



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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INTERNATIONAL FUR SEAL TREATY NEGOTIATED 50 YEARS AGO

Fifty years ago Friday, July 7, steps were taken which saved a remnant seal herd from probable extinction and built it into a valuable and continuing resource, Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall said today.

It was on July 7, 1911, four nations--Japan, Russia, Great Britain (for Canada), and the United States--signed the fur seal treaty ending the killing of fur seals on the high seas and providing a formula for sharing the kills made on rookeries. Provisions for policing the treaty were included. The clause which ended pelagic sealing cleared the way for an effective conservation program and provided the basis for the United States to initiate effective conservation practices on the Pribilof Islands fur seal rookeries.

Coincidental with the 50th anniversary of the signing of the treaty which put American conservation effort on an international basis for the first time the Fish and Wildlife Service has issued the most complete summary to date on Pribilof Islands sealing operations.

The publication is entitled the Fur Seal Industry of the Pribilof Islands, 1786-1960. It was compiled and prepared by the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries. It is listed as Fishery Leaflet 516.

The leaflet gives annual catch data from 1817 to 1960 and summary data for the periods 1786-1796 and 1797-1816. Charts, maps and pictures support the text of the report.

World War II disrupted this first treaty agreement but on February 9, 1957, the four nations (Canada signing for Canada) signed a new treaty which became effective in October of that year. A Canadian-American agreement had been in effect during the interim period. The new treaty was similar in most respects to

the old one--pelagic sealing was banned except for certain research operations and for natives using primitive methods and using the harvest for sustenance; the principle of sharing the harvest on the rookeries was maintained but the formula changed somewhat; policing was provided; and a new coordinated research program was instituted which made possible not only research on a single herd but provided for studies to determine whether or not there was any interrelationship between the various North Pacific fur seal herds.

In the 1911 treaty, the rookery-owning nation kept 70 percent of the harvest and the other 30 percent was divided among the other nations. In the present treaty, Japan and Canada each got 15 percent of the American harvest on the Pribilof rookeries and a like percentage of the Russian harvest on Robben Island and Commander Islands off the Asian coast. The Pribilof herd supplies about 80 percent of the world's production.

As a result of conservation practices which the United States put into effect shortly after the signing of the 1911 treaty, the Pribilof herd has increased from approximately 132,000 in 1910 to 1,500,000 at the present time.

There are five islands in the Pribilof group in the Bering Sea about 300 miles off the Alaska coast. The two largest are St. Paul, 14 miles in length, and St. George, 10 miles in length. The two islands are about 40 miles apart. Although Alaska was visited by Vitus Bering, Russian navigator, in 1741 and a great number of "sea bears" reported, it was not until 1786 that Gehrman Pribylof, another Russian navigator, discovered the islands which bear his name and which contain the great fur seal rookeries.

There are four periods of sealing history in the Pribilof Islands. The first such period of history began with the date of discovery and continued until 1834 when, because of the reduction of the herd, the Russian government placed restrictions on sealing operations. During that 48-year period, records show that two million fur seals were taken.

The second period is between 1834 and 1867, the year the Russians sold Alaska, including the Pribilofs, to the United States. During that time because of the reduced herd and restrictions about 600,000 skins were taken.

The third period began with the American ownership and control of the islands and continued until 1910, a period marked by the practice of harvesting by contract or lease. From 1870 until 1890 the limit of kill was 100,000 seals a year. This limit was reached practically every year, for the record shows that there were 2,006,136 seals taken and that the United States received \$6,020,152 in revenue. Then followed a drop in seal population and a corresponding drop in harvest. Only 330,603 seals were killed from 1891 to 1910 and the revenue was \$3,453,944.

But this third period was marked by two other significant situations. During the first two years of American control there was indiscriminate killing with 225,901 skins taken on the rookeries by independent operators. Pelagic

sealing began on a commercial scale about 1871, reaching a peak in 1894 when 61,800 seals were taken at sea. The actual number killed in pelagic sealing but not recovered in any year, or the number of seals which were wounded but escaped to die of injuries later, cannot be estimated.

The fourth and present period of Pribilof sealing is marked by direct management of the resource by the United States Government and the institution of scientific conservation practices.

When pelagic sealing was outlawed by the four nations the door was opened to conservation on the rookeries. The United States immediately banned all killing on the Pribilofs for five years except that the natives were permitted to kill for food supply. This meant that only 2,500 to 3,500 seals were killed a year. Killing was resumed in 1918 and the records show that 34,890 skins were taken. Under the policy which had been established the killing was (and still is) done by Government employees and was restricted to the harvest of bachelor males of the three and four-year-old class.

Females were given complete protection until 1955 when the biological studies indicated that the herd--scientifically estimated at 1,500,000--had stabilized at that figure and that disease and other natural causes were taking any excess. This meant that the time had come to end the protection which had been given the female and that henceforth the annual harvest of female would, under close supervision of the biologists, be standard management practice.

The seal take for the ten years ending in 1955 had been approximately 65,000 annually. Since the killing of females started the annual harvest has fluctuated because biological research on this phase of management is still in progress. The largest kill was in 1956; a total of 122,826 skins was harvested.

The economics of the fur seal is a story of its own. Until 1913 all raw seal skins were shipped to London for processing, for that art was known only to a small group of skilled English workers. When some of these workers were induced to come to America a new American industry was born. It located in St. Louis, Missouri. The processing of a skin involves about 125 distinct operations. Each skin is handled separately.

With the taking of female skins a new problem was created. The process used in the preparation of male skins was not satisfactory for female skins. Intensive research followed and a sheared skin is now offered to the fur trade.

While the Government has retained all responsibility on each phase of the conservation and production of the seal resource it has found it advantageous to contract the processing to a private firm, the Fouke Company of St. Louis, which has the sole contract for the preparation of the skins offered at the semi-annual auctions. These auctions are held in St. Louis each April and October. The receipts come to the Government after the contractual obligations are met.

The number of skins offered by the Government varies but approximates 25,000 at each sale. The price varies with the year and with the class of skin but the average approximates \$100 each.

Gross receipts from the sale of Pribilof Islands' products in fiscal years 1959 and 1960 amounted to \$9,201,182. Of this, \$3,096,129 was used to cover costs for handling, dressing, dyeing, and selling these products; \$3,442,308 was used to cover costs in administration of the Pribilof Islands; and \$1,863,921 represented net receipt payments to the State of Alaska pursuant to authority contained in Section 6(e) of the Alaska Statehood Act. Net receipt to the United States Government, therefore, was \$798,824.

Another economic phase is the meal and oil produced by the reduction of the skinned carcasses.

Then, there is the human angle, the Aleut, who was brought to the once-unpopulated islands as the top harvest hand. The Aleut and his modern, Government-built towns, the schools and the relocation problem for those whom the sealing industry will not support, is still another story.

This, then, Secretary Udall points out, is a brief sketch of an industry and a resource which can continue far into the future--the result of an action consummated on July 7, 1911.

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