shared to reduce the uncertainties that are associated with many subsistence endeavors. Sharing of food also was a means of dividing the often substantial work required to process fish and game. In some cases, if food were not shared, it would spoil before it could be eaten or properly stored for future use. It was in the context of multi-family households that most food sharing likely took place.

Raw materials for making things—including tools, household goods, clothing, and boats—came in part from the same resources Unangax used for food. As just one illustration of Unangax resourcefulness, the different parts of the Steller sea lion were used in a wide variety of ways. Skins of these large sea mammals were used for boat covers; meat, fat, and internal organs were eaten; bones were made into a variety of tools; teeth were carved into pendants; intestines were sewn into rain parkas; and other parts served other functions. Other animals, from marine mammals to birds, were used as extensively as was the sea lion. Unangax survival clearly depended on extensive and creative use of the animals they hunted.

Subsistence technology included hatched bidarkas and larger, open skin-covered boats, bidars, the latter capable of carrying substantial cargo and many people. Most hunting of marine mammals and birds was done at sea from bidarkas, with men hurling their harpoons using spear-throwers, carved pieces of wood that gave throwing arms greater length and their spears greater force and distance. Harpoons themselves were created from long wooden shafts to which were attached, first, a connecting piece made from bone, and, finally, depending on what was being hunted, one or more barbed bone points. Bird spears had multiple barbed points fanning out from the central wooden shaft, thereby providing several tips and notches to catch a bird. Marine mammal spears had single harpoon points, sometimes tipped with a small sharp stone inset. They were designed so that the barbed point detached from the valuable wooden shaft and remained in an animal, while a line made from animal skins connected the harpoon to an inflated skin float, which prevented the wounded animal from diving.

It appears likely that hunting for large whales was a particularly specialized endeavor conducted exclusively in the eastern Aleutians, rather than farther to the west. The basic technique was to put a poison derived from the aconite, or monkshood, plant on the end of a harpoon or spear. The lone whaler would then wound a whale and retreat to land to let the poison kill the animal, a days-long process that, with any luck, would leave the whale washed ashore reasonably close to the hunter's village.

Fishing at sea was undertaken with hand lines and baited hooks, weighted to keep them stable in ocean currents. The lines were made of strips of kelp or sea mammal skin, the hooks of two pieces of carved bone or ivory that were lashed together, and the weights of hand-sized beach stones that had been notched slightly at the ends to keep the line from slipping off. At stream

mouths and along streams, where salmon were the main and often abundant goal, nets, fish spears (leisters), and stone or wood fences across streams (weirs) were employed.

As elsewhere in Alaska, Unangax[^] subsistence activities followed the seasonal pattern of resource availability. In general, spring, summer, and fall were times of greater abundance of foods, as many migratory species (such as salmon, many birds, and fur seals) were present during these seasons. Winter, on the other hand, was more of a slack time, when fewer resources were available.

Housing and Settlement

In a region devoid of large trees, it is not surprising that Unangax[^] built dwellings in large part of the earth itself. Houses were constructed in a semisubterranean fashion, literally, half underground. Excavations several feet deep and sometimes lined with rocks on the walls were roofed over with beams made from driftwood and long whale bones, such as those from the lower jaws, or mandibles. Over this framework, smaller pieces of wood and bone, grass, and, finally, a layer of living sod completed the structure, so that from the outside a house appeared like a small grassy hill. Side windows and doors were absent; instead, entry and exit were made through an opening in the roof, from which a notched log ladder descended to the central floor area. Large houses could have had multiple openings in their roofs to provide additional light and air circulation.

Inside these precontact Unangax[^] houses, families had their personal use areas around the immediate inside of the walls. These were separated from each other with woven grass mats. The central floor area was a communal activity area; in some houses, small sub-floor pits were dug for storage of food and other materials.

Archaeological research has shown that all Unangax[^] houses were not alike. While all appear to have followed the same basic semisubterranean construction plan, they varied a great deal in overall size and complexity. Many dwellings were relatively small, generally oval-shaped structures that measured about 20 to 26 feet long and 10 to 13 feet wide. Bigger houses were generally made larger in length than in width, since it would have been very difficult to span much more than 13-16 feet with the available building materials.

Some different forms of houses occur in the eastern Unangax[^] region. On Unimak Island and the Alaska Peninsula, archaeologists have found a number of "nucleus-satellite" houses. These have central floors up to about 20 by 50 feet in size, to which some 2 to 14 side rooms are attached by low, narrow passageways. In the Unalaska Island area, archaeologists located the largest houses in the Unangax[^] region, termed longhouses, which also have multiple side rooms, but have central floors measuring up to 20 by 165 feet. Also in the Unalaska area, some houses dating to about 3,000 years ago had stone-lined troughs in their floors to aid in distributing warm air from fireplaces to the entire structure.

With the primary focus of their subsistence economy on resources of the sea and coastline, it is obvious why Unangax[^] placed the vast majority of their villages and seasonal camps as close to the ocean as was feasible. Favorable locations were those that afforded safe access to the sea, a fresh water stream, and nearby dependable food resources. Additional consideration was given to the proximity of defensive locales, such as steep-sided offshore islets, which served as refuges in times of warfare.

In optimal places Unangax[^] villages were sometimes quite large and probably occupied year-round, at least by some of their residents. The well-known site of Chaluka, a part of the contemporary community of Nikolski on Umnak Island, is one of these. Measuring some 600 feet long and 200 feet wide, cultural midden deposits at Chaluka extend down as much as 30 feet and back in time nearly 4,000 years.

In addition to such large communities, Unangax[^] also maintained smaller, resource-specific camps where individuals, families, or work groups would go at those times of year when resources there were available. For example, Unangax[^] might travel to a locale having a rich salmon stream, but few other food resources, during the summer months that salmon are running. Also, over thousands of years of use by Unangax[^], a single settlement location might have been at certain times a seasonal camp and at other times a year-round community, its changing use depending on Unangax[^] adaptations to fluctuations in food resources.

In recent years, archaeologists have discovered a small number of Unangax[^] settlements that defy straightforward interpretation. These are houses, and possibly other structures, located in upland areas on Adak Island, away from the coast. Continuing investigations will clarify their role in Unangax[^] settlement patterning, with possibilities including, among others, defensive sites, inland bird hunting sites, and temporary layover sites on portages over the island. It is likely that similar sites will eventually be found on other islands in the region.

Household, Kinship, and Marriage

Much changed in Unangax[^] social organization after Russians arrived over 250 years ago. It is only from Unangax oral history, early Russian period documents, and archaeological evidence that a picture, however indistinct, of kinship, living arrangements, marriage, and leadership can be drawn. In terms of household composition, it is clear from archaeological information, that most, if not all, dwellings were large enough to be home to more than a single nuclear family. Even the smallest structures likely housed multi-generational families. At the other extreme, the largest houses might have been home to 100 or more individuals.

The ethnohistoric evidence is not especially helpful in determining who lived together. However, we can make some educated guesses based on another basic feature of social organization, namely, the manner in which Unangax[^] determined kinship relationships. Although there is some disagreement on this topic, one strong argument has been made that Unangax[^] had a matrilineal kinship system. In such a system, one belonged to the kin group of her or his mother. However, because two people in the same matrilineage were never allowed to marry each other (a rule of lineage exogamy), no Unangax[^] belonged to her or his father's kin group.

Matrilineal kinship also had implications for child-rearing. An Unangax[^] girl's training would be overseen by her mother, since, by definition, both were in the same kin group. On the other hand, a boy's training was not managed by his father (who was in a different matrilineage from the boy), but by his mother's brother, or maternal uncle. This relationship between a boy and his mother's brother is termed the avunculate relationship, one found in many matrilineal societies the world over. In other, better-documented matrilineal societies in Alaska, it is known that a young boy actually left his parents' home to live with his mother's brother and his family, perhaps for the rest of his life. Moreover, after sufficient time has passed, a young man may marry this uncle's daughter, who, by rules of matrilineal kinship, is never in his own kin group. Such a marriage may be seen as a way of strengthening and perpetuating the avunculate relationship itself.

Consistent with this discussion is that many, if not most, marriages were likely arranged, with the future in-laws determining what unions would best further the social and economic needs of their families. A girl could marry quite young, although in the avunculate system described above, she would continue to live with her husband in her parents' house. A boy was somewhat older when he married, waiting until he had achieved reasonable skill at hunting.

Complicating this picture of marriage and kinship relationships is that Unangax[^] allowed polygamy, that is, having more than one spouse at a time. While it is likely that monogamy, having a single spouse, was the norm, both types of polygamy, polygyny (a man married to more than one woman) and polyandry (a woman married to more than one man), were permitted, with the former being more common. As the ability to provide for the needs of multiple spouses was something only certain especially capable individuals could manage, polygamy was a sign of higher wealth and status.

Returning to the question of who might have lived together in a house, if we assume that having at least the core of a barabara's occupants related to one another would provide for the smoothest and most efficient management of daily tasks and interpersonal relations, then we can suggest a possible scenario, which, while overly simplistic, nonetheless is illustrative of fundamental Unangax[^] matrilineal kinship principles.

Imagine that three married couples lived together. The three husbands could have been from a single matrilineage (they could have been brothers), and the wives could have been from a single, but different (following the rule of lineage exogamy), matrilineage. These couples' children would all belong to their mothers' matrilineage. While the daughters stayed at home, the young sons left the household when they became old enough to live with their mother's brothers. Finally, the sons of the fathers' sisters came to live in the barabara as part of their avunculate training, and they could marry the daughters living there.

Thus, in our hypothetical example, a multi-family household is composed of three matrilineally-related nuclear families (minus the sons), plus three nephews who have moved in. Because its occupants are all closely related to one another and only two different matrilineages are represented, we can suppose that this extended family house functioned well. Smaller and larger barabaras housing fewer or more people could have been composed in much the same way.

Of course, Unangax[^] real life must have been much more complex than this simple illustration. Yet, however a particular extended family barabara was composed, household members were bound together through ties of descent and marriage to form the most important day-in and day-out social and economic group in Unangax[^] society.

Leadership and Rank

Social organization and subsistence were nowhere more closely connected than in the extended family household. Unangax[^] cooperated and shared among houses and, indeed, with other villages, but their most important daily economic relationships were with their own kindred within a barabara. Leadership within a household rested with its most highly regarded occupants—men and women who embodied qualities valued by all Unangax[^]. These included such things as having achieved successes in hunting, warfare, travel, and trade; being skillful at household organization, oratory, and oral history; and being a good provider and care-giver. In

short, the men and women who led a household were those who had the highest rank, or status, within a barabara.

It is important to recognize that both men and women had necessary and mutually supportive leadership roles. Women and men could not survive very well without the skills, knowledge, and direction each brought to a marriage and to a household. While men were looked to for guidance in times of certain “high profile” activities, such as organizing hunting and warfare ventures, women’s leadership roles in child-rearing, certain subsistence tasks (for example, gathering grass, weaving mats and baskets, fishing, food processing, and meal preparation), and household management, though perhaps of “lower profile,” were arguably no less critical.

Beyond the household, village-wide leadership was occasionally required, especially for certain subsistence and warfare matters. This meant that male household leaders might consult as a group, showing deference to the man of highest rank. Similar to that within a household, a man’s rank in a community was based on a combination of attributes, including age, achievements, personal wealth, and, importantly, how many local relatives he had to support him. Thus, a high ranking man or woman with substantial support in one village could very well be of no special status in another.

At very infrequent times, such as those related to warfare, it might have been necessary for leaders from multiple villages to work together. On these occasions, the most influential of the village leaders could have emerged to oversee what needed to be done. Russian period documents and Unangax[^] oral history speak to the existence of political groups or alliances within the Unangax region, but the manner in which they functioned is largely unknown.

This system of rank within Unangax[^] society seems to have been more highly developed in the eastern Aleutian Islands than it was farther west. In the late precontact period, it is possible that eastern Unangax were on the verge of actual social stratification, in which people of high rank would not only have had more influence than others, but they also would have had power and control over the lives of other Unangax. Such power could be expressed in the control over access to subsistence resources, unequal sharing of resources, and the ability to coerce people to comply with one’s demands.

At the lowest end of the ranking scale were slaves, mostly captives from warfare either among Unangax[^] themselves or between Unangax[^] and their Sugpiaq neighbors to the east. Comprising a distinct class of individuals, slaves had essentially no control over their own lives. Their fate lay in the hands of their owners, with whom they lived and worked. Because slaves were a form of wealth, ownership of them served as another indication of one’s rank in Unangax[^] society.

For all Unangax[^], one’s position in society could be reflected in a number of ways. These included the number and quality of items of personal ornamentation, such as labrets (carved stone, bone, or ivory pieces worn in holes in the cheek below one’s mouth), facial tattoos, nose pins (bone or ivory carvings worn through a hole pierced in the nasal septum), and quality of clothing.

Fundamental Religious Beliefs

As with certain other features of precontact Unangax[^] culture, many features of their religious beliefs are unknown, having been altered or lost soon after the first Russians came to the area. Nevertheless, the basic

features of their religion can be summarized. For precontact Unangax[^], the natural and supernatural worlds were actually a single, inseparable aspect of their existence. The world was, in essence, a spiritual place, where all things—including people, animals, places, oceans, and so on—had spiritual qualities and powers. While some spiritual forces were more important than others, successful living required Unangax[^] to live in harmony within their spiritually-based environment. One who failed to follow proper behavior could face bad luck, sickness, or death.

Examples of this are provided by the Russian Orthodox priest Ivan Veniaminov (since 1977, Saint Innocent), who lived in Unalaska from 1824 to 1834 and provided us with our most extensive information on traditional Unangax[^] culture. He reported that male hunters should not touch a menstruating woman; to do so would result in “frightful misfortunes and a cruel death.” Further, a sea otter hunter who was “lazy, spiteful, malicious or disregarded the teaching of the elders” would find his prey “cavorting around his baidarka [bidarka] . . . teas[ing] and splash[ing] him with water.”

The individual who provided spiritual care was the shaman. A woman or man, the shaman led a mostly ordinary life, serving only when needed as a part-time specialist. For example, when someone wanted to insure hunting success, to foretell the future, to cure a sick family member, to bring good luck in battle, or to bring harm to an enemy, a shaman was consulted. The shaman combined a specialized knowledge of spiritual powers with an ability to communicate with spiritual forces to bring about the desired end. As is common elsewhere in Alaska, Unangax[^] shamans utilized song, dance, and drumming to aid in their role as intermediaries between the everyday and spiritual realms.

Unangax[^] spiritual beliefs and values were expressed in many ways. Two of the most obvious are ceremonies and the treatment of the dead.

Ceremonies

Various group ceremonies were routinely held by Unangax[^]. These included large feasts, some for remembering and honoring the dead, where the hosts distributed food and goods to the invited guests and provided lavish entertainment, including singing and dancing. Such events served multiple functions, including underscoring the value of sharing and reinforcing and enhancing the social standing of the hosts.

Treatment of the Dead

Reflecting their belief in the undying aspect of human spirits, and paralleling the differences in rank within their society, Unangax[^] had a wide range of ways to treat their deceased relatives and friends. Most information on this subject comes from archaeological evidence, since burial practices changed considerably soon after Russians arrived in the region.

Perhaps the most common form of burial throughout the region was to place a body in a hole dug into the ground near the barabaras in a village. The oval-shaped hole was dug about three feet deep (as deep as one can easily reach to dig using small hand tools) and four feet long, and the body was placed within it in a flexed position, that is, with legs and arms bent up against the chest. Grave goods, such as beads and labrets, could accompany the burial.

Another, more elaborate type of interment has been called an umqan burial. This burial consists of a very low mound of earth and stones built up over one or more of the common type of burial described above. Surrounding the mound, a shallow V- or U-shaped trough with its opening facing down slope presumably directed surface water away from the burials. Umqan burials are known from the eastern and central Aleutians.

More intricate yet was a small above-ground wooden burial structure known from only a few, though widespread, locales. One or more individuals could be interred; as with other burials, grave goods could be included.

The most elaborate burial form was that made in a rock shelter or cave, often in a location that was difficult to access. While cave burials are known from throughout Unangax territory, the most intricate, involving mummification, have been found only in the eastern Aleutian Islands. This is likely a reflection of the greater emphasis on rank and possible stratification in that area. Individuals were often carefully prepared by removing their internal organs and filling the body cavity with moss or dried grass. Clothed in their everyday garments, men, women, and children were then placed along with grave goods in the caves. Infants were sometimes wrapped in furs and placed atop finely woven grass mats inside of carved wooden boxes. Because the dryness of cave environments afforded better preservation of organic materials than did other forms of Unangax burial, these burials became mummified. Consequently, they provide a rare and particularly valuable glimpse into the clothing and perishable material culture of precontact Unangax. Unangax men sometimes visited the mummies of powerful individuals, whose remains were able provide assistance in hunting and other endeavors. The fat emanating from a mummy was sometimes rubbed on a harpoon to transfer the power from the deceased to the living hunter.

While each manner of treating the dead appears to have been afforded to both sexes and all ages, enemies slain in battle were sometimes given much different treatment. To release and render harmless the hostile power that dead foes might still possess, their bodies were dismembered and discarded.

The Russian and American Periods

In all of Alaska, it was the Unangax region that experienced the earliest contact with foreigners. In 1741, Vitus Bering and Alexei Chirikov ventured eastward in two ships from Kamchatka, eager to establish the geographic relationship between Asia and North America. Following the return of their crews to Russia, fur hunters began sailing to the Aleutian Islands in pursuit of sea otters, foxes, fur seals, and other valuable furbearers. Over second half of the eighteenth century, Russian crews sailed ever farther eastward, expanding their colonial reach to the central Aleutian Islands by around 1750 and to the eastern Aleutians by the 1760s.

The early Russian period was a devastating time for Unangax. By 1800, little more than 50 years after first Russian contact, the Unangax population had been reduced by some 80 percent, to about 2,500 people. Battles between Unangax and Russians, Russian atrocities, forced Unangax labor, and introduced diseases all took their toll, and no part of traditional Unangax culture was left unchanged. In the realm of subsistence, many traditional activities continued through this time, but some important shifts took place. Because many men were forced to work for fur-hunting companies in the region, women and children took on increasing responsibilities for providing their families with foods and resources.

With population loss came far fewer occupied settlements and the consolidation and relocation of many villages. By the end of the Russian era in 1867, only approximately 17 Unangax communities remained, a number that, with some fluctuation, declined until today. At the same time, social and religious changes were also imposed. The earlier matrilineal kinship system fell apart. Traditional leadership structures were used by Russian colonizers for their own purposes, with Unangax leaders soon finding themselves serving in the often difficult role of middlemen between their own people and the dominant Russian economic interests. Hand in hand with these changes came a new religion, Russian Orthodoxy. By the later eighteenth century, even before the first Russian Orthodox priests had arrived from Russia, Unangax were being baptized into the church by Russian laymen, and Russian Orthodoxy quickly became the sole religion of the region.

Achievements and accomplishments made during the Russian era were sometimes positive. For example, some Unangax became literate in both Russian and Unangax; doctors brought smallpox vaccines and other

medicines; schools were opened; and some Unangax became shipbuilders, navigators, and priests. Nevertheless, after thousands of years of successful adaptation to their region, Unangax experienced all of these changes in a very short time. Further, the changes occurred in a context of overwhelming Unangax population loss and of Russian exploitation both of Unangax themselves and of the natural resources of their region. Within just a few decades of the first Russian arrival, Unangax were a subjugated population with essentially no real control over the main direction of their lives.

Following the sale of Alaska by Russia to the United States in 1867, a number of economic forces left their marks on the region. Unalaska continued its Russian era position as a commercial and population center, with arctic whaling, trading, military activities, and the 1899 Nome gold rush bringing abundant maritime traffic to the region. In the eastern Unangax region, cod, salmon, herring, and whaling industries brought some employment between the 1880s and 1930s. During the 1920s and 1930s, communities west of Unalaska benefitted significantly from fox trapping, an enterprise that eventually declined in the decade before World War II.

Of course, not all aspects of precontact Unangax culture changed completely, or at the same rate, over the Russian and American periods. For example, though Russian Orthodoxy was introduced in the late 1700s, certain pre-Russian religious beliefs and practices persisted. For example, in the 1860s some Unangax were chastised by their Russian Orthodox priest for having visited a burial cave to receive traditional spiritual help from the human mummies preserved there. Likewise, because Orthodox priests were spiritual, not medical, specialists, they could not completely replace traditional shamans, whose expertise at healing continued to be needed, though it was kept hidden from priests' and other outsiders' awareness.

Similarly, Unangam tunuu remained vital in many communities until well into the twentieth century, although following World War II, and especially following the introduction of television in the late 1970s, the number of Unangax speakers has dropped to just over 100 today. Another realm of continuing traditional culture is subsistence, with many people in Unangax communities participating in a complex integration of traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering with the modern cash economy. Importantly, sharing continues to be an essential value, with traditional foods often finding their way to family and friends who have moved outside of the Unangax region.

The Pribilof Islands

A well-documented, but not particularly well known, example of Russian and American control of the lives of Unangax is that which occurred in the Pribilof Islands. Of the fur-bearing animals that Russians sought, none brought them more wealth than did the northern fur seal. With hairs packed at an astonishing 300,000 per square inch, fur seal skins have long been valued for their warmth and softness. Fur seals lead a pelagic (open ocean) life for much of the year, spent mostly in the North Pacific Ocean waters as far south as California. They come ashore from spring to fall to rest, give birth, and mate only in the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea. For thousands of years, Unangax must certainly have understood this annual migration, as each spring fur seals swam northward through the island passes of the eastern Aleutians, returning southward in the fall along with their new pups. The abundant fur seal bones in precontact archaeological sites make it clear that Unangax frequently hunted these animals when they migrated past the archipelago.

When Russians arrived in the eastern Unangax region in the second half of the eighteenth century, they soon learned of the fur seals' migratory movements past the islands. For some years, Russian skippers searched the Bering Sea north of the Aleutian Islands for the animals' breeding grounds, efforts that came to fruition in 1786 and 1787, when they located St. George and St. Paul, the two main islands of the Pribilof Islands group. At that time, an estimated five million fur seals came to the Pribilofs each summer.

Almost immediately, Russians compelled Unangax from villages in the Aleutian Islands to travel seasonally to the Pribilof Islands to harvest fur seals. By the early 1800s, seasonal work camps transformed into permanent, year-round Unangax villages on both St. George and St. Paul. To a greater extent than elsewhere in the region (or anywhere in Alaska), the lives of the Unangax of St. Paul and St. George were

dictated by the profit motives of those who controlled the fur seal harvest. During the American period, the federal government regulated most aspects of Unangax lives: marriages, movement to and from the islands, employment, and administration of justice. Unangax became wards of the government, as they remained until well after World War II.

Commercial fur seal harvesting, first for Russians and later for Americans (as an enterprise run by the federal government), served as the economic backbone of the islands until it ended in 1984. Since that year, fur seals may be harvested only by Unangax for their own food. Other economic endeavors, including halibut fishing and tourism, have been developed to replace the commercial fur seal harvest. Today, St. Paul is one of the largest Unangax communities in the region.

World War II

Overall, the cultural changes that came about following Russian contact in the eighteenth century were the most profound that Unangax had to confront since their ancestors first came to the region some 10,000 years ago. However, it is the tragic events of World War II that are still fresh in the memories and oral histories of Unangax living today, some of whom experienced them directly.

On June 3 and 4, 1942, Japanese military forces conducted air strikes on U.S. Army and Navy facilities at Dutch Harbor, in what is now the city of Unalaska. Several days later, they occupied Kiska and Attu islands, the latter the location of an Unangax village. Within a short time, the 42 Unangax residents of Attu and a non-Native teacher were taken to Japan, where they served as laborers for the Japanese for the duration of the war. Following World War II, the 24 Unangax who survived the illness and malnutrition of their experience returned to the United States. They were not allowed to return to their home on Attu Island, however, as the government believed that it would be too difficult to maintain a Native community that far from mainland Alaska. Instead, many were resettled in the village of Atka.

For the Unangax of most other villages, World War II brought a different fate. The Japanese attack on Dutch Harbor had caught government and military planners off-guard, and, beginning on June 12, 1942, the Unangax residents of nine communities were hastily boarded on ships and evacuated. In all cases, Unangax were allowed to take only a few possessions with them. They were taken to several locales in southeastern Alaska and housed in abandoned fish canneries, abandoned mine buildings, and similar places. Housing, sanitation, and medical care were uniformly appalling during their internment, and by war's end and their eventual return to the Aleutian and Pribilof islands, some 82 of the 881 interned Unangax had died.

As had occurred during the Russian period, during World War II the outside world had taken control over the lives of the Unangax, ignoring their fundamental rights and welfare. Although the injustices that Unangax faced during their internment were addressed in 1988 through formal federal reparations, the legacy of World War II has been one of cultural loss and change for which reparations cannot make amends. The memory of those years still brings sadness to many Unangax.

Unangax Today

Today, Unangax are spread around the world, although most, of course, still reside in Alaska. Over the two and a half centuries of foreign contact in the region, the number of villages has dwindled, so that there remain fewer than a dozen communities. With the passage of the Alaska

Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, 3,249 Unangax (regardless of where in the world they were living) enrolled as shareholders in the regional Aleut Corporation, headquartered in Anchorage; of this total, 2,361 also enrolled in one of thirteen village corporations within the region (the remainder were “at large” shareholders, unaffiliated with a particular local community). These village corporations represented Unangax communities that were in existence in 1971, although not all of these remain occupied today. Some 1,700 Unangax now live in communities in their region in southwestern Alaska. Another 300 live in the community of Nikolskoye, on Bering Island in the Commander Islands of Russia, the descendants of Unangax taken there from Alaska by Russians in the early 1800s. Interestingly, the “newest” village is Adak, established on Adak Island in 1998 following the closure of the U.S. Naval station there and the transfer of its facilities to the regional Aleut Corporation. Being a recently formed entity, Adak has no ANCSA village corporation.

While the Aleut Corporation engages in for-profit activities benefitting its Unangax shareholders, the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association (APIA) is the regional non-profit tribal organization that provides over 3,000 tribal members with a broad range of services, including, among others, health, education, employment, and vocational training. Also included in APIA’s activities is its leadership role in promoting Unangax cultural heritage and language. In its Anchorage headquarters, the Cultural Heritage Department maintains a library of printed and other materials related to the culture and history of the region. It also holds a yearly “Urban Culture Camp” to promote traditional cultural knowledge to children, youth, and adults.

Finally, over the decades since the passage of ANCSA, many Unangax communities have themselves rekindled efforts aimed at preserving their cultural heritage. This resurgence in Native pride has included the formation of dance groups, language classes, and local culture camps, all formed to help rectify the history of cultural suppression that marked the Russian and American periods.



<http://www.amiq.org/aleuts.html>

The Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands, Alaska.

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CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The cultural survival of the Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands, Alaska, is one of the most unusual case studies in the Arctic. Taken from their homes on the Aleutian chain to two uninhabited and isolated islands in the central Bering Sea, the Pribilof Aleuts were forced into service to kill sea mammals for two colonial regimes, first Russia and later the United States. The Aleuts were one cog in a wheel of a massive fur industry that lasted 199 years, from which a complex history and unique culture developed.

The People

The seal hunters of the Pribilofs are descendants of the great maritime race of Aleuts who settled along the Aleutian archipelago, a 1,300-km chain of islands extending southwest of the Alaskan mainland. Russians called them Aleut (al'-ee-oot), but their own name is Unangan, meaning "the coast" or "seashore." They are believed to have migrated across the Bering land bridge from Asia between 12,000 and 15,000 years ago. An early Eskimo-Aleut culture began to develop about 8,000 years ago in the Bering Sea and North Pacific region, later branching into the distinctive maritime culture and language of the Unangan along the Aleutian Islands. Living in semisubterranean houses, the Aleuts developed a sophisticated marine technology to cope with the limitations imposed by their environment and rigorous climate. They possessed special skills for hunting marine mammals from skin-covered kayaks, skills that were later exploited by the Russian fur traders who came to the islands after 1750 in search of sea otters and fur seals. In the first fifty years of Russian control, Aleuts died from introduced diseases, wars resisting colonizers, malnutrition, and privation caused by the transport of able-bodied hunters away from their families and villages to hunt sea mammals for the Russians. At the time of contact, the Aleut population is estimated to have been between 12,000 and 15,000. (1) Today, there are about 2,000 Aleuts, of whom only 340 people still speak the Aleut language.(2)

In 1786 Russian navigator Gavriil Pribilof discovered the first of two islands that came to bear his name after a three-year search by some sixty Siberian trading companies for the breeding site of the valuable fur seals. St. Paul and St. George Islands, collectively known as the Pribilof Islands, are the summer hauling grounds for the greatest concentration of Northern Pacific fur seals in the world. Since the animals breed on land, it is relatively simple to round up and harvest them in a convenient location. The islands were uninhabited at the time of their discovery by Pribilof, although Aleutical history knew them as Aamix, a rich hunting ground once visited by an Aleut chief lost in a storm. At the time of the discovery, Russian traders had nearly eliminated sea otters and were seeking the next most valuable source of furs—the fur seals. The discovery of the Pribilofs extended the Russian fur trade in America for almost another century.

Aleut hunters were taken to the islands, often without choice, on a seasonal basis, and by the 1820s permanent settlements had been established on both islands. Seals were killed ruthlessly until then, when the Russian American Company established a licensed fur-seal monopoly and adopted conservation methods in harvesting seals, taking only three- to five-year old nonbreeding males and prohibiting the killing of female seals. By the time of the sale of the Russian-American territories to the United States in 1867, the Pribilof Aleuts had attained an enviable status, enjoying full rights as citizens of Russia, literate in two languages, paid fairly for their labor, and retaining their traditional systems of governance.

The second great shock to the Aleut culture came with the American purchase of Alaska in 1867. The Pribilofs were the unpublicized "jewel in the crown" of the Alaska Purchase, and the seal industry generated large revenues for the U.S. Treasury. At first, the Aleuts were paid competitive wages by a series of private monopolies, at a rate comparable to other industrial workers in

America. After forty years of private control, however, the fur seal populations had been severely depleted, and the Aleuts experienced privation and malnutrition. The U.S. government took over the industry in 1910, and the Aleuts discovered that the government's agenda for the Pribilofs was 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. 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 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.

The Americans were also remiss in the first forty years of managing the seal harvest. By the late 1800s, sealskin coats had become so popular that sealers from several countries had launched a spree of uncontrolled highseas, or pelagic, killing. By 1910 the combination of pelagic sealing, corrupt government agents, who were supposed to oversee the harvest but did not, and greedy monopolies had reduced the northern fur seal from its population of over one million animals to only 300,000 animals. In 1911 the North Pacific Sealing Convention was signed by Russia, Japan, Great Britain (for Canada), and the United States in return for a ban on high-seas killing. To compensate Canada and Japan for the loss of pelagic furs, Russia and the United States agreed to share a portion of their controlled, land-based harvests of nonbreeding, three- to five-year-old seals. Scientists from the signatory countries would determine how many seals could be harvested each year and thus maintain a maximum sustainable yield. The commercial harvest was tightly controlled and the killing technique (stunning and bleeding) was assessed as more humane than any other alternative methods. The international treaty, unique in the history of wildlife conservation, brought the seal back to a sustainable population while providing the Aleuts with employment and subsistence food.

The Pribilof Aleuts gained full rights as American citizens, as well as government-level wages and benefits, in the mid-1960s, but their newfound freedom came at a cost. News about this secret federal reserve was beginning to reach the public, and the environmental movement of the 1970s was questioning the wisdom of hunting animals for their skins.

The Setting

The Aleutian climate is so notorious that early Russian missionaries called the area "the place that God forgot."⁽³⁾ High winds, rain that blows sideways, and thick fog are commonplace. The islands are volcanic, treeless, and covered with thick grasses, sedges, and beautiful wildflowers. Environmental conditions were even harsher on the Pribilofs where there were no natural harbors for protection, no freshwater streams or salmon populations, and fewer varieties of berries. The Aleuts developed respiratory problems associated with the climate, malnutrition, and living in government houses that let in the wind.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The Aleuts lost their maritime navigation and sea-hunting skills on the Pribilofs when they were forced into a land-based industry that interfered with many traditional subsistence activities. In particular, the men did not have the freedom to fish or hunt during the sealing months. They worked intensively through the summer harvest season, sometimes killing over 100,000 seals in a precise, methodical assembly line of designated tasks.

Women and children helped on the killing grounds, gathering seal meat to salt for winter use. During the winter months, the sealing crews were idle, waiting for the next killing season. During this time, the men hunted Steller sea lions from shore, an activity that required a strict code of hunting ethics, respect for elders, and apportionment of meat along extended family lines. Women picked and preserved berries in the summer months and, in early times, gathered crustaceans in the intertidal zone. The rest of the subsistence diet was supplemented by ducks, reindeer (an introduced species), cod, halibut, and seabird eggs. An extensive trade network developed between the Pribilof Aleuts and their relatives on the Aleutian chain, with whom they exchanged fur seal meat for dried salmon and berries.

Social and Political Organization

Unangan villages were traditionally ruled by a chief (toyuq), a second chief (sukaskiq), and after the coming of the Russians, a chief who was lay reader in the local Orthodox church (staristaq). The Russians honored this political system, but the American government interfered with the Aleuts' selection of chief and the distribution of harvest monies. The Pribilof Aleuts formed a tribal council after World War II, but their political structures were consistently undermined by the U.S. Treasury agents who managed the islands. The Aleuts gained more political and economic control over their islands with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. The local land and financial resources now came under the control of native corporations. By the 1980s, a proliferation of modern institutions vied for power in the villages of St. Paul and St. George: tribal council, city council, corporation, and school. This became a source of constant conflict.

The primary social unit on the Pribilofs is the Aleut extended family. Entire families were involved in the fur-seal harvest, and to this day, elders will not eat seal meat that has not been butchered, preserved, and prepared by a family member. Family units are now engaging in the successor to the fur-seal industry, namely, the new day-boat fishery.

Religion and World View

Little is known about Aleut beliefs prior to their contact with Europeans, although early Russian priests reported that Aleuts followed the instructions of local shamans (indigenous priests or ritual specialist) regarding hunting taboos, weather, and predictions for the future. The dimensions of "east" and "above" were associated with the sacred and a universal creator. Sunlight and seawater were regarded as sacred sources of life. This world view meshed with Russian Orthodox Christianity, and the conversion of the Aleuts to this faith was bolstered by the respect shown by missionary priests for local customs and language. Indeed the priests often interceded on behalf of the Aleuts with the Russian imperial government, protecting the Aleut culture from the worst practices of the fur companies. This respectful alliance between the missionaries and the native population and the overlap of world views account for the importance of the Orthodox church in Alaska today. It is regarded as a native institution, the major symbol of Aleut identity, and the guardian of social mores in Aleut villages. On the Pribilofs, the Orthodox churches provided a continuum of ritual and tradition during periods of upheaval. Old melodies are sung in the churches in Aleut, Slavonic, and English. Seasonal subsistence activities of hunting, sealing, fishing, and berry picking receive the priest's blessing, and all the houses in the village are ritually blessed at least once a year.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

One thing that kept us together was we had a common goal, and that was to survive.
Maxim Malvansky, mayor of St. George, 1988[\(4\)](#)

Challenges - Then and Now

Today, the villages of St. Paul and St. George are the largest Aleut communities left in the world, with a population of 768 people in St. Paul and 184 in St. George. The Pribilof Aleut culture has survived and adapted to many challenges over the last two centuries: forcible relocation, the influence and culture of two colonial nations, substitution of their traditional economy with a wagebased economy, and suppression of their language, religion, political structures, and human rights. From 1975 to 1985, the Aleuts faced a new, more insidious challenge: the wrath of a Western, urban culture living thousands of miles away. The environmental movement had spawned a new generation of animal rights' activists, who, bolstered by the success of the harp-seal pup campaigns in the Canadian Atlantic, began to pressure the U.S. government to withdraw from the fur-seal industry on the Pribilofs. Despite the differences between the harpseal hunt and the fur-seal harvest, animal protection groups launched intense, emotional campaigns that treated all seal killing as one. The Aleuts were subjected to hate mail, threats and harassment, legal challenges by humane societies, and negative media coverage.

"The seal harvest is presently a key element of our survival," wrote Aleut leader Larry Merculieff in a 1984 letter. "Thus any attempts to stop it through misdirected emotionalism of people who do not live with nature as closely as we do can only be viewed as violence against us-and the seals."[\(5\)](#) International campaigns devalued seal pelts, making the U.S. government's stake in the harvest increasingly unprofitable. The Reagan administration, seeking ways to cut the budget, decided that abandoning the commercial seal harvest could assuage negative public opinion and save tax dollars. In 1983 the U.S. government announced its withdrawal of its \$6.2 million annual allocation to the Pribilofs, the sole economic mainstay of the islands. At the same time, the United States withdrew from the international fur-seal treaty, leaving the northern fur seal without international migratory protection, open to pelagic killing, and without international scientific monitoring and research.

There was little time to prepare a comprehensive community and economic mobilization plan. The government offered no compensation in the announcement of its withdrawal from the seal industry. An intensive lobbying effort by Pribilof Aleuts in Washington, D.C., resulted in a \$20 million trust fund to the islanders to assist them to diversify their economy. Both St. Paul and St. George began to prepare to move into fisheries, which by the mid-1980s were booming in the Bering Sea as the result of a change from being a foreign-owned to being an American-owned fishery. Harbors were constructed on both islands to provide safe moorage to the U.S. small-boat catcher fleet. By 1990 St. Paul's harbor was deepened and expanded to accommodate large floating processors and factory trawlers. The Aleuts quickly adapted to a day-boat fishery, and today over 100 local fishers operate thirty locally owned vessels in a million-dollar halibut fishery. The Pribilofs offer the only sheltered harbors in 50,000 square kilometers of rough ocean waters. The crab industry sustains St. Paul today. During crab season, the harbor serves over 230 transient vessels, two floating processor plants permanently moored in the harbor, and over forty floating processors, freighters, and crab vessels within five kilometers of the islands.

Environmental Crisis

This new economy may do more to destroy our habitat and disrupt the wildlife than anything in the island's history, and it has the capacity to accomplish this destruction within

a single generation.

Larry Mercurieff, 1997[\(6\)](#)

Once protected by its physical isolation and the secret nature of the federal fur-seal industry, today's Pribilof environment is more vulnerable to catastrophe because of the community's recent entry into the global market place. The Pribilofs are located in the middle of the richest bottom fishery in the world, and during the winter crab season the marine horizon is filled with as many as 300 trawlers, tramp steamers, supply ships, freighters, and fish processors, their lights illuminating the night skies. Fuel barges filled with from three to six million gallons of marine diesel fuel weave their way through the flotilla of vessels, en route to the harbor. Scientists fear that this concentration of vessels around the largest, most sensitive wildlife area in the southern Bering Sea may have catastrophic consequences for marine birds and animals. The introduction of rats through a ship berthed in harbor or a grounded freighter could quickly destroy the Northern Hemisphere's greatest concentration of seabirds and introduce disease to the seal rookeries.

Ten vessels have run aground in as many years on the Pribilofs. The worst was the wreck of a floating processor in March 1989, spilling more than 10,000 gallons of diesel fuel. If the spill had occurred two months later, thousands of nesting seabirds would have been affected. In 1996 a vessel dumped contaminated fuel within five kilometers of the Pribilofs, resulting in the death of about 1,000 King Eider ducks, part of the winter subsistence diet of Aleuts. When the oiled ducks began to wash up on St. Paul's shores, the community was divided between publicizing the negative effects of the fishery and keeping quiet about it to protect their economic interests. "It took a spill to wake people up to focus on preventive action" said Larry Mercurieff, who for a decade was the lone Aleut voice addressing the deteriorating health of the Bering Sea ecosystem. "The deterioration is the result of wanton waste of millions of pounds of fish thrown overboard by fishing vessels, discharge of huge levels of contaminants by land and by sea over decades, and the use of the Bering Sea as a convenient dumping ground for non-biodegradable garbage" (personal communication, February 21, 1996).

In 1992 northern fur-seal pups began to die mysteriously in two breeding rookeries on St. Paul. Researchers found the cause of the 20 percent mortality increase to be "white muscle disease," perhaps the result of a toxic substance reaching the pups through mother's milk or their flippers. This was the first documented case of the disease appearing in a marine mammal, having been found only in domestic cattle before. Scientists suspected that contaminant discharges from an offshore fishing vessel caused the seal deaths.

Decades of intensive fishing in the Bering Sea, combined with climatic changes, have led to population declines in over seventeen species of marine mammals, fish, and seabirds. Scientists believe that food stress is responsible for most of the declines. Prospects of a broad ecosystem failure, similar to the crash of the northwestern Atlantic cod fishery, have mobilized a host of committees, working groups, and government panels to focus on the plight of the Bering Sea. They are still grappling to understand the problem, much less knowing how to reverse it. Pribilof organizations have now joined this process. The city council of St. Paul has raised environmental issues to the top of its agenda and it has added an environmental department to its operations. The tribal government decided to sue the vessel responsible for the death of oiled King Eider ducks, resulting in an out-of-court settlement.

Sociocultural Crisis

Aren't we still serving someone else's existence? It's basically taking the same tool that was used before, only it's chiseling a living from the Bering Sea.

Aquilina Bourdukofsky, 1995[\(7\)](#)

The loss of the commercial harvest was socially and economically catastrophic to the community of St. Paul, the focus of fourteen years of research. Without government subsidies, the cost of home heating, marine transportation, and maintenance of the airport, roads, and buildings skyrocketed. Eighty percent of the wage base in the community disappeared. The insecure future, increasing loss of cultural identity associated with the seal, and lack of respect from urban populations evidenced by attacks on the traditional Aleut sealing practices all led to rapid social disintegration. In the first years after the government pullout, there were unprecedented numbers of suicides and murders, and an increase in drug and alcohol abuse and violent behavior. Politically, three local institutions (municipal government, tribal council, and native corporation) filled the void left by the government, but they all fought with each other. Divisions were intensified by a heritage of oppression and the fact that two institutions were patterned after the dominant society (a municipal government and a for profit corporation) and the third represented tribal functions. Factionalism, corruption, competition, and constant legal challenges thrived in this environment. The Orthodox church began to lose its position of authority in the community. Changing values influenced by television, materialism, travel, and the disintegration of community sharing contributed to the erosion of social institutions and cultural beliefs and practices formerly of great importance.

The last commercial seal harvest took place in 1985. Since the U.S. Congress failed to ratify the international fur-seal treaty in 1985, sealing on the Pribilofs occurs now only on a subsistence basis. The harvest of as many as 1,600 animals, which is conducted on a voluntary basis by the tribal council, is monitored and supervised by federal officials and a voluntary humane observer. In the first years of the subsistence harvest, the Aleuts countered constant legal challenges by animal protection groups claiming that the seal meat was being wasted. Representatives of these groups would appear on the harvest field each summer, watching while the Aleuts butchered the seals and had their meat weighed by a federal official. After years of legal skirmishes, the Aleuts have won the right to take seal meat without harassment. They also fought for and won the right to take seal pelts for a handicraft program, the first time in two centuries that they have had control over the destination of the seal pelts.

Fifteen years after the government withdrawal, the Pribilofs have entered a new era of economic and social stability. In St. Paul, there is a blossoming of self-governance as the more moderate elements of the community take political leadership roles. The community no longer relies on outside expertise to run the village. The political bickering has subsided, and the local institutions concentrate on doing their jobs. Alcoholism and drug use decreased when the island's employers began to enforce sobriety policies and random drug testing. Employees with substance addictions are sent off the island for treatment, and they participate in a mentorship program when they return. Violence, felonies, suicides, and murders, have all decreased. There is a new pride in the halibut day-boat fishery, and people have adapted successfully to a fishing livelihood. Fishing, like the commercial seal harvest before it, absorbs the entire community, involving entire families in its operation. There is a new affluence in St. Paul, where the median household income is \$42,000, among the highest in rural Alaska, and there is no shortage of jobs for those who wish to work.

The boom has, however, brought a new set of problems previously unimaginable on these isolated, pristine islands. Each crab season brings 2,000 transients to work in the processing plants or waiting for a ship. "We've become the gas station of the Bering Sea," says the Aleut priest, George Pletnikoff.⁽⁸⁾ The close-knit small-town atmosphere has been strained by daily jet service, strange faces in the village stores, and an invasion of urban values into an island setting. Streets are filled with taxis, forklifts, and semitrucks conveying crab pots. Boat crews buy groceries, find spare parts, hire drivers, drop off the injured, or pick up fishermen flying into town.

Island leaders realize their economy is riding the peak of a Bering Sea fisheries boom. Their economy, like the seal fishery before it, is too dependent on a single resource, and it is completely vulnerable to collapse in global markets, resource fluctuations, overefficient fishing technology, and the rapacious appetites of the corporations that drive this market. Crab quotas have been declining, and St. Paul's \$14 million budget immediately registers the effects in reduced taxes, fuel sales, services, and storage fees. "Have we moved from one endangered species to another?" asks city clerk Phyllis Swetzof. "If the fishery went away, we would definitely go into a slump" (personal communication, July 24, 1998). The day-boat fishery is also vulnerable to quotas set by regional fishery councils far from the islands. The 1998 halibut quota was increased, with a corresponding rise in the amount of time devoted by the community to fishing. This resulted in an oversupply of halibut in the processing plant, causing the price to drop by half. Caught in a falling price market, Aleut fisherman continued to bring in more halibut in the hope of making enough money to pay the loans on their boats.

The extended halibut season has interfered with the subsistence seal harvest that normally follows the fishing season. In 1999, 980 seals were taken, compared to 1,345 in 1998. This follows a trend of higher community value being placed on the commercial fishery than the subsistence seal harvest. The Aleuts are asking the federal government to extend the harvest period from one to three months, thereby enabling people to eat smaller amounts of fresh meat rather than freezing large quantities of seal in a short time frame. Frozen seal is now distributed to Aleuts in Seattle, Anchorage, and the Aleutian Chain. Seal meat is no longer the dietary staple on the Pribilofs. In 1881, the average annual consumption of seal meat on the Pribilofs was 600 pounds per person ⁽⁹⁾. By 1981 this amount had dropped to approximately 284 pounds per Aleut. Today the figure has fallen to about 40 pounds per person ⁽¹⁰⁾. The decline can be traced to the greater variety of choices in the store and the availability of other subsistence foods (halibut and reindeer), changes in nutritional awareness (less salted meat is consumed), the influence of Western, urban values via television and travel, contaminants in the meat from pollution in the food chain, affluence, and less time to prepare the meat. If the woman in a household dislikes seal meat, her avoidance is generally passed through subsequent generations.

The new fishing economy has reinforced assimilation into global economic markets by merging local fishing councils with multinational fishing corporations. The Pribilofs, like other Alaskan Bering Sea communities, participate in a Community Development Quota (CDQ) program, which attempts to balance inequities between local fishing communities and corporate fish processors. The St. Paul CDQ association receives a 4 percent allocation of the Bering Sea pollock quota and sells this quota to processing companies for about \$2 million in annual revenues to be reinvested in fishery development programs. The community receives development funds (reducing pressure on government budgets), and large-scale processors have a competitive advantage to fish in a region. One outcome of this new alliance is a reluctance by the directors of the local fishing council to offend their industrial partners by discussing the environment or the future. By becoming partners in large-scale resource extraction in the Pribilof region, local people are

effectively removed from direct, meaningful control and involvement in decisions affecting their region's resources. Indigenous systems of knowledge and prudent use of natural resources are increasingly forgotten in the pressure to increase fishery quotas for multinational fishing corporations.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Taking Control

Two broad patterns can be traced in the fifteen years since the federal government announced its withdrawal from the commercial seal harvest. The first was the work by a generation of Aleut leaders to respond to the crisis and to consolidate and administer the land, equipment, and financial structures under municipal, tribal, and corporate structures. These leaders had the difficult task of balancing traditional Aleut values with elements of Western culture they needed in order to move from being passive wards of the federal government to managing and planning their own destiny. That they have largely succeeded in this task in a short period of time is nothing short of miraculous.

The second trend emerged over the past five years: a cultural revival movement seeking to celebrate the traditional Aleut strengths and the sealing, hunting, and fishing skills that enabled them to survive many difficult challenges over the centuries. This work was begun by one Aleut woman, Aquilina Bourdukofsky, in a quiet, unassuming way. Today, her work, which is flowering in all sorts of offshoots, is manifested primarily in the desire of local people to stop fighting and get to work governing their island and in a renewed sense of their role as stewards of their islands. Bourdukofsky spent a year recording the Aleut language and stories of her father, the Russian Orthodox priest Michael Lestenkof. She thought about the Pribilof history and the sense the Aleuts have of being victims and slaves to an outside authority. "I began to focus on our strengths," she said. "We know our people came here under hard conditions. We took seals in mass amounts for the fur trade. We had to be the ones to do it—we knew when to stop, how many to take. We have to take more ownership, responsibility, and respect for our history instead of dwelling on ourselves as slaves, a skinny evacuated people huddled in corners" (personal communication, August 27, 1998).

The Pribilof Islands Stewardship Program thus began with the goal of reconnecting young Aleuts with their islands and sea. Funded by the island organizations, federal and state governments, volunteers, and environmental organizations, the summer program combines traditional knowledge with Western science, providing young people with the opportunity to work with international scientists researching fur seals, fish, and seabirds. The students gather data, count populations, take tissue samples, and assist in lab work. They participate in the subsistence seal harvest, apprenticing with experienced sealers to learn how to kill, skin, and butcher the seals. They haul meat for the villagers, flesh pelts for a handicraft program, and shear pups for a population census. A skilled "disentanglement team" of young people now roam the fur-seal rookeries, removing the fish nets from the necks of seals that would otherwise die from strangulation. In winter, the young people clean debris from the beaches and seal rookeries. Students have learned traditional Aleut songs, dancing, and drumming, and then how to make their own dance regalia. The program has also spawned a revival of Aleut kayak (bidarka) construction in the local school.

Only a decade before, many Pribilovians thought these symbols of Aleut identity had vanished forever. The stewardship camp sparked a resurgence of cultural pride and strengthened ethnic

identity in other areas of community life: in the success of the halibut day-boat fishery, in the incipient sobriety movement, in the resurgence of skills among the voluntary subsistence seal harvest crew, and in the blossoming of self-governance. Bourdukofsky is now working on a Marine Messengers Program, in which students from the stewardship program visit other harbor villages and the Alaska mainland to speak about their role in caring for the Bering Sea. "We are now getting outside funding agencies to not just think about investing in the environment, but investing in the indigenous people who grow up in this environment," she says. "That's how we'll make sure we continue to live here" (personal communication, August 27, 1998).

Sadly, the Aleut language is now endangered, and linguists predict it may be extinct by the year 2055. Only the elders still speak it in the Pribilof villages. Attempts to teach it to younger generations through the school have not been successful. The Aleut language is tied to an intimate knowledge of the land and sea, rules of conduct, and a unique way of knowing. The processes of modernization and assimilation into a Western mainstream culture have displaced the language from its context, rendering it a cultural artifact.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

I believe we exist generationally. Would we be as strong as we are if we didn't go through the hardships, the slavery? It's powerful to hear the strength of our people-that's what held them together in the past and today.

Aquilina Bourdukofsky (personal communication, August 27, 1998)

The story of the Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands, Alaska, is a unique case of cultural survival in the Arctic, a story of resilience and adaptation to an onslaught of assimilative processes over the course of two centuries. The Aleut culture and population flourished on the Aleutian archipelago prior to the arrival of Russian fur hunters in the eighteenth century. Soon thereafter, the Russian American Company enslaved and relocated Aleuts from the Aleutian Islands to the Pribilofs to hunt fur seals. The Aleuts were settled in villages on St. Paul and St. George Islands, where they labored in a land-based seal industry, losing many of their aboriginal subsistence and marine skills. The purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867 ushered in the second wave of assimilation, and the Aleuts became wards of the American government.

Pressure from the animal rights movement and a declining fur market prompted the U.S. government to abandon the commercial seal harvest in 1983. The government pullout led to catastrophic social and economic effects in the Pribilof communities. The insecure future, increasing loss of identity with the seal, and lack of respect from urban populations led to rapid social disintegration. Local institutions, hobbled by a mentality of dependence and inexperience in self-governance, were divided by factionalism, power struggles, and legal disputes.

The Pribilof communities entered the flourishing Bering Sea bottom fishery, developing harbors, processing facilities, and vessel supply operations. Aleuts achieved a rapid, successful transition to a day-boat halibut fishery, which has brought a new prosperity to the Pribilof communities. However, the marine fishing economy has resulted in several unintended, disruptive socioeconomic consequences: village roads are clogged with harbor traffic, the island water aquifer is strained by the freshwater requirements of the processing plants, and transients have transformed the small village atmosphere in St. Paul. The community's livelihood is now tied to a global market economy and decisions made by fishery councils far from the shores of the Pribilofs.

Efforts by animal rights groups to save fur seals may, in the long term, have led to a reduction in the fur-seal population. An overefficient, mechanized fishery has posed far greater threats to the Bering Sea ecosystem than the seal harvest.

Aleuts have become their own agents of assimilation and modernization through their participation in the fishing industry. This third major wave of acculturation has resulted in the most profound and rapid changes to the Pribilof cultures. A local, cultural, and environmental movement has grown up to counteract the loss of Aleut identity, community cohesiveness, subsistence skills, and connection to the land and sea. In the process of cultural recovery, self-governance, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency are emerging in the community. Finally, the Aleut connection to the fur seal, severed by the collapse of the seal harvest and the disapproval of a Western, urban culture, is now being recovered by a young generation of Pribilof Aleuts.

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1. Margaret Lantis, "Aleut," in *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 163.
2. Valerie Chaussonnet, ed., *Crossroads Alaska: Native Cultures of Alaska and Siberia* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 109.
3. Michael J. Oleksa, *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 3.
4. Quoted in *Tundra Times*, June 27, 1988, vol. xxvi, 1.
5. Letter to Animal Protection Institute of America, April 26, 1984.
6. Ilarion (Larry) Meraulief, "Western Society's Linear Systems and Aboriginal Cultures: The Need for Two-Way Exchanges for the Sake of Survival," in E. S. Burch, Jr., and L. J. Ellanna (eds.), *Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research* (Providence, R.I.: Berg, 1994), 411.
7. Quoted in Doug O'Harra, "A Boom in the Bering," *We Alaskans Magazine; Anchorage Daily News*, March 5, 1995, H-11.
8. Quoted in Miro Cernetig, "The Endangered Hunters of the Pribilofs," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, July 20, 1991.
9. D. W. Veltre and M. J. Veltre, "The Northern Fur Seal: A Subsistence and Commercial Resource for Aleuts of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands, Alaska," *Inuit Studies* 11 (2): 51-52.
10. Helen Corbett and Susanne Swibold, "Furs, Food and Factions: The Fur Seal and the Pribilof Aleuts," *Wildlife and Local Cultures, Fourth International Whaling Symposium* (Tokyo: Institute of Cetacean Research, 1994), 105.

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<http://www.iato.org>

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