Pioneering Conservation in Alaska

Ross, Ken

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One of the first great international wildlife controversies began immediately after the United States acquired Alaska. In various forms, it lasted more than a century. It gave birth to a prototype environmental campaign and an international treaty centered on a North Pacific sea mammal: the fur seal.

Biologically related to the fur seals of the southern oceans, the northern fur seal gathered on a few subarctic islands each spring and summer for breeding and birth of pups. During the fall and winter the females and young migrated southward in the open ocean while most older males remained in the Bering Sea. On the North American side the herd ranged to the latitude of southern California, swung eastward toward the coast, and followed it northward in the late winter and spring on the way back to the rookeries.

While the sea otter grew harder to find, the fur seal took its place as a mainstay of the Russian fur-trading enterprise in Alaska, furnishing the bulk of profits. Only the superb pelts of the sea otter and black and silver foxes exceeded that of the fur seal in value. Shortly after the mid-18th Century, hunters exhausted the seal rookeries on Bering Island where Steller had encountered them and on
nearby Copper Island. Then in 1786 and 1787 navigator Gavriil Pribylov and his crew found the islands that later bore his name. There they discovered by far the largest breeding grounds of the northern fur seal, as well as sea otters and other mammals.\(^1\) Pribylov rookeries hosted about 80 percent of the northern fur seals. Smaller populations bred at the Commander Islands in Siberia, the Kurile Islands and Robben Island controlled by Japan, and San Miguel Island and Castle Rock off California.\(^2\)

**FUR SEALING IN THE RUSSIAN ERA**

Massive exploitation immediately followed Pribylov’s arrival. He returned to Kamchatka in 1788 carrying the hides of 40,000 fur seals, 2,000 sea otters, and 6,000 blue-phase Arctic foxes. For decades thereafter, expeditions tallied similar or greater hauls. The Russians settled Aleuts on the previously uninhabited islands (named St. George and St. Paul) to do the work of sealing, driftwood gathering, and hunting of foxes, birds, and sea lions. They organized an efficient means of harvesting fur seals, as outlined by Russian captain Frederick Litke in the 1820s:

> The hunters form a human chain along the shore and cut off any possible retreat of animals to the sea. They then push them all, without distinction, inland. Then they separate the first and third class males as well as the females and drive them back to the sea. As to the young ones which they intend to kill, they chase them as far as to the settlements—a distance of two or three leagues—but without hurrying them and letting them rest often, for without this precaution the animals could die of exhaustion, especially at a hot and windless time. Once they arrive at the settlement, the hunters kill the animals by blows. On the Island of Saint Paul herds of 3,000 to 4,000 seals can be driven inland this way, and on the Island of Saint George herds of 500 to 2,000.

Occasional signs of empathy for the seals could be seen. Litke observed that “the hunters themselves, hardened as they are to this form of murder, confess that often they can hardly raise their clubs to strike this innocent creature which, lying on its back with its paws in the air and crying plaintively like a baby seems to be imploring mercy.”\(^3\)

As soon as feasible, within a few days of the kill, Aleuts removed and cleaned the skins. Women stretched the skins on wooden frames and placed them in drying houses, warmed by heated stones. Workers tied the dry skins in bundles of 50 for shipment. They dried some of the meat for food and stored the remainder of the fat-laden carcasses in a pile to be burned as fuel.\(^4\)

Russians took the fur seal pelts to Kiakhta for trade or sale to the Chinese. British and New England traders, primarily interested in sea otters, also traded
or sold fur seal pelts in China. Following the discoveries of the Cook expedition, British merchant ships outnumbered the Yankees from 1785 into the 1790s. New Englanders, who first carried Falkland Island fur seal pelts to China in 1786, quickly surpassed the British in the Northwest fur trade. It formed a vital part of their China trade and helped establish the new nation as a viable economic unit and an important seafaring power.

Many of the fur seals taken to China came from islands off southern South America and, later, off Mexico and California. Sailors went ashore and clubbed them by the tens of thousands, likely exterminating some of the herds. Approximately 150,000 fur seals at the Galapagos, Guadalupe Island, and Baja California, and a similar number on the Farallons off California, fell to the sealers. On Mas Afuera Island alone, sealers killed 3.5 million. The total for Southern waters, Mexico, and California stood at 5 million.5

At both Sitka and the Pribilofs the Yankees traded their goods for northern fur seals. Russians needed the rice, tea, sugar, flour, rum, tobacco, and other
high-quality supplies brought by the Americans but did not want to pay in valuable sea otter pelts. Over a 30-year period beginning in 1799, Americans and other traders acquired at least 700,000 fur seal skins from the Russians.6
Until the 1820s no significant market existed for fur seals in Europe or the United States; nearly all skins went to Canton. Limited uses in the United States and Europe included caps, gloves, carriage rugs, trunk covers, and “beaver” hats. Between 1825 and 1870, improved processing, especially in dyeing and guard hair removal, enhanced the quality of pelts. London enterprises handled nearly all fur seal skins by 1870 when fashion began to drive up prices. People now prized seal fur for coats, muffs, and trim. An average pelt sold for less than $5 in the late 1860s and for $40 by 1900. Pribilof seals ranked second-best in quality to those of the South Shetland Islands–Cape Horn. Another, smaller population of southern fur seals bred at the Lobos Islands off Uruguay.7

Uncontrolled taking of the Pribilof seals sharply reduced their numbers. In 1802, in an attempt to speed up the drying process, workers spoiled nearly 800,000 skins. Between 1810 and 1813 the Russian-American Company burned at least 100,000 more pelts, apparently to keep the market price high.8

Declining seal populations induced conservation measures. Nikolai Rezanof, inspecting for the Russian government in 1805–1806, called an immediate halt to the killing, resulting in transfer of the crews to Unalaska. Sealing resumed on St. George in 1808 and on St. Paul in 1810. Regulations brought additional harvest cessations in 1822–1824 on St. Paul, 1826–1827 on St. George, and 1836–1837 on St. Paul. Notwithstanding a cap of 50,000 per year, the take fell to 7,000 or fewer during the 1830s to early 1850s. Protection of females beginning in 1847–1848 assisted recovery, and the harvest reached 30,000 to 40,000 in the late 1850s and 1860s. By the time of sale to the United States in 1867, the Pribilof herd had rebounded to an approximation of its natural strength of more than two million. During the Russian era, including the Commander Islands, fur seekers had killed about four million fur seals in the North Pacific.9

A number of considerations combined to persuade Russian leaders to leave North America, despite the sound financial condition of the Russian-American Company before its lease ended in 1862. British vessels, visiting and mapping the Arctic and subarctic while searching for the lost Franklin Expedition, raised questions about their motives. Russia’s military weakness revealed in the Crimean War exposed its inability to deploy defensive forces halfway around the world, and consolidation of the empire in Asia warranted first priority. The British Navy had attacked Russian bases in eastern Siberia and established a base at Esquimault on Vancouver Island. Britain created the crown colony of British Columbia in 1858 and remained an adversary after the war. By contrast, the United States and Russia maintained friendly relations.10 Discovery of gold in the Stikine River Valley in 1862 set off a gold rush, attracting more Americans. Advances by Britain through the Hudson’s Bay Company could not be reversed. Hoping the United States would help balance their geopolitical rival Great Britain, Russians opted to sell Alaska to the Americans.11
Americans did not eagerly take possession of Alaska, mainly because they could see little economic benefit. Unlike the contiguous Western territories, settlers could not easily move to Alaska. If they did, they might find no agricultural potential. Hardly any information existed about the mainland. The oceans, by contrast, contained a recognizable store of wealth in the form of sea creatures. Most could be harvested at sea without much reliance on the land. But one valuable exception, the fur seal, came ashore where it could be exploited by whoever owned the land. A fur seal industry might repay the United States in large part for the cost of acquiring Alaska. Eventually it benefited the industry but not the public treasury, and not without 44 years of conflict among nations over who had rights to take the seals.

Management of Pribilof Sealing

In their first year on the Pribilofs, Americans behaved worse than the Russians—introducing liquor and making love to the women while the Aleut men did the work. They showed far less concern for conservation of the seals. For years prior to 1867 the Russians had limited themselves to ensure a sustained yield. American companies, four or more operating in 1868, took an estimated 240,000. Publicity about the high kill rate and pressure from interested investors triggered a congressional investigation, an 1868 ban on commercial sealing, and a March 1869 resolution declaring the Pribilofs a preserve. The Treasury Department announced that only enough seals to feed the Aleut population of 371 would be harvested in 1869, but two commercial companies reaped a total of 85,901 skins. One of the companies, Hutchinson and Kohl of San Francisco, organized the Alaska Commercial Company consortium and won a twenty-year contract for exclusive sealing rights and a monopoly on all fur trading in Alaska between 1871 and 1890. Rules permitted an annual kill of 100,000 fur seals. The company also secured from Russia a monopoly on land sealing at the Commander Islands.

Under the terms of the 1871–1890 lease the Alaska Commercial Company supplied the Pribilof Aleuts with food, firewood, housing, medical care, and schooling for children, and the company discouraged alcohol. It voluntarily paid into a support fund for Aleuts a stipend based on the number of seals harvested, as had the Russians, and it aided widows and orphans. The lease required payment to the U.S. government of a $55,000 annual fee and $2.625 per seal skin. On-site agents of the Treasury Department’s Fur Seal Service had responsibility to oversee the operation. In practice the agents exercised substantial power over the lives of the Aleuts, and most adopted a solicitous attitude toward the company.
Ruled by the Russians, the Pribilof Aleuts endured a state of semi-slavery similar to that practiced in Russia. Yet for years before the transition to U.S. rule, they had been paid for their sealing work. Moreover, they retained their traditional chiefs who held considerable influence in village administration. Americans divided administrative duties on the Pribilofs between the Alaska Commercial Company and the U.S. government. At first Treasury agents tried to work through the chiefs chosen by the people. Finding that inconvenient, they resorted to removing and installing chiefs. Rather than paying wages into a community fund to be distributed by the chiefs, as the Russians had, agents took control of the money flow. They tried to stop alcohol consumption and other forms of behavior they considered immoral or unproductive. Offenders paid through fines, imprisonment, forced work assignments, restrictions on their movements, and, sometimes, exile. When an Aleut father refused to send his son to school, “Mr. McIntyre took him from his house, put handcuffs on, and lodged him in the cell of the company’s house, a very cold, damp place, and during all this time the son had been confined in a dark closet in the company’s house and kept on bread and water.”

Aleuts had readily taken to the schools at first, but they lost interest because they could not study Russian and other aspects of their culture. Treasury Department superiors condoned the actions of their agents, apparently assuming they would improve the Aleuts’ behavior and ensure a more productive sealing enterprise. Company managers and Treasury agents got along well. Dr. H.H. McIntyre, the first Treasury agent in the Pribilofs, had helped the Alaska Commercial Company win the 1871–1890 lease and a high annual harvest quota. The company hired him as its superintendent for the Pribilof operation, a post he held for the duration of the lease.

The U.S. ownership of the Pribilofs and their easily accessible breeding colonies permitted the entire harvest to be carried out on land. To help maintain the population, no females could legally be taken. But the harvest plan encountered obstacles in the migration pattern of the seals and in competing claims on them. Native hunters, primarily Indians on Queen Charlotte and Vancouver islands, had long been aware that the seals migrated southward in the fall and north in the spring. They intercepted the mainly female seal herds and speared them for their fur, meat, and oil. Schooner captains from Victoria began trading for the furs in the 1850s. Commercial pelagic sealing began off the British Columbia coast in 1866 and achieved the status of an industry by 1879 as fashion boosted the value of seal pelts. Schooners from the United States and Canada began carrying white and Indian hunters and their canoes to sea to do the hunting. The Alaska Commercial Company’s lease kept most vessels away from the Pribilofs, so the schooners hunted along the migration routes. Compared to land-based harvest on the Pribilofs, hunting at sea wasted
large numbers of seals: females because they could not be distinguished from males, pelts damaged by bullets and spears, and more lost by sinking or wounding than captured. Commercial sealing vessels numbered a known 34 in 1883 and 115 in 1889.\textsuperscript{19}

Sealing vessels sailed out of San Francisco, Victoria, and a few other ports. They started in late winter or early spring, intercepted the migrating seals, and followed them up the coast. Some Indians preferred to hunt offshore in their cedar canoes without schooners. They did well some years but risked being caught offshore in bad weather. In 1875 about 100 perished in a storm off the Washington coast. Most Indians took their chances on schooners, being paid according to the number of seals they killed. Women sometimes accompanied their husbands as cooks or canoe steers. A few Indians owned schooners; the Makahs sailed ten out of Neah Bay on the Olympic Peninsula in 1893.\textsuperscript{20}

As soon as they understood the migration pattern of fur seals in the eastern Pacific, sealers realized they could kill greater numbers near the Pribilof rookeries. And it would be even easier to kill the seals onshore if Alaska Commercial Company personnel could be avoided. In 1874 Martin Kimberley sailed the \textit{Cygnet} from San Francisco to the Pribilofs, carrying Indian hunters. They sealed on or near Otter Island and company officials boarded them. They gave up some skins but took home 135 plus 20 sea otter pelts. The next year Kimberley went to St. George Island and brought back 569 sealskins.\textsuperscript{21} In 1876 the \textit{Ocean Spray} raided the Pribilofs, followed by others despite the danger of being fired on by rookery guards. Exploits of pirate sealing captains at the Russian and American rookeries set examples for later American, Canadian, and Japanese raiders and inspired romantic novels by Kipling and London.\textsuperscript{22}

Raiding continued on the Pribilofs despite patrols by revenue cutters. In 1884, Lieutenant John E. Lutz of the \textit{Corwin}, detailed to guard St. Paul Island, encountered three poaching vessels. He captured one, engaged the second in a running gun battle, and could not reach the third. The captured \textit{Adele} had German registry, a Scandinavian captain, a Japanese crew, and clearance to hunt in the Kuriles. Lutz left most of the prisoners in the custody of the St. Paul Treasury agent and sailed the \textit{Adele} to Unalaska. Unable to make port, he continued to San Francisco.\textsuperscript{23}

Seal poachers operated offshore or on the Pribilof beaches. Usually they came at night or on foggy days to avoid being seen by guards. A journal entry by St. George Island agent A.W. Lavender for June 22, 1885, related: “On the arrival of Mr. Morgan and myself on the ground we found the marauders gone, but their work left on the beach, 120 seal skins and evidence enough to satisfy the Government agent that between 600 and 700 seals had been killed, nearly all females.” Lavender frequently made such entries between 1884 and 1889.\textsuperscript{24}
During the 1880s critics voiced concern over the extent of seal killing, both onshore and at sea. Treasury agent Charles Goff complained that Aleuts took the initiative to hunt seals at sea: “[M]any thousands are killed by them as they pass through the passes to and from the islands, only for the skins, which are sold and traded for whiskey to poaching vessels.” Goff also objected to the regulation permitting the Aleuts to kill 5,000 pups annually at the Pribilofs for food. They did not need them for food or clothing, said Goff; they made the skins into blankets, caps, gloves, and trinkets to be sold to visiting ships.25

Pelagic sealers and poachers increasingly contributed to shrinkage of the fur seal herd. An expert on the seals, Henry Wood Elliott, had suggested in his 1881 and 1887 books that no problem existed in the seal population or the actions of the Alaska Commercial Company.26 Officially the herd in 1886 stood at a robust 4.7 million. But seal counts had been carried out by unscientific methods, if at all. Agent Goff challenged the complacent assumptions in 1889, reporting a sharp drop-off. The Treasury Department sent Elliott and Goff back in 1890 to investigate. What Elliott saw and heard shocked him. His July 1890 report differed dramatically from his earlier assessments; it set the seal count at one million. The Treasury Department decided not to release the document to the public for the time being lest it influence U.S.-British negotiations over rights to pelagic sealing.27

Any estimate of seal numbers invited dispute because of its economic and political implications and because no easy method of counting the seals existed. Also, seal totals varied greatly from the post-winter period to the pupping stage. Elliott received vigorous criticism for the 1890 estimate, as he had in the 1870s when he claimed 4.7 million. Yet his had not been the highest 1870s estimate, and other counts in the 1890s confirmed a steep downward trend.28

Henry W. Elliott

Widely considered the nation’s leading authority on the northern fur seal, Elliott (1846–1930) had been raised in Ohio. He dropped out of high school for a year because of ill health and trained himself in art and science. His father, Franklin, who illustrated his own books on horticulture, encouraged Henry. He took his son to Washington in 1861 and introduced him to Joseph Henry, secretary of the Smithsonian. Impressed by the boy’s ability, Henry invited him to work there in an unpaid capacity as a clerk and illustrator. Among other projects, Elliott sketched birds for Spencer F. Baird’s volumes on land and water birds of North America.29

Meanwhile, interest in Alaska grew rapidly. No telegraph link extended to Russia, diplomatically friendly toward the United States at that time. Western Union devised a plan to route one through Alaska. It arranged for the
Fur Seal’s Friend: Henry W. Elliott

Smithsonian to staff an exploratory venture. Elliott signed on as a member and illustrator. The expedition departed in 1865, its scientific section led by Robert Kennicott of Chicago. It visited parts of coastal British Columbia and Southeast Alaska, including Sitka. A transatlantic cable laid in 1866 eliminated the need for an Alaskan route, but the scientific expedition carried on the following summer. Its data and vivid descriptions of Alaskan nature reached Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee and prime mover of the effort to purchase Alaska. This and similar information enabled Sumner to counter the “Seward’s Folly” and “Walrussia” arguments and reassure the Senate. The treaty approved, Alaska became part of the United States in 1867.

Kennicott (1835–1867), born in New Orleans and raised in Northfield, Illinois, learned to love natural science as he worked in the family horticulture business. His early work in fauna led to study under Baird at the Smithsonian. Poor health prevented his attending university, but the quality of his scientific work put him in charge of a statewide survey of natural science in Illinois at age twenty. He founded the Museum of Natural History at Northwestern University and provided its initial collections. On an 1859–1862 expedition to Canada, funded by the Smithsonian and the Chicago Audubon Society and fully supported by Hudson’s Bay Company, he traveled to northern Canada and into Russian territory to Fort Yukon. He ranged widely by boat, dogsled, and on foot, collecting for the museums. After his return in 1862, Hudson’s Bay officers continued to send bird and mammal specimens to Chicago and to the Smithsonian.

When the telegraph project got under way in 1865, Kennicott, now curator of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, accepted a position as chief of scientific explorations. In the second year of the expedition he and six assistants left San Francisco in July 1866 and sailed to St. Michael on the Yukon Delta where two parties separated to explore toward Bering Strait and up the Yukon. A third unit, including Elliott, debarked in British Columbia to do preparatory work for the telegraph line along the Fraser River. Kennicott led the Yukon team, and both northern contingents wintered at Unalakleet. Having suffered a heart attack in San Francisco, Kennicott died at Nulato in May 1867. His colleagues ascended the river to Fort Yukon, completing the first exploration of the river by non-Natives.

After Kennicott died on the Yukon, a young Bostonian geographer named William Healey Dall became expedition leader. Dall (1845–1927) pursued a long career in the U.S. Coast Survey and U.S. Geological Survey, completing at least fourteen study trips to Alaska. After retirement he continued to collect material for the Smithsonian and wrote widely into the 20th Century: hundreds of articles and books on mollusks, Alaskan nature, and Native life, the
best-known being *Alaska and Its Resources* (1870). Dall’s porpoise and the Dall bighorn sheep bear his name. Historian Morgan Sherwood titled him “Dean of Alaska’s Experts.”
William H. Dall, chief of Marine Dept., Scientific Corps, Western Union Telegraph Expedition, San Francisco, July 1865. Smithsonian Archives. Dall, an early American explorer in Alaska, became a leading scientific expert on the territory.
Elliott’s experience on the Kennicott expedition opened the door to others. In the summers of 1869–1871 he served as an illustrator on the Hayden Yellowstone expeditions that resulted in the world’s first national park. Almost certainly Elliott took note of how photographer William Henry Jackson and artist Thomas Moran, also members of the 1871 expedition, used their work to persuade Congress to pass the park bill.

Fascinated by Alaska, Elliott secured a position in 1872 as assistant to the Treasury agent for the Pribilofs, overseeing the licensed fur sealing operation and researching the seals for the Smithsonian. Baird, in his dual role of Smithsonian administrator and the first U.S. fish commissioner, wanted information on the seals and arranged Elliott’s appointment. Soon after Elliott arrived at the Pribilofs he fell in love with the area and married an Aleut woman, Alexandra Melovidova. He studied the seals in depth and created hundreds of drawings and paintings of the seals and other wildlife, scenery, and Aleut life.

In 1874 reports of pelagic sealing caused the Treasury Department to send Elliott back to investigate. He and Lieutenant Washburn Maynard, the latter detailed to check on the Alaska Commercial Company, visited the Aleutian, Pribilof, Nunivak, St. Matthew, St. Lawrence, and Diomede islands and St. Michael on the Yukon Delta. Elliott collected artifacts and did drawings and paintings for the Smithsonian. In 1876 he returned to the Pribilofs on his own and visited the Kuskokwim Delta. Upon returning to Washington he continued his work on the seals and, when the need arose, devoted his talents to their protection. He wrote The Seal-Islands of Alaska (1881), the first book on the fur seals. This well-received work and Our Arctic Province: Alaska and the Seal Islands (1887) presented a comprehensive profile of the Pribilofs and covered other parts of Alaska. Elliott’s articles and illustrations appeared in popular publications; the seals began to acquire a public following.

After leaving his Treasury post in the Pribilofs, Elliott wrote and spoke approvingly of the Alaska Commercial Company, whose operations he had overseen. He wrote articles and testified before Congress to the effect that development funds for Alaska would be a waste of money. Critics believed the company wanted to maximize its control over the fur trade, inland as well as at the Pribilofs. Governor Alfred P. Swineford considered Elliott’s negation of Alaskan development part of a strategy to prevent territorial status lest it hinder the company’s operations.

Political Tension and Scandal

For the 1891–1910 licensed monopoly on Pribilof sealing the Alaska Commercial Company submitted the lowest bid, as it had in 1871. The highest bidder, another California-based group named the North American Commercial
Company, won the contract. Two men who had great influence in the Harrison administration, one (Stephen B. Elkins) to be appointed secretary of war, owned most North American Commercial Company stock. The two men opposed land killing limits and pressed for restrictions on pelagic sealing by their competitors. But the first lessee had killed excessively and depleted the seals. It had taken an annual average of 99,081 seals (Table 2.1) and earned $18 million for its fourteen stockholders. North American Commercial Company would kill an annual average of 16,413 but realize nearly $5 million because of higher fur prices. For their part, the Aleuts suffered economically from the harvest reduction, and the government lost $12 million over the first twelve years of the 1891–1910 lease, primarily because of the cost of patrol ships.36

Beyond economics and ecology, the fur seal controversy embodied important international dimensions. Beginning in 1886 U.S. Revenue Marine cutters had arrested and confiscated several Canadian and American sealing vessels operating in the Bering Sea outside the traditionally recognized three-mile territorial limit. Noah L. Jeffries, an Alaska Commercial Company lobbyist, wrote articles propounding the theory of U.S. ownership of the Bering Sea. He used his influence to bring about the seizures. When Attorney General A.H. Garland heard about the seizures he ordered the ships released. But the judge in Sitka,

### Table 2.1. Reported Harvest of Pribilof Fur Seals, 1786–1950

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>St. Paul/St. George Is.</th>
<th>At Sea</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1786–1790</td>
<td>208,879</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>208,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791–1800</td>
<td>420,099</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>420,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801–1810</td>
<td>422,440</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>422,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811–1820</td>
<td>428,460</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>428,460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821–1830</td>
<td>271,860</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>271,860</td>
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<tr>
<td>1831–1840</td>
<td>104,615</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>104,615</td>
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<tr>
<td>1841–1850</td>
<td>130,814</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>130,814</td>
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<tr>
<td>1851–1860</td>
<td>186,087</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>1861–1870</td>
<td>624,766</td>
<td>17,483</td>
<td>642,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871–1880</td>
<td>1,042,520</td>
<td>71,926</td>
<td>1,114,446</td>
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<tr>
<td>1881–1890</td>
<td>939,103</td>
<td>238,484</td>
<td>1,177,587</td>
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<tr>
<td>1891–1900</td>
<td>165,252</td>
<td>421,300</td>
<td>586,552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901–1910</td>
<td>163,111</td>
<td>208,611</td>
<td>371,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911–1920</td>
<td>197,411</td>
<td>20,834</td>
<td>218,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921–1930</td>
<td>268,576</td>
<td>39,401</td>
<td>307,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931–1940</td>
<td>555,900</td>
<td>11,698</td>
<td>567,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941–1950</td>
<td>664,036</td>
<td>1,106</td>
<td>665,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,793,929</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,030,843</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,824,722</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Does not include seals killed and lost at sea. Figures before 1910 are least accurate.
persuaded by Jeffries’s theory, declined to carry out the order. The legal claim became a part of U.S. policy despite its contradiction of previous American practice, and seizures continued.

Secretary of State John W. Foster later remarked on how “a great government might be betrayed into a line of policy through the machinations of a private corporation, influenced by pecuniary motives, which put in peril its relations with a powerful neighbor and subjected it to the condemnation of an international tribunal for conduct taken unadvisedly and unwisely.”

Great Britain and the Canadians demanded compensation for the seizures and asserted their right to hunt seals at sea. Taking the position that the United States owned the seals, in March 1889 Congress passed and President Grover Cleveland signed a law declaring the right to police the Bering Sea and directing the president to send ships to arrest law violators. More seizures took place in the summer of 1889. President Benjamin Harrison ordered revenue cutters again in 1890 to prepare to apprehend pelagic sealers. British foreign secretary Lord Salisbury warned that Britain would be forced to act if more seizures occurred. Five Royal Navy warships at Esquimalt, British Columbia, prepared for action, suggesting the possibility of armed conflict. Diplomacy prevented a military clash and the United States arrested no ships, but pelagic sealing proceeded.

Spring 1891 again tested Harrison’s administration. The fur seals in the Pribilofs faced the prospect of extinction by hunting—on land by the American licensees and at sea by Canadian sealers. A much greater force of sealing ships prepared for the 1891 season. The disturbing though still-undisclosed study conducted by Elliott for the Treasury Department waited in the wings. It claimed an 80 percent decline in the number of Pribilof seals and recommended a five-year halt on land killing and a permanent cessation of pelagic sealing.

Added to a great power confrontation, administration officials had the 1892 elections to worry about. They dared not be seen as backing down from the British. They needed their powerful friends in the North American Commercial Company but did not wish to be viewed as tools of Big Business. And should Elliott’s fur seal report be uncovered, public opinion would demand protection for the seals. The administration chose to leak the study to North American officials, who tried to publicly discredit Elliott. The administration transferred Treasury agent Charles Goff, who at Elliott’s urging had recommended prohibition of further killing, away from the Pribilofs. In his place they appointed an inexperienced man. Secretary of State James G. Blaine, having reached a verbal agreement with the British ambassador to stop both pelagic and on-land seal harvest for the 1891 season, nevertheless arranged to give North American a permit for 60,000 kills.
In short order the administration’s scheme began to unravel. A woman attending a party in Washington overheard North American’s lawyer boasting about the secret deal. She alerted Elliott. Receiving a less than honest response from the official who made the deal, Elliott wrote to the New York *Evening Post* revealing the arrangement and the conclusions of his seal population survey. The *New York Times* picked up the story and called for an investigation of the “sealing scandal.” Elliott, a consultant to the State Department, lost his job the day after his letter appeared. Harrison found himself in an embarrassing position and ordered cancellation of the secret agreement between Blaine and North American.

Negotiations resulted in a joint U.S.-British Bering Sea Patrol of revenue cutters and warships to intercept pelagic sealing vessels entering the Bering Sea beginning in 1891. Of the 49-ship fleet leaving Victoria, the patrol fleet stopped 41. Next the two powers signed a treaty, ratified in 1892, instituting a Bering Sea Tribunal to arbitrate the dispute. Harrison lost in the fall election, but the diplomatic process went on. The tribunal convened in Paris in February 1893.

At the tribunal the United States contended that the seals, spending one-third of their lives ashore in the Pribilofs, thereby became American property and needed protection from pelagic sealing. No nation had the moral right, it argued, to destroy the resource at sea. It also claimed jurisdiction over the Bering Sea based on a supposed similar claim by Russia. The U.S. case had been weakened by the reports of Elliott and others documenting wasteful killing by the licensed American company. The tribunal ruled in August 1893 that the United States had no jurisdiction over or ownership of the seals beyond the 3-mile limit. Tribunal guidelines called for both British and American legislation protecting the seals by restricting pelagic hunting in the Bering Sea to licensed, nonmotorized vessels without firearms. No vessel could hunt between May and July or within 60 miles of the Pribilofs. Both parties passed laws by April 1894 incorporating the regulations. The United States paid $423,000 in compensation for seized Canadian vessels.

**Height of the Pelagic Sealing Industry**

Pelagic sealing continued to exact a high toll despite the regulations. In the 1893 and 1894 seasons, according to London records, pelagic sealers from the northeast Pacific turned in the pelts of nearly 194,000 fur seals. Spears wielded by Natives proved as effective as guns, and the seals breeding at the Pribilofs swam far beyond the 60-mile limit in search of food. Females, pregnant and returning to suckle pups at the rookeries, comprised up to 80 percent of the seals feeding at sea. Killing a female at sea meant the death of a pup as well. One visitor counted 16,000 starving pups at the Pribilof rookeries in 1896. As
many as one million breeding females may have been killed during the pelagic sealing era (Table 2.1).43

Fisheries expert Charles H. Townsend described the machine-like efficiency of a pelagic sealing fleet, all but six of whose vessels employed Indians wielding spears:

The sealing fleet consisted of 38 schooners, carrying 6 to 20 boats or canoes apiece—the average number being about 12. The boats hunted in all directions, frequently going 10 miles away from the vessels to which they belonged. . . . Pursuing seals in this systematic way, 38 vessels carrying somewhat more than 450 boats, took 31,542 skins in six weeks.44

Seals typically slept on their backs, their heads protruding. Indians threw 12- to 14-foot double-pronged spears tipped by detachable spearheads tied by a 30-yard line to the boat. They struck seals at distances of 30 to 35 feet in fairly smooth water. The hunter pulled the seal to the boat and clubbed it. Townsend added that “seals fight vigorously at such times and seldom fail to leave permanent marks of their sharp teeth on boats and canoes, while large bulls are very dangerous to handle.”45

Indians hunted in two-man canoes and white hunters in threes—one to row, one to steer, and one to shoot. Until banned, a rifle or, more commonly, a
shotgun dispatched the seals. Hunters received pay based on the number of seals they took and, to some extent, the condition of the pelts. Bullets usually did more damage than spears, and seals when shot had to be quickly retrieved before they sank. Crew members took their catch aboard the schooner, skinned it, and packed the pelts in salt. In its most successful years a schooner might gather 4,000 skins or more. Between 1887 and 1892, hunter Oscar Scarf chalked up 2,788 seals, including a possible record of 683 in one season. The industry, for a time the most important seafaring pursuit on the Northwest coast, attracted ships from as far away as Newfoundland.

Fur seals, mostly from Robben and the Commander Islands, also migrated down the western Pacific coast to Japan. American hunters decimated the sea otters in the Kurile Islands beginning in 1872 and then discovered small fur seal rookeries on the islands and eradicated them. Following the *C.S. White* in 1890, 82 American and Canadian pelagic sealing vessels arrived off Japan by 1894. The Japanese learned to hunt seals at sea, giving the westerners stiff competition. Seal populations shrank and the price of seal pelts fell in London. An 1897 American law forbade importation of sea otters or fur seals and pelagic hunting under the U.S. flag. Nearly all foreign sealers had left Japanese waters by 1900.

Danger added to the costs of pelagic sealing. In 1894 alone, nearly 10 percent of boats and their crews in northwest Pacific waters went down. A storm off Alaska in 1895 engulfed the Canadian schooner *Walter A. Earle* and its crew of 32. It drove the *C.S. White* onto a snowy shore; 11 drowned or froze and 5 survivors had frozen limbs amputated.

No longer plagued by competition in the northwest Pacific, an active and burgeoning Japanese fleet soon thinned out the seals in nearby waters. Ranging northward, it depleted the seals off the Robben Island rookery, which Japan later gained in 1905 after the Russo-Japanese War. It hunted off the Russian-owned Commander Islands and, to a lesser extent, off the Pribilofs. Not a party to the 1893 tribunal, Japan had no legal obligation to respect the 60-mile limit around the Pribilofs. By 1910, 53 Japanese sealing vessels plied the northern waters.

Subsidized by the Japanese government until 1909, and its boats often captained by North Americans, the fleet adopted aggressive tactics. Two schooners erected facsimiles of funnels to disguise themselves as revenue cutters. A line of schooners would rest three miles off the Pribilofs to intercept females passing by. Boats approached the shore, hunters fired shotguns to frighten the herd off the rookery, and the boats retreated and killed the seals in the water. Some men went ashore to club seals. Five American revenue cutters patrolled the islands and made arrests and confiscations but could not stop the raiders. Thirty or more sealing vessels, bad weather, and sixteen large rookeries on St. Paul and six on St. George made full protection impossible.
Several men died in encounters between poachers and rookery guards. In the most dramatic incident, in 1906 Pribilof rookery guards killed five Japanese poachers, wounded two, and captured twelve. American seizure of Japanese ships and shooting of poachers raised the political stakes of the dispute.\(^5\) Nations could not afford to risk wider conflict over such an issue; it called for international diplomacy.

Resolution of the Conflict

Britain and the United States had agreed in 1891 to send a joint commission of four scientists to the Pribilofs to investigate and make recommendations. C. Hart Merriam and Thomas Mendenhall represented the United States. Unable to agree in the short time allotted, the two teams wrote separate reports. The British-Canadian team downplayed pelagic sealing as a cause of seal decline, and the Americans placed primary blame on pelagic hunting. Unlike Elliott they advocated on-land harvest of young males not necessary for breeding. This position aggravated the split between Elliott and nearly all of the few scientists knowledgeable about fur seals.

Again in 1896 Britain and the United States sent scientists to gather data, and again Elliott did not find himself among those chosen. David Starr Jordan (1851–1931), an ichthyologist who had become president of Stanford University, headed the American team. The rest included Leonhard Stejneger and Frederick Lucas of the Smithsonian and Charles H. Townsend of the U.S. Fish Commission. As had the 1891 team, they condemned pelagic sealing but advocated harvest of surplus males.\(^5\) In a summary document Jordan wrote a critique of Elliott’s 1890 report not well engineered to win the heart of its author. While conceding the “general excellence” of the portrayal of the fur seal’s life history, Jordan labeled Elliott’s 1872–1874 fur seal herd estimates as “gross exaggerations.” Citing Elliott’s 1870s assertions that government management protected the seal herd, Jordan commented, “This is the only conclusion of his earlier work which he calls into question, and to its undoing his whole 1890 report is dedicated. It is, however, perfectly correct.” Whereas Elliott placed little blame on pelagic sealing for the herd reduction, Jordan described it as “the sole cause of the decline.” Jordan accused Elliott of “deliberate misrepresentation” of facts: “Whenever any statement made by Mr. Elliott is tried by the records it is found wanting.” Jordan’s summary judgment on the 1890 report: “We must again express our regret that it was ever printed. It adds absolutely no knowledge to the subject, while it is the source of needless error and confusion. It is wholly lacking in both the methods and spirit of scientific investigation. . . . Its methods and results cannot be too strongly condemned.”\(^5\) Jordan and Elliott, the latter of whom considered himself the foremost expert, engaged in a
sixteen-year battle over fur seal science and policy. Elliott painted the scientists as tools of a government beholden to sealing interests. They in turn portrayed him as an irrational and unreliable pseudo-scientist.

The United States, Russia, and Japan met in late 1897 and agreed on a temporary pelagic sealing ban pending approval by Canada and Britain. In the 1898 meetings of Canada, Britain, and the United States, Canada attempted to tie the seal issue to settlement of the U.S.-Canada boundary. Canada’s proposal would give the Yukon Territory direct access to the sea. The United States refused and the talks failed. But the United States had proposed a new idea: to give Canada a share of the Pribilof harvests in exchange for cessation of pelagic sealing. This proposal would be a crucial element of the ultimate solution.55

Studies by Jordan, among others, did not convince the Canadians of the role of pelagic sealing in fur seal decline. Estimates of 20,000 dead pups in 1894 and 16,000 in 1903, allegedly because their mothers had been killed at sea, stimulated the debates. A visit to the Pribilofs by U.S. senators in 1903 determined that the illegal on-land killing of females and yearlings might be as damaging as that done at sea. Congress had entertained, the House passed, and President Theodore Roosevelt suggested a proposal that, absent an agreement, the United States should kill off nearly all the fur seals. However sincerely intended, such a move would put the pelagic sealers out of business and save the cost of revenue cutter patrols.56

Disputes among claimants to knowledge of the seals added confusion to the debate and divided conservationists into factions emphasizing preservation and sustainable use. Jordan distrusted Elliott’s census figures and his habit of identifying himself as “Prof. Elliott, of the Smithsonian.” Elliott possessed neither a professorial appointment nor employment at the Smithsonian, and Secretary Samuel Langley asked him to stop making the claim. Jordan and Elliott campaigned separately for the seals. Jordan published seventeen works on the sealing issue, including a children’s book, Matka and Kotik, about the life of a seal and her pup. Added to the fictional works of Kipling, London, and Poe, Jordan and Elliott created wide public awareness of Alaska and the North Pacific sealing story.57

Elliott had established himself earlier than the others as a writer and an expert on the seals. His illustrations, moreover, may have been more important than the texts. He presented the seals in a highly sympathetic manner, reflecting his own feelings. He drew maps showing the drastic reduction in rookery land area occupied by the seals in 1890 as compared to 1872. When they became available to the press and other interested parties, the maps seemed convincing evidence of excessive killing of the seals. Elliott distributed his pictures and writings to key players in the seal debate, including the British ambassador.
And he drew humorous and biting cartoons of his enemies. The artwork added a telling dimension to his campaign.⁵⁸

Jordan held the respect of the scientific community and most government officials, but Elliott appealed to the press, much of the public, and many in Congress. After the breakdown of great-power talks in 1899 and the accession

of conservation-oriented Theodore Roosevelt to the presidency in 1901, Elliott tried to reinstate himself as the government’s top fur seal expert. He criticized Jordan’s thesis, arguing that it exaggerated the impact of pelagic sealing and minimized the effect of land harvest. He proposed a treaty to Secretary of State John Hay that included a ten-year moratorium on harvest at the Pribilofs and a 25 percent share of profits for Canada. He met Roosevelt in the White House in 1904 and offered to go to Canada and negotiate on behalf of the United States. Roosevelt, who admired Elliott’s spunk, nevertheless wisely declined the offer. After Hay died in 1905, Roosevelt chose fellow Boone and Crockett Club member Elihu Root to replace him. To Elliott’s dismay, Root brought Jordan back as the administration’s fur seal adviser. Even though Root offered Canada an agreement similar to Elliott’s proposal, Elliott blamed Root when Canada turned it down. He returned to his mode of attack on government fur seal policy.59

Elliott found an ally in William T. Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Park. Like Elliott, Hornaday tended to be egotistical, arrogant, unpredictable, and a preservationist and, therefore, disliked by other prominent conservationists. Also, like Elliott, he displayed extreme tenacity. And he had long since proved his ability to influence the press, public opinion, and Congress. At Elliott’s request he set to work on the fur seal issue in 1907. Elliott agreed to
remain in the background. Through the Camp Fire Club of America (a group of sportsmen and outdoorsmen he had organized in 1897) and the support of Senator Joseph M. Dixon and President William Howard Taft, Hornaday labored successfully for a 1910 law protecting the fur seals. Henceforth the government would manage the seal herd through the Department of Labor and Commerce in a manner calculated to preserve the herd.  

A Fur Seal Advisory Board appointed in 1909 had backed the 1910 legislation, as had Secretary of Commerce and Labor Charles Nagel. Jordan headed the board, and Merriam, Stejneger, and Townsend sat on it. As before, they staunchly opposed pelagic sealing but advocated harvest of males. When Nagel authorized a kill of 12,000 males in the spring of 1910, Hornaday and Elliott went on the offensive. They charged that the kill violated the law and undermined the treaty negotiations. Hornaday argued that no scientific basis existed for killing the males. He questioned the integrity of both Nagel and Jordan. Meanwhile, continuing reports of seal herd decline lent urgency to the negotiations. Various estimates in 1908 and 1909 placed the Pribilof fur seal total at 50,000 to 200,000.  

International politics and economics intertwined to bring about the North Pacific Sealing Convention of 1911, the first major international agreement on wildlife. None of the parties wanted armed conflict. Americans wished to avoid extinction of the seals and to maintain the principal share of profits. Russia wanted to safeguard its seal herds, especially from Japanese predation. London had long been a processing point for the furs and stood to lose if extinction occurred. Britain also wanted stable relations with the United States. The Canadians no longer held a significant stake in sealing. Japan still maintained an active sealing fleet as well as its own fur seal herd on Robben Island and stood to gain economically and diplomatically from an accord. The July 1911 agreement, renewed in 1926, compensated the Japanese and Canadians for the loss of their pelagic sealing industries by guaranteeing each of them 15 percent of the skins from Russian and American harvests. Japan in turn agreed to give 10 percent of its pelts to each of the other signatories. The treaty sharply reduced the practice of pelagic sealing. Beyond economics and geopolitics, both the convention and the 1893 tribunal decision set valuable precedents in international cooperation for natural resource protection.  

Signing of the treaty did not end the domestic squabble over the seals. Congress held hearings about alleged violations of the law by the North American Commercial Company. Given a more accessible battlefield than treaty negotiations, Elliott and Hornaday carried on the fight to limit seal killing. They and their adversaries, including Jordan and Fisheries commissioner George Bowers, exchanged malicious charges. A congressional committee chairman brought in a trained seal (presumably a California sea lion) during hearings. On the
cue “Professor Elliott” it barked and waved its flippers, and at “Commissioner Bowers” it tried to hide beneath a chair.

Both houses of Congress had to approve the treaty because it involved allocation of funds. The House passed the enabling bill in the form desired by the administration. In the Senate, Hornaday and Elliott persuaded Senator Gilbert Hitchcock of Nebraska to attach an amendment to halt all seal killing for ten years. Administration officials could not easily overcome what seemed to be a conservation measure or the argument that the seals ought to know what to do with their young males without human intervention. Congress passed a compromise bill containing a five-year moratorium.63 The preservationists had prevailed over the utilitarian conservationists.

A New York Times article, its rhetoric highly reminiscent of Hornaday’s, celebrated the “victory.” It left no doubt as to the villainy of

the people who enjoy killing mothers so that their litter may starve to death, the people who want to wear “furs” without regard as to how their “furs” are got, and the people who see their way clear to make money out of that last desire. These are the three classes that for the last forty years have made organized seal murder under the American flag a profitable industry.

And there are two subsidiary classes. One consists of the so-called experts, headed by Dr. David Starr Jordan, who have supplied the seal murderers with a semblance of argument for their bad cause, and the other consists of the government officials . . . who want to make a commercial record and show they did a big volume of business in this or that fiscal year. These five classes combined to hoodwink that good easy man, Secretary Charles Nagel, and commit the United States Government to the seal slaughtering policy.

At the center of the article stood Elliott in a commanding pose, flanked by an 1872 painting of a rookery full of fur seals and another from 1890 nearly empty.64

Even after the treaty ratification, congressional hearings continued on the alleged past mismanagement of the fur seals. A House committee sent Elliott back to the Pribilofs in 1913 for more investigation. He participated in the hearings, carrying on the struggle against his scientific and administrative opponents.65

FUR SEALS UNDER FEDERAL MANAGEMENT

Pelagic sealing and the contraction of the fur seal herd worked a hardship on the Aleuts. During the first lease, despite severe restrictions on their freedoms they had prospered economically. Their earnings approximated those of the average American worker. When harvests declined in the 1890s, so did their income. Treasury agents pleaded for subsidies and Congress eventually
responded. As Aleut sustenance shifted from seal pelt earnings to donated necessities managed by the agents, the latter increasingly treated the Aleuts as wards rather than employees and took even more control over their everyday lives. A 1909 directive from the Department of Commerce and Labor’s Bureau of Fisheries, which had assumed jurisdiction in 1903, specifically authorized agents to (1) draft Aleuts for unpaid labor when needed, (2) remove or install chiefs when necessary, (3) ban sugar to discourage alcohol production, and (4) banish people from the islands when necessary. The orders forbade divulging information on seals or the seal islands. For the next 40 years or more, Pribilof Aleuts lived in a state of dependency and subservience.66

The 1910 Fur Seal Act had ended the leasing system, putting the U.S. government directly in control of the Pribilof herd. After the five-year moratorium on commercial sealing at the islands, the Department of Commerce engaged the Fouke Fur Company to conduct a controlled harvest of the herd beginning in 1918. To make use of the meat, fat, and bones, the government built a reduction plant. An observation facility constructed in 1920 accommodated tourists who had been coming to see the seals.67 During World War I the government tested uses of seal parts for leather, oil, and fertilizer but had difficulty finding economically viable products. Plants operated in 1919–1924, 1928, 1935–1941, and after 1942. They produced oil for tanning leather and meal for feeding foxes, hatchery fish, and poultry. Beginning in 1962 a private firm contracted to supply frozen meat for mink raising.68

Indians made relatively modest and declining catches at sea (Table 2.1). The treaty exempted Native Americans from the pelagic sealing ban as long as they hunted without firearms or assistance from motorized vessels.69 Tlingit Indians had begun commercial sealing in the 1890s, operating from schooners. Between 1897 and the 1920s they used specially designed “Sitka sealers,” 25-foot wooden canoes rowed and steered by six-man crews. Unable to legally shoot seals, some kept a gun in a hollowed-out cedar log, plugged at the open end. If approached by a patrol vessel they could toss the log overboard and recover it later. A fur trader confided that nearly all the pelts he bought displayed bullet holes.70

U.S.-Japan Tensions

Officially, the Japanese government lived up to the terms of the agreement. But surreptitiously it condoned the continuation of pelagic sealing. Japanese sealers raided the Commander Islands rookeries while the revolution distracted the Russians. They caught seals in Japanese waters for their army to sell in Manchuria. Deteriorating relations between Japan and the United States caused Japan to withdraw from the treaty effective October 1941, terminating it as
such, and Japan’s pelagic sealing increased. Canada and the United States co-
operated through a bilateral agreement from 1941 to 1957.

Wartime tensions bred speculation that Japan might attack the Pribilof herd. Frank Thorne suggested in Science News Letter that

the little men from the East can do immense damage to a major American natural resource. . . . By making even a temporary landing, the enemy could practically wipe out the herd with machine guns and rifles. . . . It can be anticipated that the Japanese will make such a raid—perhaps they already have made it—for they will want all the furs they can steal, in preparation for their anticipated attack on the Soviets in Siberia.

Ben East in Natural History repeated the Siberian campaign thesis, adding that the Japanese had held a grudge against the Americans since the killing of their sealers in 1906.

Pribilof sealing had proceeded under Department of Commerce jurisdiction until 1939 when reorganization shifted the responsibility to the Bureau of Biological Survey, renamed the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1940. Its Sealing Division ran the Pribilof operation from Seattle. In 1940 a sealing agent over-
saw the work of a population of 294 Aleuts on St. Paul, and a second agent supervised 183 Aleuts on nearby St. George. Most workers and their families lived year-round on the islands as they had since the time of the Russians.

Uncertainty about Japanese intentions, and the desire for military flexibil-
ity, led to evacuation of the Pribilof Aleuts as well as those on other islands soon after the Japanese attacks in June 1942. Pribilovians spent the remainder of the war at an abandoned cannery and gold mine site at Funter Bay on north Admiralty Island, and other Aleuts stayed elsewhere in Southeast Alaska. Agency jurisdic-
tional confusion and lack of preparation and funding contributed to disease and many deaths related to inadequate living conditions. In spring 1943 the Fish and Wildlife Service took 116 men back to the Pribilofs to carry out a successful and lucrative sealing operation. The next year a sealing expedition went north to stay, and nearly all of the Pribilof population returned as well.

Postwar Management

Fish and Wildlife Service agents hoped to maintain their control over the sealing in the postwar era. But Aleuts had developed skills and experience as workers during the war, and they pressed harder for change. Frederika Martin, who had lived in the Pribilofs in 1941 and learned their history, wrote a book and articles calling for reform of the treatment of Aleuts. Other reformers in and out of government added their voices, and Congress held hearings in 1949. Laws passed in 1950 and 1962 gave the Aleuts full worker rights. The 1958
Alaska Statehood Act retained federal control of the seals but assigned 70 percent of sealing profits to the state. Aleuts took ownership of most of the Pribilof Islands through the lands settlement acts of 1971 and 1980. They won an $8.5 million judgment from the federal government in 1978 and a $20 million trust fund in 1983 to help them proceed on their own economically.

From an estimated pre-commercial high of about 2.5 million and a low of 215,000 in 1911, the Pribilof fur seal population recovered to about 1.5 million in the 1940s and leveled off. The harvest in the 1940s to early 1950s averaged 66,000 annually. Pelagic sealing, restricted to Natives by the 1911 treaty, tapered off to insignificance by 1950. A renewed Fur Seal Convention in 1957 that included the Soviet Union and Japan retained a profit-sharing arrangement among member nations, including Japan. Japan had lost control of its Robben Island rookery during the war. The new treaty banned pelagic sealing and provided for ongoing research.

In the mid-1950s biologists considered the Pribilof seals to be overpopulated. They believed that by reducing the number of pups born, the rate of pup survival would be greater, thereby boosting the annual sustainable harvest to 65,000–95,000. Accordingly, they reversed an 85-year-old policy and, between 1956 and 1968, included 321,000 females in the kill. The program did not yield the expected result; the sustainable harvest level dropped to 36,000 by 1960. Speculation about the causes of the reduction included hookworm infestation, lessening of food supply by commercial fishing, and entanglement of the seals in discarded nets.

In 1973 the Department of Commerce, now in charge of Pribilof sealing, set aside St. George Island for long-term research. Opposition to seal slaughter by animal rights groups and the advent of synthetic furs contributed to a decline in the industry. Commercial harvest ended in 1984. A rising tourist industry based largely on fur seal viewing helped sustain the Pribilof economy. More important for economic sustenance, the federal government established a trust fund and built port facilities, roads, and other infrastructure, enabling the Pribilofs to operate as a service base for the Bering Sea fisheries.

In the late 20th Century only Pribilof Aleuts purposely harvested fur seals in Alaska. They took about 1,600 annually for subsistence purposes, not affecting the population. However, between 1974 and 1983 the herd shrank from 1.25 million to 877,000, resulting in a 1988 designation of the northern fur seal as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. One probable cause of the decline, the use of high seas driftnets by Taiwan and Japan, killed an estimated 5,200 seals in 1991. Other fishing gear contributed minimally to seal mortality. International pressure brought high seas driftnetting to an end after 1991. But industrial development on the Pribilofs appeared to be creating disturbances that lowered pup production at some rookeries. A precipitous
decline in the fur seal population after 1998 invited speculation and research about killer whale predation, loss of food to commercial fishing, global warming, or a combination of these factors.83

ELLIOTT’S LEGACY

One of the first American artists to work in Alaska, Elliott left a valuable record of Aleut life. But he is far better known for his work on the fur seals. Throughout most of the years from 1890 to 1926, he tirelessly lobbied Congress and otherwise publicized the seals’ cause. Often neglecting his family, he carried on his single-minded crusade. He objected to the harvest monopoly held by the Fouke Fur Company and lobbied for a 1926 Senate bill to open the market to competitive bidding. After the bill’s defeat he moved to Seattle to live with his son John and died three years later at age 80. Some members of Congress remarked that they had never seen such a persistent fighter for a cause.84

Elliott had made a last visit to the Pribilofs in 1913, during which he received word that the five-year killing moratorium he had fought for neared approval. Never satisfied, he persisted in his singular quest. Frederika Martin paid tribute in her book *Sea Bears*:

No posthumous honors have been paid him; the seals he saved, but his reputation, tarnished by the slanders of powerful foes, has still to be rescued. His deeds are permanently recorded in dozens of volumes of Congressional hearings. Few Americans will chance to open even one to chuckle at his barbed rejoinders, his searing caustic epithets, or be impressed by his masterly, insistent repetition of embarrassing facts and statistics. No one following his course through volume after volume of these records will fail to be convinced that had there been no Elliott, the fur seal of the North Pacific might today be an aquatic wraith, companion to its vanished southern relative and the Steller’s sea cow.85

Elliott, his friends, and some of his adversaries had pioneered Alaskan environmental politics and placed it on the national and world stages.

Elliott’s unique background and character helped make possible an environmental victory on a subject greatly removed from the experience of the average person before the age of electronic media. The issue peaked during the Progressive Era when the rapacious behavior of corporations and collusion of government incited strong resentment and suspicion in the body politic. Moreover, curbs on the sealing industry did not threaten the profits of the major natural resource industries of mining, logging, agriculture, or even fishing; nor did sealing benefit the average citizen. And unlike the wolf and buffalo, the fur seal could not disrupt the lives of ordinary people. Thanks primarily to Elliott,
the fur seal appeared an innocent, somewhat lovable creature worthy of protection from greedy and brutal exploiters.

To justify suppression of pelagic sealing, technically legal under international law, the United States needed to show evidence of the threat of fur seal extinction and present it as morally offensive. Through its scientists and Elliott and Hornaday, though the men fought among themselves, the effort succeeded. The morality and economics of natural resource use shifted the focus of the dispute from territorial rights to conservation. Also, the gains and losses from the sales of sealskins paled in comparison to the potential costs to the United States of conflict involving the other nations operating in the North Pacific—Russia, Japan, Great Britain, and Canada.

The fur seal controversy promoted the emergence of the national conservation movement. Paralleling the story of the buffalo and the less fortunate passenger pigeon, it helped turn public opinion against market hunting, curbed by the Lacey Act of 1900 and other federal and state laws. Elliott and Hornaday’s political campaign, one of the first and most prominent on behalf of wildlife, contained elements to be seen in many to come. Walt Disney, using 20th-Century technology to achieve what Elliott had attempted to do through words and paintings, sent photographers Al and Elma Milotte to the Pribilofs in 1946. The film *Seal Island* appeared in theaters without human actors. To war-weary audiences, an innocent and heartwarming drama of Nature came as a welcome change. The film won an Academy Award in 1948 and its success inspired other nature movies by Disney, laying a foundation of widespread public sentiment for nature preservation.

Far in advance of the modern environmental movement, the fur seal affair modeled several of the movement’s key values. Elliott insisted on and ultimately won government and corporate accountability. Management by government experts replaced favoritism toward exploitative commercial interests, and the experts themselves came under closer scrutiny. Through artwork, congressional testimony, and citizen groups, Elliott and Hornaday drew the public into the debate. They and their rivals employed scientific information, though largely in the form of field observation, as a crucial element. Writings and Elliott’s paintings of the seals engendered nonconsumptive uses of the seal by a public that would probably never see the creatures in the wild. Not least, international cooperation on seal conservation presaged the common use of treaties to manage natural resources in the post–World War II era.

Under American rule, officials pursued the goal of protecting the fur seal from commercial extinction. Management objectives moved from uncontrolled exploitation to utilitarian sustainability and somewhat beyond. Ecotourism and educational materials testified modestly to the seals’ nonconsumptive use value. But nature shows notwithstanding, the seals lacked the sea otters’ charismatic
image as cuddly, playful, and devoted parents. Managers treated the fur seal herd as a cash crop for the nation until profits fell off in the 1960s; later, the nation subsidized the operation for the benefit of the Aleuts. When commercial harvest stopped in the 1980s, the seals encountered new hazards in the forms of commercial fishing and climatic warming. Their future would depend on the quality of scientific research and the level of political commitment to preserve the ecological integrity of the North Pacific.