Returning to her home port of Cordova, Alaska, on April 28, 1976, the king crab boat *Master Carl* developed mechanical problems in the face of a fierce storm, a blow featuring waves more than thirty feet high. Water entered the vessel’s hull as she passed near Montague Island just outside of Prince William Sound, and at midnight the ship’s flooded engine died. Tossed by waves, the *Master Carl* rolled onto her side and her captain and crew members had to abandon her. After donning survival suits, they clambered into a life raft and, with great difficulty, cast off. Caught in three-storey-high waves, the raft overturned on several occasions, spilling the men out into the rampaging sea. Against the odds, they climbed back in, and eventually two of the crewmen made it to shore. The captain and another crew member died in the attempt. Once on shore, the two surviving men, exhausted and suffering from hypothermia, huddled together through a cold night. They were harassed by a grizzly bear, which they fended off by throwing rocks. Only after a horrific night were they rescued the next day by a coast guard helicopter.¹

The loss of the *Master Carl* was typical of accidents afflicting king crab vessels in Alaskan waters. In early 1983, the *Americus* and her sister ship, the *Altair*, went down in 80-knot winds, sinkings that cost the lives of thirteen men. Even earlier, in the winter of 1962–1963, thirteen king crab boats were lost, most with all hands, in storms whose winds exceeded 140 miles per hour.² Men and women were willing to endure extreme hardships in Alaska’s fisheries for the same reason that they did so in exploiting the state’s other natural resources: they wanted to get rich quick.³ Whether hunting sea otters, mining gold, fishing for salmon and king crabs, drilling for oil, cutting down forests, or boosting a burgeoning tourism industry, Alaskans—like Ameri-
cans on frontiers before them—sought personal enrichment and adventure.⁴ A national park service planner who had spent five years in Arctic Alaska observed in the mid-1970s that the state’s coat of arms should be a shield divided into quarters with each bearing one of four mottos: “Dig it up; chop it down; fish it out; shoot it.” Even those who failed to strike it rich in Alaskan ventures—and there were many—aspired to riches.⁵

Relatively little thought was given at first to the conservation of natural resources or to more general environmental matters. However, as development continued and resources seemed to be in danger of depletion, conservation matters, and sometimes environmental issues, were taken more seriously by Alaskan residents.⁶ By the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries there were stirrings of concern about the conservation of natural resources, especially wildlife. After World War II, that concern broadened and deepened to include land-use and water-management matters and quality-of-life issues.

This chapter examines conservation and environmental issues in Alaska since the Second World War; World War II in Alaska, as throughout so much of the Pacific, was a watershed in history. After surveying Alaska’s development through the 1960s, the chapter first analyzes efforts, only partly successful, to preserve fishing stocks in Alaskan waters, particularly those along
the Aleutian Islands and in the Bering Sea. The chapter looks next at controversies surrounding drilling for oil on the state’s continental shelf, especially its outer continental shelf. This development brought oil prospectors into conflict with fishermen, and how those disputes were resolved is a revealing story of resource management. The chapter closes by investigating joint efforts on the part of the American and Russian governments to create a Beringia Heritage International Park on both sides of the Bering Strait and what those attempts have meant for people already living in that region.

The developments dealt with in this chapter took place in what might be called “Island Alaska” and shared similarities with occurrences elsewhere in America’s Pacific possessions. Several major themes permeate this story. Once again, politics emerge as very important in determinants of resource allocation. In the political arena, businesspeople, environmentalists, politicians, and others worked out compromises on how to use and preserve Alaska’s lumber, fish, and minerals. Then, too, the rights of indigenous people, Alaskan Natives and Eskimos (Inuit), played important roles similar in some ways to those played by native Hawaiians and, as we shall see in a later chapter, by Chamorros on Guam. Finally, economic and social developments in Alaska passed through different stages of integration, disconnection, and re-integration with other parts of the Pacific.

Alaska’s Development

From the beginning, Euro-American explorers rightly described Alaska as immense. Russians called it “Bolshaya Zemlya,” the “Great Land.” Today’s state of Alaska embraces 591,000 square miles (378 million acres), an area one-fifth the size of the lower forty-eight states sweeping across four time zones. A map of Alaska superimposed on one of the lower forty-eight states shows it touching the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the Canadian and Mexican borders. Alaska is as diverse as its geography is large, with six regions having distinct topographies and climates. The state possesses 34,000 miles of seacoast, 50 percent more than the total of the lower forty-eight states combined. Two oceans and three seas wash Alaska’s shores.⁷

Russian fur traders and merchants moving east from Siberia and Kamchatka were the first non-natives to enter Alaska. Private individuals, they sought profits by trading the pelts of sea otters found in Alaskan waters for goods in China. The Russian adventurers established an extensive fur-trading empire dependent on the Aleuts as hunters. Stretching by the early 1800s
from the Aleutians through Alaska's panhandle and south to an outpost in northern California, that empire was beset by problems. Its great distance from Russia meant that needed supplies were often scarce; there were conflicts with native groups in southeastern Alaska; and there was growing competition with traders from the United States and European nations. Always lightly held—there were never more than about seven hundred Russians in Alaska—Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867.⁸

Russian work in Alaska set trends that Americans continued. Despite attempts to rein in the slaughter, the Russians and other westerners hunted sea otters to near extinction. Coming a bit later, most Americans also looked upon Alaska's natural resources as treasures inviting plunder. As historian Stephen Haycox has noted, Alaskans have generally been “insensitive to their impact on nature and landscape, regarding the land as infinitely renewable and its resources as inexhaustible, and theirs to appropriate for their own uses.” Some of that same insensitivity long governed relations with native peoples. Torn from their homes and overworked, Aleut Indians fell prey to diseases unintentionally introduced by Russians to which the Aleuts had no natural immunities. Aleut numbers dropped from 15,000–25,000 in precontact times to a scant 900 in 1848. As with Hawaiians and Chamorros, disease was the big killer of the Aleuts, just as it was for Native Americans across North America.⁹

Alaska long remained colonial in its economy. Most of the capital necessary to develop Alaska came from outside of the region, most recently in the case of the oil and lumber industries, earlier in mining and fishing.¹⁰ To the extent that people succeeded in developing Alaska's economy in the early days, they did so through their engagement in the Pacific economy. Sea otter pelts were traded in China, with food to support the Russian venture arriving from such diverse sources as Russia, the Hawaiian Islands, the Pacific Northwest, and California. For a while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Alaskans turned their backs a bit on greater Pacific connections, focusing on just the Pacific Coast of North America. However, after World War II salmon fishermen and king crabbers, along with most miners, lumbermen, and oilmen, returned to a full involvement in the Pacific economy. In these varied Pacific relationships, Alaskans remained dependent on outside regions for development funds, markets, and their general economic well-being, just as were residents in the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, and (for many years) the Seattle area. Alaskans' work was part and parcel of the economic integration of the Pacific stimulated by Americans.

Even the nature of later federal–state governmental relations during
American times was foreshadowed in the Russian period, for in both time periods the relationship between the metropole and the periphery was a love-hate one. Alaskans recognized that they needed the support of the federal government, but were most reluctant about acknowledging that necessity. Like Hawaiians and Guamanians, they resented what they regarded as outside federal interference in their affairs.¹¹ Americans were active in Alaskan developments even in Russian times, including Russian Alaska in their Pacific maritime frontier from about the 1820s. American ships carried New England goods to the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, where they were exchanged for furs, especially sea otter pelts. Later, American whalers hunted in Alaskan waters, periodically putting into the Hawaiian Islands to resupply. By the 1840s and 1850s, hundreds of American whalers wintered in Honolulu on O'ahu and Lahaina on Maui.¹²

Like many regions dependent on just a few resources, Alaska developed a boom-and-bust economy. Mining was the first major industry to go through that cycle. Hard-rock gold mining in southeastern Alaska flourished from the 1880s, with the mines and smelters paid for by outside capital and with most of the profits leaving Alaska. Copper mines operated in south-central Alaska by the Kennecott interests two decades later also depended heavily on outside capital and organization. However, it was the discovery of gold in Canada's Klondike in 1896 that boomed Alaska. In 1897–1898, 60,000–100,000 gold rushers left Seattle and San Francisco for the Klondike. By 1907, fifty new gold-mining camps had been established in Alaska. Alaska's non-native population rose from about 430 people in 1880 to roughly 30,000 in 1900. Conversely, the region's native population fell from 33,000 to 30,000 over the same decades.¹³ The mining boom quickly became something of a bust. Gold production peaked in 1906, and copper production began falling in the early 1920s. By 1930, only 4,800 Alaskans were working in mines. By 1920, Alaska's non-native population had fallen to 28,000, a figure only slightly higher than the 27,000 natives living in the region.¹⁴

The territory's fisheries proved more long-lived, but showed the same boom-and-bust characteristics. Moving their operations north from California and the Pacific Northwest, salmon companies set up their first canneries in Alaska during the 1870s and 1880s. In 1889, thirty-seven canneries packed 714,000 cases of salmon (a case was 48 net pounds). Capitalized at $4 million, they employed about 6,000 people. Most of the workers were brought in from outside Alaska for the summer and fall canning season, and few local residents found employment in the canneries. Nor, initially, did residents benefit much by catching fish for the canneries. Instead, the canneries relied
mainly on their own fish traps and nets set at the mouths of rivers up which the salmon swam to spawn. By 1910, the Alaskan salmon pack came to 2.5 million cases. About 6.7 million cases were packed in 1918, as the U.S. Army bought canned salmon for its troops. Output fell to fewer than 3 million cases in 1921, but recovered to more than 8 million cases in 1936, an all-time high.¹⁵

Efforts to regulate Alaska’s salmon industry were sporadic political footballs pitting the salmon canneries against local Alaskan fishermen and federal officials against territorial ones. As early as 1889, an inspector for the U.S. Fish Commission, worried that the fish traps were depleting Alaska’s salmon runs, recommended conservation measures. The packers disagreed on what to do and accomplished little. Instead, the federal government and the packers turned to artificial propagation in fish hatcheries, which, however, did little to help. Alarmed by failures at conservation, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover convinced President Warren Harding to establish a salmon-fishing reservation in southwestern Alaska in 1922. Local fishermen opposed this action as unfairly limiting their activities. Legislation following Harding’s executive order, the White Act of 1924, named after Representative Wallace H. White of Maine, who introduced it in the House, was ineffective. Its two most controversial sections—one prohibiting the use of fish traps, as desired by Alaskan residents, the other establishing more fishing reservations, as desired by the packers—were deleted before passage. The White Act did give the secretary of commerce the power to limit fishing in parts of Alaskan waters and allowed him to set the types of fishing gear that could be deployed, although not the amount, a crucial omission. The legislation also decreed that half of the salmon be allowed to swim upstream to spawn. Even this last requirement was only rarely enforced at the time, however.

Little more was accomplished over the next two decades. Significant in its own right—the industry employed more workers than any other industry in the territory during the 1920s and 1930s—the Alaskan salmon industry was important for precedents it set. The conflict between local and outside interests was replicated in many later industries, including the king crab industry. In addition, Congress’ actions in trying to conserve salmon greatly angered many Alaskans, contributing to their dislike of the federal government.¹⁶

At the time of World War II, Alaskans still lived a colonial existence, with their economy based on the extraction of minerals, fish, and furs. Nearly all of the capital came from outside. In the case of infrastructure improvements, such as the building of the Alaska Railroad, completed from Seward to Fair-
banks in 1923, the source was the federal government. In the case of private businesses, funds came from across the United States. In the instance of the salmon industry, the sources lay in Pacific Coast companies. Not surprisingly, most of the business profits left Alaska, repatriated to corporate offices elsewhere. The economy of Alaska had become less of a Pacific economy by about 1910. Alaskans still had ties with America’s Pacific Coast, but they temporarily turned away from Asia and Hawai‘i. Only later were those connections fully reestablished.¹⁷

Developments during World War II and the Cold War partially changed Alaska, but earlier precedents remained significant. Billions of federal government dollars flowed into Alaska, linking the region closely to the rest of the United States. The achievement of statehood further boosted Alaska in the eyes of many. Even so, sustained economic growth was, as before, elusive. As one prominent Alaskan historian explained in 1967, the state’s progress depended on “minerals, oil, coal, timber, and furs,” supplemented by “high-grade fish.” More than elsewhere in western states, Alaskans acted out the paradox of the centrality of the state and the conviction of personal responsibility and autonomy.¹⁸

In Alaska, World War II revolved around Japan’s attack on the Aleutian Islands in 1942, including the taking of the islands of Attu and Kiska, and the United States’ successful counterattack to recapture the islands a year later. American bombers also flew 1,500 sorties from bases in the Aleutians against Japanese positions in the Kurile Islands, and nearly half of the lend-lease materials reaching Russia was carried in ships traveling the northern circle route, which went through the Aleutians. As elsewhere in the Pacific, the war greatly increased the American presence in Alaska. At its peak in 1943, the American military stationed 152,000 troops there (as late as 1939 only 524 military personnel had been in the territory). The war brought infrastructure improvements, many of which were later put to commercial use. These included building the first all-weather highway connecting Alaska to the lower forty-eight states, the Alaska/Canadian (ALCAN) highway, making improvements to harbors, and constructing numerous air bases.¹⁹

Not all benefited from wartime developments. As elsewhere in the Pacific, economic growth was uneven. Aleut Indians, in particular, were hurt, as they were evacuated by the American military from their settlements on the Pribilof and the Aleutian Islands. Some of their villages were razed to prevent Japanese use of their buildings. Many Aleuts spent the war in unsanitary relocation camps in southwestern Alaska. Still others were taken prisoner by the Japanese on Attu. Placed in an internment camp on Hokkaido,
40 percent died. The survivors found that they could not return to Attu at the close of the conflict, for the island was littered with war debris. They joined other Aleuts in a resettlement colony on Atka Island. Like Chamorros on Guam, Aleuts were innocent victims of the Pacific conflict. Only in the 1980s and later did Aleuts receive some compensation for their wartime losses.²⁰

The Cold War extended changes that had begun in World War II. After briefly slumping at the close of World War II, military construction in Alaska averaged about $250 million per year between 1949 and 1954. Although military expenditures declined in real terms after the mid-1950s, they remained important, amounting to $932 million in 1980. Similarly, the number of military personnel, after falling to 19,000 in 1949, rose to 50,000 in 1952, before dropping to 30,000 in 1970. Alaska's population rose from 73,000 in 1940 to 129,000 in 1950 and then soared to 226,000 in 1960. The nature of that population changed. As late as 1940, natives comprised 44 percent of Alaska's population, but by 1960 they made up only 19 percent of it.²¹

The Cold War threatened to alter Alaska through the uses of nuclear and thermonuclear energy. In 1957, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) approved Operation Plowshare as part of an effort to find nonmilitary uses for nuclear explosives. A year later, the AEC devised Project Chariot as part of Operation Plowshare. Project Chariot was to use hydrogen bombs to blast out a harbor near Point Hope on Alaska's northwest coast at the northern reaches of the Bering Strait. A considerably scaled-down plan using nuclear bombs was presented to Alaskans in early 1959, and a still more modest scheme was laid out in 1960. Even the smaller 1960 plan would have used bombs having an explosive power over twenty times that of the blast that had destroyed Hiroshima. To be exploded underground, the bombs would allow the AEC to experiment with nuclear weapons as a possible tool for building canals and harbors. With military spending in Alaska winding down a bit, all of Alaska's chambers of commerce and most of the territory's political leaders initially supported Project Chariot.²²

Little thought was given to the Eskimos eking out a subsistence existence in the area, but by their actions the Eskimos changed that situation. Very worried by reports of harm to Pacific Islanders caused by nuclear tests, they publicized possible negative outcomes of the blasts. They also were alarmed by the fact that the federal government would reserve a considerable amount of land for Project Chariot, making it difficult for them to acquire lands to which they were entitled. In late 1959, the Point Hope village council voted unanimously against Project Chariot and turned to other Alaskan Natives for
support. At a meeting at Point Barrow in 1961, Eskimos and Alaskan Natives united in opposition to Project Chariot. In 1964, they held their first statewide conference, resulting in the establishment of the Alaskan Federation of Natives two years later. This organization was an important factor in later environmental and Alaskan Native issues. In their opposition, Alaskan Natives were joined by a pioneering Alaskan environmental organization, the Alaska Conservation Society, and by national groups such as the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club. When environmental studies revealed that proposed blasts might harm birds and caribou upon which the Eskimos relied for food, and that the explosions might also release unacceptable amounts of radioactivity into the atmosphere, the AEC backed off from Project Chariot and, despite continued support for the project from many of Alaska’s business and political leaders, abandoned it.23

Opponents were less successful in halting nuclear and thermonuclear weapons tests on the Aleutian Island of Amchitka. The AEC and the Department of Defense chose the uninhabited island as the site for a series of above-ground and below-ground tests, but the adherence of the United States to an international treaty prohibiting atmospheric tests in 1963 meant that explosions would be underground. Global developments thus intruded into the Pacific. Opposition to the first test in 1965 was muted, as Cold War concerns ruled the day. Plans for additional tests generated more controversy. Scientists and environmentalists pointed out that Amchitka lay near a geologic fault line and that nuclear testing might set off earthquakes and tidal waves. For those reasons, too, the governments of Japan and Canada opposed the tests. Environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, joined Alaskan Native bodies to try unsuccessfully to block the tests through court appeals, as did the Aleut League in a suit of its own. The tests went ahead in 1969 and 1971. Fortunately, although Amchitka and its wildlife were damaged, no seismic activity occurred. One result later to have significance throughout the Pacific and the world was the formation of the environmental group Greenpeace. Set up initially to halt the explosions, the group adopted its name in 1972.²⁴

With World War II and the Cold War drawing more people into their territory, Alaskans voiced successful calls for statehood. In 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the proclamation admitting Alaska as the forty-ninth state in the Union. Statehood brought important changes to the management of natural resources. The new state’s constitution urged governmental officials to “encourage the settlement of its land and development of its resources by making them available for maximum use consistent with
the public interest.” Federal officials agreed to give the state 103 million acres from the public domain, 28 percent of Alaska’s area, with state officials to select the land over twenty-five years. The state also gained control over Alaska’s continental shelf and the waters above it for a distance of three miles out to sea. To administer hunting and fishing, the state government created an Alaskan Board of Fish and Game. One of the board’s first jobs was to enforce a ban on fish traps, hated by independent Alaskan salmon fishermen as a symbol of outside interests. The traps had been provisionally outlawed by a 1956 ordinance and were permanently banned three years later.²⁵

However, even after statehood the federal government remained very important in Alaska. Of the 110,600 working Alaskans in 1971, some 17,300 were employees of the federal government. All of the public domain not selected by the state and all of the waters above the continental shelf more than three miles from shore remained under federal control. The federal government extended its authority over fishing activities beyond the three-mile zone up to six miles out to sea in 1958, and much farther out in the 1960s and 1970s.

Statehood did not automatically bring boom times to Alaskans. The search for stable economic growth continued. The salmon industry continued a decline begun in the 1940s. Not even the imposition of limited-entry fishing, which used a system of permits to regulate the amount of fishing gear in use, helped much. Beset by problems of its own making and by the overfishing of salmon stocks on the high seas, the Alaskan salmon industry became less important to the Alaskan economy than it had been in prewar times. After peaking at more than 8 million cases in 1936, the Alaskan salmon pack plummeted to fewer than 2 million cases by 1960 and rebounded to only 3 million cases a decade later. Not even a later recovery in salmon fishing fully revived the fortunes of fishermen, as prices dropped. Military spending in Alaska peaked in the mid-1950s and then fell in real terms. Nor did mining, fur trapping, or farming offer much hope for economic growth.²⁶

There were some bright spots. One was the lumber industry. Alaska’s first large pulp mill opened in Ketchikan in 1954, and five years later a second mill, owned by a Japanese firm, began operations in Sitka. Both were supplied with logs from the nearby Tongass National Forest. By 1967, Alaska produced $78 million worth of wood products. Then, too, the development of new fisheries such as king crabs partially offset the decline in the salmon industry. By 1965, the wholesale value of Alaska’s fish catch came to $167 million. Tourism, which became one of Alaska’s key industries in later years, was in its infancy. So was the state’s oil industry. By 1965, five oil and gas
fields had been developed in Alaska, and the state had taken in $122 million in payments from oil companies.²⁷

Despite the promise of expansion in fisheries, lumber, tourism, and oil, Alaskan economist George W. Rogers was correct when he stated in 1967 that there was an “urgency for understanding” economic development matters that was “greater in Alaska than in the nation as a whole.” In fact, he continued, “Every Alaskan is aware of the need for economic development if our state is to survive and prosper as a viable political entity.” He was heartened that “The political leaders and candidates of both parties campaign under the banner of economic development.”²⁸ Yet matters were more complex than Rogers suggested. While most Alaskans continued to favor putting their state’s natural resources to use with little thought for the future, some were beginning to question this approach—as the defeat of Project Chariot suggested. Developments in king crab fisheries along the Aleutian Islands and in the Bering Sea raised important questions about resource usage and conservation over the next four decades.

**Conservation in Alaska’s King Crab Industry**

As fishery expert Terry Johnson explained in 2003, “Commercial fishing in Alaska is a diverse, colorful, tough, dangerous, thriving and—with skill and luck—lucrative enterprise.” Alaska’s varied fisheries accounted for about half of the United States’ seafood harvest, with a dockside value of about $1.3 billion. “Not only does the Alaska seafood harvest outrank in quantity and the value of the harvest of the rest of the United States’ combined,” Johnson observed, “this bounty outranks the individual harvests of Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and Canada.” Alaska’s fisheries products industry employed about 70,000 workers. Crabs composed about a quarter of the value of Alaska’s fishery products, with most of the crabs taken along the Aleutian Islands and in the Bering Sea.²⁹

The Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea comprise western and southwestern Alaska. Extending almost 1,500 miles west from the Alaskan Peninsula toward Russia and Japan, the Aleutian Islands are mainly volcanic in origin. They have vegetation described by scientists as consisting of “alpine heath meadows and lichen communities, with moist tundra at some lower elevation sites.” There are few trees. The islands and the Bering Sea just to their north endure weather that is foggy, rainy, and stormy. However, weather on the whole is less severe than that of the interior of Alaska. Temperatures
fall below 0°F only occasionally in the winter and rarely rise above 55°F in the summer. Covering an area as large as the United States west of the Mississippi, the Bering Sea benefits from climactic conditions, currents, and geographical features that make it one of the most productive fishing grounds in the world. Much of the sea is shallow. Its continental shelf to a depth of 300 feet covers 400,000 square miles, and a section of the shelf the size of California lies fewer than fifty feet under the surface.³⁰

It was in the coastal waters of Alaska, especially those around the Aleutian Islands and in the Bering Sea, that king crabs were found.³¹ Largely unexploited by Americans before World War II, king crabs were heavily fished after the war. No one was more active in fishing these waters for king crabs than Lowell Wakefield. As overfishing developed by the 1960s, Wakefield and others involved in the industry strove to ensure their future through conservation measures. The resolution of conflicts over the utilization of the Alaskan king crab fishery—disputes between Alaskan fishermen and fishing companies headquartered outside of the state and contests pitting American, Japanese, and Soviet fishermen against each other—illustrated how complex conservation issues had become.

Lowell Wakefield pioneered the development of the Alaskan king crab industry through the formation of Wakefield Seafood. Wakefield came from a family with an extensive background in Alaska’s salmon and herring fisheries.

Lowell Wakefield (left) with two other founders of Wakefield Seafood in the Aleutian Islands in the 1950s. (Author’s collection)
He became acquainted with king crabs through exploratory efforts made by the federal government in the 1940s. Searching for new sources of protein for the American public and the armed forces during World War II, the government sponsored fishing expeditions along the Alaskan coast. These ventures suggested that king crabs could become a significant fishery. Surveys were conducted in front of a Wakefield cannery and revealed a large number of crabs in the water. Wakefield's knowledge of the surveys and his realization that Alaska's herring and salmon industries were in decline led him to abandon his family's business and set up his own company.³²

Wakefield spearheaded the formation of his new enterprise under the laws of the state of Washington in 1945. Breaking with past experience, he assigned a single ship to catch, process, and freeze king crabs and bottom fish. Previous operations had employed small ships to catch crabs and fish, which they then transferred to shore plants or large mother ships for processing and canning. Processing on board the catching vessel, a specially built ship named the Deep Sea, was favored by Wakefield as highly efficient. He expected to reduce costs greatly by decreasing spoilage and by integrating previously separated stages of fish processing into one continuous-flow operation. Freezing, which came into common use for food processing in America in the 1930s and 1940s, appealed to him as an ultramodern method and as a way to differentiate his crab from the canned crab of competitors. After processing, the crab and fish would be stored on board the ship in refrigerated holds until they could be packaged and sent to market.³³

Getting started proved difficult. Unable to secure financing for his speculative venture from commercial banks, Wakefield turned to the federal government. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), a federal agency set up to help businesses during the Great Depression, agreed in 1946 to grant a substantial loan to Wakefield Seafood. Family and business ties brought in additional needed funds. The founders and investors were young men in their twenties and thirties on the make. World War II had disrupted their lives, and they found themselves at loose ends at the conclusion of the conflict. All were extremely optimistic, expecting that their new company would be returning hefty profits within two or three years of starting operations. Motivated by more than money, they were looking for adventure in setting up their new business.³⁴ The expected quick profits did not materialize, for the company encountered difficulties in every stage of its operations. The problems nearly brought Wakefield Seafood to its knees. Only a timely loan from Wakefield's father and a charter of the Deep Sea for work for the federal government saved the firm from bankruptcy in 1948.³⁵
Wakefield Seafood emerged as a profitable enterprise in the mid-1950s. Several related elements accounted for that success. The company’s officers eagerly embraced technological advances, many of them spin-offs from World War II. Their ship was the first to use radar, sonar, and loran (a navigational aid) in fishing. The captain of a minesweeper in the Aleutian Islands for several years during World War II, the skipper of the Deep Sea was well versed in advanced nautical technologies. Then, too, those starting the company were willing to endure hard times. When unable to attract fishing and processing crews, the owner-managers manned the nets and processing lines themselves. Moreover, the personal ties that had been important in starting Wakefield Seafood helped account for the firm’s survival. Friendships between the founders of the company and the heads of the Seattle branch of the RFC, Seattle’s commercial banks, and the suppliers of fishing gear secured extensions on loans. Though internal factors help to explain the success of Wakefield Seafood, so do external elements. As on many western American frontiers and throughout America’s Pacific possessions, the federal government was significant in many ways in the development of Alaska’s king crab
frontier, from financing the initial fishing surveys to the provision of the RFC loan.³⁶

In developing its operations, Wakefield Seafood was one of a handful of fishing ventures to employ Aleut Indians at that time. Most of the Deep Sea’s processing crew was composed of Aleut natives from Akutan Village just northeast of Dutch Harbor. Both humanitarian and practical considerations led Lowell Wakefield to hire them. Wakefield’s background was important. He had done graduate work at Columbia University in anthropology, studying with the famed Franz Boas. After finishing there, he worked for the International Labor Defense. He became involved in the Harlan County, Kentucky, coal disputes—“Bloody Harlan”—and in the Labor Defense’s southern organizing drive before returning to Alaska. He hoped the king crab industry would provide jobs for Aleuts, who had few employment prospects. Then, too, he imagined that employing locals might burnish his firm’s luster with Alaskans at a time when some were beginning to see the company as a predatory outside interest. All was not sweet harmony, however. After serving on board the Deep Sea for a month or more, non-native deck crew members cast aside inhibitions when they received shore leaves. They drank to excess and caroused. They brought liquor into native villages and cohabited with native women, acts about which Aleut village chiefs bitterly complained.³⁷

No sooner had Wakefield Seafood escaped from near-bankruptcy than it expanded its operations dramatically. Relying increasingly on independent fishermen to catch crabs, the firm built shore plants in the Aleutians to process and freeze the crabs. Wakefield Seafood’s success attracted competition. In 1950, the company put up 70 percent of the American king crab pack, but by 1966 it accounted for only 18 percent. Nor was competition confined to American firms, as Japanese and Soviet ventures reentered Alaskan waters. In 1959, American companies accounted for two-thirds of the king crabs caught in the Bering Sea and from waters above Alaska’s continental shelf, but in 1962 the share of American firms had dropped to just over half. With more ships placing more fishing gear in the water, Alaska’s king crab catch soared from 23,000 pounds in 1946, to 1.5 million pounds in 1950, to 29 million pounds in 1960, and to 160 million pounds in 1966, a high point. The catch crashed to just 60 million pounds in 1969 and to only 50 million pounds in 1974.³⁸

To deal with their problems, especially the decline in the crab catch, fishermen turned to state and federal governments, and conservation measures often became tools for economic competition, just as had occurred
earlier in the salmon industry. Of most immediate concern in the 1950s were regulations governing the catching of crabs within Alaska's three-mile limit. Most of the initial fishing regulations sought to mediate fishing-gear conflicts. Wakefield Seafood's ships were mainly trawlers, which dragged nets across the ocean bottom scooping up everything in their paths. By way of contrast, most of the smaller boats manned by independent Alaskan fishermen employed crab pots. Like very large lobster pots, they were lowered to the ocean floor. Once crabs crawled into the baited pots, they could not get out. Raised to the surface, the pots were emptied on board the boats, which then delivered crabs alive to the nearest processing plant. As early as the mid-1950s, clashes occurred in Cook Inlet, especially Kachemak Bay, with local fishermen claiming that the trawls operated by the ships of Wakefield Seafood were destroying prime fishing grounds and their pots. Federal and territorial authorities were able to work out compromises regulating when and where different types of gear could be employed.³⁹

When Alaska gained statehood, control over near-shore fishing was transferred to state agencies. Pushed by Kodiak fishermen, the state took a number of actions that hurt the larger non-Alaskan firms. The state banned trawling operations completely in 1961 and severely limited the movement of ships from one fishing area to another. As local crab shortages began to show up in some fishing areas, state agencies sought to limit the number of crab pots a boat could carry. This effort proved ineffective as a conservation measure, for it placed no restrictions on the number of boats entering the fisheries. The state then moved in the direction of limited-entry fishing, as desired by Lowell Wakefield and executives of other large companies. Limited-entry fishing restricted the number of boats that could fish for crabs, usually by granting licenses only to boats already engaged in the fishery.⁴⁰

However, little was achieved until after the crash in the crab catch in the late 1960s, for the smaller, local companies viewed limited-entry fishing as an infringement on their economic rights. In the 1970s, the state established a quota system by dividing Alaska's king crab grounds into six areas, setting a maximum allowable catch (MAC) for each and closing the grounds to fishing each season once the MACs were reached. This system seemed to work. By 1976, the crab catch was back up to 106 million pounds, and in the late 1970s it averaged 180 million pounds per year.⁴¹

The state scheme was helped by changes in national and international fishing regulations. Even as they fought each other over the regulation of near-shore fishing, Alaska's king crabbers united in opposition to Soviet and Japanese fishermen. Clashes first occurred over the types of gear to be
used. The Japanese employed stationary tangle nets across large reaches of the ocean, much to the annoyance of American fishermen trying to move through the same fishing grounds with trawls. Then, too, American fishermen wanted their Japanese counterparts to agree not to fish for crabs east of 175 degrees west longitude, a line that would exclude them from much of the Bering Sea. The Japanese had agreed to such a restriction with regard to salmon and halibut. Led by Lowell Wakefield, American crabbers took their concerns to the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission (INPFC). Set up in 1952 with the United States, Japan, and Canada as signatories, the INPFC was charged with studying and regulating fisheries resources in the North Pacific. Arguing that the king crab fishery was not fully developed, the Japanese refused to accept limitations on their high-seas crab fishing in the 1950s. International conflict flared up anew in the early 1960s, when large Soviet crab fleets, some with as many as two hundred vessels, entered Alaska’s offshore waters. Gear conflicts multiplied, and local shortages of crabs became common.⁴²

Actions by the United Nations helped resolve matters, with consequences that extended far beyond the North Pacific. In 1958 and 1960, the UN sponsored Law of the Sea Conferences. Of greatest importance for American king crabbers, the conferences adopted a convention giving coastal nations almost exclusive control over the exploitation of their continental shelves—specifically over oil, minerals, and some fish (sedentary creatures on the bottom) found on or under them to a depth of 200 meters.⁴³ Backed by many third-world nations but initially opposed by the United States, whose leaders were concerned about global access for its fishermen and about navigation rights for its commercial and military vessels, this convention had a major impact on king crabbing. King crabs were deemed to be sedentary, for they crawl but do not swim. Thus, the crabs were judged to be attached to the continental shelf. Consequently, this convention would place crabs in the mostly shallow waters of the Bering Sea and the Aleutian Islands in American hands. By 1963, enough countries—including the United States, which had reversed its earlier position, and the Soviet Union, but not Japan—had ratified the convention to put it into effect.⁴⁴ In 1964, Congress gave the convention bite by passing legislation confirming the United States’ ownership of creatures on the nation’s continental shelf, over vehement protests from Japan. Further talks with Japanese and Soviet representatives in 1964 and 1965 led to their reluctant acceptance of the continental shelf convention and restrictions in their fishing for king crabs.⁴⁵

Additional international agreements helped the American king crab in-
dustry. Here global matters merged with Pacific ones. What fisheries expert Terry Johnson has recently called “the most profound change in the world’s commercial ocean fisheries” occurred with the adoption of 200-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZs) by a growing number of nations in the 1970s. After first opposing the concept, the United States proclaimed such a zone in 1976 with the passage by Congress of the Federal Fishery Conservation and Management Act (reenacted, with some changes, in 1996). This legislation extended the federal government’s control over fishing 200 miles out to sea from American shores, regardless of ocean depths. Eight regional management councils set Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for different types of fish in their areas. Foreign vessels could fish within the 200-mile zone only if American ships did not take all of the TACs. Lowell Wakefield acted as an industry representative at UN Law of the Sea Conferences in 1974–1976, at which many of the concepts embodied in the 200-mile EEZs were discussed.⁴⁶

Another UN Law of the Sea Conference in 1982 resulted in global recognition of 200-mile EEZs.⁴⁷ Objecting to some of the details set by the conference governing the management of the EEZs, the United States did not sign this convention, but did insist on its 200-mile economic exclusionary zone. The 1982 convention was implemented without American adherence in 1994. By then some 60 nations had signed it, 145 nations by 2003. Many Pacific Island nations declared 200-mile EEZs, and by the 1990s some were beginning to reap substantial benefits from them, as they leased fishing and mineral rights to people from other countries.⁴⁸

Not all actions represented progress toward conservation, however. A UN Law of the Sea Conference in 1993 failed to regulate fishing on the high seas beyond the 200-mile limit. This meeting was called the UN Conference on Straddling Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. A follow-up meeting in 1995 gave rights to manage such fish to regional fishery organizations, but it gave those organizations no right to exclude anyone from fishing and gave the bodies no enforcement powers. The 1993–1995 conferences were toothless in their outcomes.⁴⁹

None of these agreements ensured that global or regional fishery resources would be used in a sustainable manner, and many world fisheries, including some in the Pacific, were overfished. Too often nations controlling the 200-mile EEZs permitted more fishing than fish stocks could sustain, and beyond the 200-mile limits just about anything went. New England’s cod fishery, which in the mid-1970s accounted for 23 percent of the entire global fish catch, crashed a few years later and has not recovered.⁵⁰ One careful in-
vestigator observed in 1998, “After a steady rise from twenty million tons per year just after World War II, the production capacity of the ocean peaked at 90 million tons in 1988 and then flattened out. The catch has grown no further despite the fact that the world’s fishing nations are pumping $230 billion a year into fleets to produce seafood worth about $175 billion.”

By the 1990s, the world’s fisheries were in a state of crisis. As early as 1992, U.S. News & World Report carried a lengthy article on “the rape of the oceans,” exposing to the general public what was already well known by fishing-industry members. Three years later, the Economist reported that navies around the globe were gearing up to defend fishing rights. An article in the same journal in 2002 observed, “The world’s fish catch may be much smaller than previously thought.” In 2003, the Economist wondered if it was “the ocean’s eleventh hour” for fishing. There were valid reasons for concern. According to the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, the global fish catch of 2000 was only half that of fifty years before, despite a tripling of the world’s fishing effort. In June 2005, a thousand scientists signed a letter asking the UN to declare a moratorium on industrial fishing techniques, which they suspected were sweeping the high seas clean of fish. The letter was submitted to the UN Law of the Sea Conference in Costa Rica.

Alaskan fisheries experienced roller-coaster rides in the 1980s and 1990s. There was tremendous optimism that the proclamation of a 200-mile EEZ there would aid the fisheries. Fortune Magazine exuded faith in 1979 that “opportunities in the northern Pacific region appear almost boundless.” And, indeed, the Alaskan king crab catch did reach new heights in the late 1970s. But then it crashed in the early 1980s, falling by 90 percent in 1981 alone. The catch recovered somewhat later in the 1980s, only to collapse again in the mid-1990s. No one fully understood the dynamics of the king crab population as the twenty-first century opened, but research showed that developments in different fisheries were interrelated and suggested that a seemingly small change in climate might have “cascaded” in its effects to produce large changes in them.

A possible scenario went as follows. There was a rise in the temperature of Alaskan waters amounting to 2°C in 1977. The warmer water caused plankton to disappear. Tiny copepod and krill, which feed on plankton, soon also disappeared. Shrimp and crab, deprived of their food, nearly vanished—hence the king crab crash in the early 1980s. Nor were they the only species affected. Lacking food, Steller sea lions declined in numbers. There were about 300,000 sea lions in Alaskan waters in the 1960s, but only 60,000 by
the 1990s; and in 1997 the Steller sea lion was declared an endangered species. Killer whales, which had fed mainly on sea lions, turned instead to sea otters. In the 1980s, there were about 100,000 sea otters living along the Aleutian chain, but by 2000 just 6,000 remained.⁵⁵

As a result of their continuing problems, many in the king crab industry had in the early 2000s come to favor the establishment of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQ), also called Individual Fishery Quotas (IFQ), for fishermen going after crabs. Successful as a conservation measure in fisheries in Iceland, New Zealand, and some other nations, ITQs gave fishermen property interests in their fishery resources, a nearly assured percentage of the TACs. The ITQs thus placed fisheries on sustainable bases.⁵⁶ Successful in the Alaska halibut fishery, ITQs were extended to the state’s snow and king crab fisheries as well, even to the extent of giving some ITQs to processors who received delivery of catches.⁵⁷

Not all species suffered. Salmon, which adjusted better to the warmer water than did king crabs, exploded in numbers. Recovering from their low points in the 1950s and 1960s, salmon catches rose in later decades, again for reasons not completely understood. American fishermen, protected from foreign competition by the 200-mile EEZ, swarmed into Bristol Bay in the Bering Sea and other Alaskan waters. They often entered into joint-venture agreements with Soviet, Japanese, and Korean companies. Americans caught the salmon (and halibut and pollack), which they then sold to factory ships owned by foreigners for processing. By the mid-1990s, the catch was too large. The number of salmon landed in Alaska rose from 22 million in the mid-1970s to 217 million two decades later. In 1996, the Wall Street Journal reported that “Alaska is awash in salmon.” Record Alaskan catches, along with the development of fish farming for salmon in some nations, glutted world markets. Prices plummeted, leading Alaskan officials to conclude, once again, that their state’s salmon industry was on the ropes.⁵⁸ Their very success also brought fishermen into conflict with Alaska’s oil prospectors, setting the stage for additional conservation controversies.

Fish and Oil

Although drillers had discovered oil and gas in Alaska earlier, it was Atlantic Richfield’s announcement in 1968 that its roughnecks had hit paying quantities of oil at Prudhoe Bay on Alaska’s North Slope that set off the state’s oil boom. The discovery turned out to be mammoth, the largest ever found in
North America and the twelfth largest in the world, ten billion barrels of recoverable oil. (By way of comparison, an earlier gigantic field, the East Texas Field, had contained about two billion barrels of petroleum.)\(^5^9\) There were considerable technical challenges in developing the Prudhoe Bay field: how to drill in the frozen arctic and how to transport the crude oil to market. Equally daunting were political challenges, especially how to deal with land claims by Alaskan Natives. Once these matters were addressed, the success of the oil companies on the North Slope led the firms to look intensively for petroleum throughout Alaska, including the state's continental shelf. This quest brought oilmen into conflict with fishermen.

The state of Alaska sold oil-drilling leases on 179 tracts of North Slope land to several consortia of oil companies in the fall of 1969 for a whopping $900 million. All of the previous twenty-two oil leases had brought in less than $100 million to the state's coffers. Alaskans immediately had visions of what the oil bonanza could finance: schools, hospitals, community centers, roads, and scholarships—the list seemed endless. Technical problems, while formidable, could, most believed, be overcome. A long-distance pipeline, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS), would carry the oil south to a terminal at Valdez, a warm-water port not far from Anchorage. However, long-standing land claims put forward by Alaskan Natives for some of the land that the pipeline had to cross halted construction of TAPS. Claims also called into question the matter of future leases for oil exploration and production. Until the claims were settled, no development could occur.\(^6^0\)

What followed was a scramble to craft congressional legislation to deal with and extinguish native claims. Many parties needed to be satisfied: Alaskan Natives, federal and state government officials, oil-company executives, Alaskan businessmen and workers, and environmentalists. Historian Peter Coates, who prepared a comprehensive account of North Slope oil development, observed, “The pipeline proposal spawned a debate commensurate to the size of the project . . . the most passionately fought conservation battle in American history since the controversy (1908–1913) over the city of San Francisco’s proposal to dam Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park to provide itself with a water supply from the Sierra Nevada.”\(^6^1\) For three years, proposals were bandied about Congress, until the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. ANCSA gave Alaskan Natives title to 40 million acres of their state’s public domain, provided them with $963 million in compensation for the settlement of all land claims, and established twelve regional corporations owned by Alaskan Natives to administer this settlement.\(^6^2\) ANCSA also called for an additional 80 million
acres of Alaska’s public domain to be set aside for public purposes. This last provision led to renewed debate among environmentalists, business leaders, and others inside and outside of Alaska for nearly a decade, until issues were resolved with a second major piece of congressional legislation, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. ANILCA set aside 104 million acres of Alaska’s public domain for national parks, wildlife refuges, national monuments, conservation areas, and wild and scenic rivers.⁶³

With native land claims addressed and with land issues in general settled, pipeline construction could begin. Authorized by Congress in 1974, TAPS was quickly built, and oil began flowing in 1977.⁶⁴ By 1980, oil revenues accounted for 90 percent of the state of Alaska’s income, and a decade later still comprised around 80 percent of state revenues. The success of drilling on the North Slope led to a surge in interest in oil exploration elsewhere, including possible underwater reserves in the state’s continental shelf. Much of that interest focused on drilling in the continental shelf north of Prudhoe Bay, but many other regions or, as they were called in the oil industry, “basins,” attracted notice.

The same principles that regulated Alaskan fisheries governed oil exploration and production on Alaska’s continental shelf, but specific laws regulated the actual granting of oil and gas leases. State governments regulated leasing and drilling on the continental shelf three miles out to sea, with the federal government doing the same at distances beyond the three-mile limit. Congressional legislation governed leasing and drilling by companies beyond the three-mile limit, and those terms were often followed by state governments setting terms for near-shore leases. Under the terms of the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act of 1953, the Department of the Interior sold leases on the basis of a cash-bonus bid plus an annual royalty on production fixed at one-sixth of the value of that production. Twenty percent of the bonus bid had to accompany the bid, with the remaining 80 percent paid, along with the first year’s royalty, when the lease was assigned. Oil companies were given five years to begin developing leases, or forfeit the leases. If oil was found, leases were generally extended for as long as oil (and/or gas) was produced.⁶⁵

Leasing laws changed in 1978, when Congress passed the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act to amend the bonus-bid system required in the 1953 legislation. The 1978 law allowed the Department of Interior more flexibility in structuring leases. Pushed by environmentalists in the wake of a major oil spill in California’s Santa Barbara Channel and passed over the protests of
most oil companies, this law stressed the need for “orderly” and “balanced” oil
development, with more protection for marine and coastal environments. At
the same time, the Alaska Legislature enacted a similar law designed to give
state officials more leeway in arranging near-shore leases and increasing its
revenues from those leases, an action again taken over the protests of oil com-
panies. The state and federal laws specified eight possible bidding systems
and tightened government regulatory controls over the oil companies.⁶⁶

Under this mélange of laws, development of oil and gas on America’s
continental shelf proceeded. The earliest offshore production occurred just
off the coast of California in 1896. A major oil field was developed in the
Gulf of Mexico in 1938 and another one there in 1947. By 1976, some 12,605
wells in federal waters had produced 3.6 billion barrels of oil and 24 trillion
cubic feet of gas.⁶⁷ In Alaska, the continental shelf beyond the huge North
Slope strikes attracted the most attention from both oil company executives
and governmental officials during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁸ It was under the
waters of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas that the greatest quantities of off-
shore oil and natural gas were expected to be found.⁶⁹ Even so, considerable
notice went to continental shelf regions in south-central Alaska, the Aleu-
tian Islands, and parts of the Bering Sea. Cook Inlet, the Kodiak Basin, and
the North Aleutian Shelf, along with a number of basins in the Bering Sea
seemed promising.⁷⁰ In fact, a few were already being developed by oil com-
panies, and these actions brought them into conflict with well-established
fisheries businesses.

Offshore oil leasing and drilling began early in Cook Inlet. Between 1959
and 1974, the state leased 1.9 million acres there, and the Cook Inlet Basin
had yielded 700 million barrels of oil and 743 billion cubic feet of natural
gas by 1976. Already in the 1960s, offshore wells and wells on the adjacent
Kenai Peninsula were pumping $50,000 per day in taxes and royalties into
the state’s coffers. Small oil spills occurred as a result of this activity. In the
decade after 1965, some 223 “incidents” dispersed 10,011 barrels of oil onto
the inlet’s water. Although some environmentalists had their doubts, most
Alaskans accepted the spillage as a small price to pay for what they viewed
as economic progress.⁷¹

Despite the development of offshore oil production there, Cook Inlet
remained a very productive fishing area. Cook Inlet, and especially its
Kachemak Bay, it will be recalled, had been the scene of many fishing-gear
conflicts in the 1950s. By the mid-1970s, Cook Inlet was producing annual
salmon catches totaling 4,600 metric tons worth $6.9 million to fishermen,
king crab catches of about 2,000 metric tons valued at $1.8 million, catches
of shrimp coming to 2,500 metric tons worth $1.2 million, along with catches of halibut, herring, and some other types of crab and fish. The bulk of these catches came from Kachemak Bay and nearby Kamishak Bay.⁷² Those catches, many feared, might be damaged by oil spills likely to accompany increased oil exploration, drilling, and production. A spill resulting from a tanker discharging ballast crude oil into the ocean near Kodiak Island in 1970 sullied 1,000 miles of beaches in the northern Gulf of Alaska, killed 10,000 sea birds, and oiled fishing gear. This incident turned many fishermen against oil developments at sea.⁷³

In the 1970s, additional government plans for offshore oil activities caused heated disputes in Cook Inlet. Controversies first revolved around the state of Alaska’s offer to sell oil and gas leases to 93,000 acres in Lower Cook Inlet, including 5,000 acres in Kachemak Bay, in late 1973. This offer created what historian Daniel Nelson has rightly called “a firestorm.”⁷⁴ Fishermen complained bitterly that state officials ignored their protests and failed to keep them informed of plans for the region. They pointed out that the state refused to hold public hearings on proposed oil and gas leases, even when biologists for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) requested a delay to examine the impact of oil and gas activities on fishing. An ADFG scientist observed, “We believe, and have evidence to support our belief, that Kachemak Bay . . . is one of the most highly productive marine environments in the world,” and a NMFS scientist added that one of the proposed drilling locations was “located in a spot that is a very critical habitat” for shrimp. Beyond objecting that oil exploration and production might pollute fishing waters, fishermen added that increased boat traffic would lead to the accidental destruction of fishing gear, especially crab pots.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the leases won approval in December 1973.

That was far from the end of the matter. Local fishermen, some state legislative leaders, themselves fishermen, and scientists raised an increasing number of questions about the compatibility of oil and fish.⁷⁶ A 1975 analysis by Alaska’s leading economist supported the fishermen, noting that oil and gas “operations and transportation will inevitably cause varying degrees of destruction to fisheries, chiefly through contamination of water by chronic discharges and accidents.” The report suggested that the state might earn greater revenues in the short term from oil and gas leasing than from taxes on fishing, but pointed out that the oil resources would be exhausted in ten to twenty years, whereas fish were a renewable resource and thus a better long-term bet for Alaska’s economy.⁷⁷
What to do with Cook Inlet became a hotly contested issue. Eager for revenues, the state went ahead with its leasing plans for the inlet in the mid-1970s. This was several years before the huge royalties started rolling in from the North Slope leases, and Alaska's government needed income. Fishermen initially failed in their effort to halt the drilling when an Alaska district court refused to hear their case against the leasing. Still, their protests continued and found a political solution, which altered how the development of Cook Inlet was carried out. With a new governor elected, in part through a promise to be more environmentally sensitive than earlier governors, the state legislature designated Kachemak Bay as a marine sanctuary in 1976. Oil and gas leasing was prohibited. Over the next few years, the state used its powers of eminent domain to buy back leases.  

The federal government thus inherited a legacy of protest when it began leasing oil tracts beyond the three-mile limit in Cook Inlet. First made in 1977, federal leases covered 495,000 acres and brought in nearly $400 million to the nation's treasury. A second and even larger sale of leases was set for 1981. However, protests and lawsuits from fishermen and environmentalists proved effective in imposing fairly strict restrictions on the development of the tracts covered by the 1977 leases and in delaying indefinitely leasing the tracts proposed in 1981. In its environmental impact statement for the proposed 1981 leases, the federal government recognized that there was “a large potential for resource-conflict between the oil and gas industry and commercial and sports fisheries.” The 1978 Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act established a Fishermen’s Contingency Fund of $1 million to reimburse commercial fishermen for any damage to their vessels or gear due to oil and gas activities.  

Much of the conflict between fishermen and oilmen shifted to the Bering Sea in the 1980s and 1990s. As early as 1981, a journalist observed, “Like a new species colonizing a remote bay, the oil folks were starting to hit Dutch Harbor.” Five of the seven basins there—the Navarin Basin, the North Aleutian Basin, the St. George Basin, the Norton Basin, and the St. Matthew-Hall Basin—were believed to contain commercially recoverable amounts of oil. The Minerals Management Service (MMS) of the Department of Interior estimated that the basins contained 2 billion barrels of oil and 45 billion cubic feet of gas. Many of the basins were also prime fishing grounds for king crabs, salmon, halibut, herring, and other fish species. An investigation by the Department of the Interior reported in 1979 that the St. George Basin “supports a large and growing king crab fishery,” that the Northern Aleutian Shelf (western Bristol Bay) “is the immigration route for the majority of the
sockeye salmon that support the largest salmon fishery in the world,” and that the Navarin Basin had “an expanding king crab fishery.” All of these fisheries would be affected by oil and gas development activities, as would subsistence fishing by Alaskan Natives. Nonetheless, the federal government sold leases for 2 million acres in the mid-1980s.\(^8^1\)

The sales led to conflict with fishermen. Graffiti in the men’s room at the bar of the King-Ko Inn in King Salmon on Bristol Bay read, “Stick your oil money up your ass, Bristol Bay will sail again.” When wells in most of the basins produced insignificant amounts of oil and gas, exploration in those regions lessened. Abetting the decisions of oil companies to stop drilling was an action taken by environmentalists. In 1985, actor Robert Redford’s Institute for Resource Management, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), interceded to work out a compromise among oilmen, fishermen, environmental groups, and Alaskan Natives on how to develop much of the continental shelf underlying the Bering Sea. Some 240 million acres in the Navarin Basin, the St. George Basin, and Norton Sound, especially sensitive near-shore areas, were placed off-limits to oil and gas development. In return, environmental groups and fishermen agreed not to oppose the leasing of 48 million offshore acres in other areas.\(^8^2\)

Exploration then came to focus on the North Aleutian Basin on the edge of western Bristol Bay, one of the most productive fishing grounds and a region that was not subject to the agreement negotiated by Redford’s organization. In 1988, oil companies bought twenty-three leases there. However, continuing protests from fishermen operating in those waters, a $1-billion-per-year fishery, led Congress to approve a one-year moratorium on oil and gas exploration there in 1989.\(^8^3\)

There was, in fact, growing sensitivity on the part of MMS officials to the harm oil could do to fisheries. In 1989, it sponsored a symposium on that issue. MMS officials observed that “The coastal and offshore waters of the United States are a source of abundant natural resources.” “This abundance,” they further noted, “does not preclude conflict among those who use these waters.” One of the papers presented at the conference specifically singled out the North Aleutian Basin as a region where “some impact assessments prepared by the U.S. Minerals Management Service have incorrectly predicted the adverse affects of oil spills by greatly underestimating the area covered by potential spills.” The moratorium passed by Congress in 1989 was implemented by the MMS a year later. It was later extended one year at a time and currently remains in effect until 2012. The oil companies relinquished their leases in 1995. This was not quite the end of matters. The MMS began a
five-year leasing program for part of Norton Sound in 2003, and the state of Alaska leased some near-shore areas for exploratory drilling.⁸⁴

The Beringia Heritage International Park

The movement to create a Beringia Heritage International Park was another flash point in the northern Bering Sea and nearby regions during the 1990s. Proposed as a joint Soviet-American venture, the park, sponsors hoped, would celebrate the end of the Cold War and encourage the scientific study of the vast region of Beringia. “A Beringian park,” observed a National Park Service (NPS) historian in 1988, “could be a showcase where the warmth of international cooperation offsets the arctic chill.”⁸⁵ After promising beginnings, however, legislation to establish the park stalled in Congress, and no such park existed as the twenty-first century began. Instead, park advocates regrouped, started a series of joint Russian and American activities called the Shared Beringia Heritage Program, and renewed their efforts to set up an international park.

The proposed park was huge, encompassing the waters over and adjacent lands of an ancient land bridge that had once linked Alaska and Siberia. During extended cold periods in the past, tremendous volumes of water had been locked in ice and snow, causing the levels of seas and oceans to fall. The Bering Sea dropped by about 300 feet twelve to fifteen thousand years ago, opening a land bridge a thousand miles wide between Asia and the Americas. By the 1990s, Beringia was seen in scientific circles as having composed a coherent region extending from the Kolyma River in the Russian Far East to the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories in Canada. It was across this land bridge, nearly all scientists believe, that people first traveled to the Americas, and it was a large segment of this region that advocates wished to include in a Beringia Heritage International Park.⁸⁶

Park ideas took several decades to attract meaningful support. Walter Orr Roberts, who had been a special consultant to President Harry S. Truman and who was the founding director of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, proposed the idea of a joint park in the 1960s. In an international climate colored by the Cold War little was immediately accomplished. Still, some steps were taken. In 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union signed an “Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection” and set up a working group to investigate the “conservation and management of natural and cultural heritage[s].” That group
developed “themes” to investigate further, and in 1987 one theme specified the “research, conservation, and management of the Beringian heritage” as a goal to be pursued. Meanwhile, the two nations agreed to treaties governing the management of migratory birds, whales, polar bears, fur seals, and fish in their northern waters. In 1987, an American woman was allowed to swim across the Bering Strait, and the next year Alaskan Natives were permitted to visit the Chukotka region in the Soviet Union across the strait from Alaska. In 1989, American and Soviet planning teams presented the concept of an international park during joint visits to native villages on both sides of the Bering Strait. Published as the *Beringian Heritage Reconnaissance Study* in 1990, the results of the work of the planning teams set the stage for an international agreement to create the park.⁸⁷

President George H. W. Bush and Premier Mikhail Gorbachev signed a joint statement endorsing the establishment of an international park bridging the Bering Strait on June 1, 1990. Bush asserted that such a park would “preserve the unique natural, environmental, and cultural heritage of the Bering Sea region” and added, moreover, that it would serve as “a bridge of hope” between America and Russia. Gorbachev echoed Bush’s sentiments, arguing that the park would help the two nations in “moving toward a healthier international environment.” Legislation to establish the park was submitted to Congress in the fall of 1991. The measure authorized the president to designate an already existing 2.8-million-acre Bering Land Bridge National Preserve as the American portion of the park (with additional lands to be added later) as soon as a similar protected area was created by the Russians on the Chukotka Peninsula. Endorsed by the native population on the Chukotka Peninsula, park planning went ahead in Russia, with the Leningrad State Institute of Urban Planning as the agency designated to prepare actual park plans.⁸⁸ By way of contrast, park planning languished on the American side of the Bering Strait.

Congress did not act on the enabling legislation when several important groups opposed the establishment of the park. Only partly reconciled to the national legislation settling land issues in Alaska, oil and mining companies fought “locking up” any more Alaskan acreage in parklands. At the time American mining executives were pursuing the possibility of joint ventures with Russian counterparts and spoke against creating the park. The head of the Alaska Miners Association added, “We have no respect for the National Park Service,” because he thought the NPS had broken promises to miners in the establishment of other national parks in Alaska. Then too, Alaskan Natives, unlike their Russian counterparts, were generally against the estab-
lishment of the park. As a member of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference explained, “Parks haven't always been good for us.” Continuing, he observed that “park officials won't let us use snow machines to get to our fishing streams in the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve.” Representative of the NPS belatedly realized that they had not done enough to urge interested parties to support park legislation. As they observed, the legislation failed to win approval in Congress in 1991, and “subsequent attempts to redraft the legislation with the cooperation of native groups in Northwest Alaska and conservation organizations were not successful.”

The evolving situation in Alaska with regard to the Beringia Heritage International Park provides a valuable contrast to the much more inhumane treatment meted out to Native Americans in the earlier creation of many national parks on the American mainland. In the establishment of the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Glacier national parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Native Americans living on parklands were simply thrown out. Nor did native groups always fare well in the establishment of national parks in Alaska. However, times change, and, at least in the case of the Beringia Heritage International Park, the NPS came to recognize, as one of its spokespersons explained, “that it was necessary to encourage more local support and involvement in the activities that an international park designation would promote, before efforts to introduce legislation that would be supported by a wide range of interests would be successful.” Organized Alaskan Natives, now full participants at the political table, could not be ignored.

From the mid-1990s, the NPS made sustained efforts to involve Alaskan Natives in decisions about the proposed park. In 1996, it set up a five-member Beringia Panel to make recommendations on priorities for the funding of Beringia projects. Even though no park existed, the NPS received annual appropriations for a Shared Beringian Heritage Program. Two panel members represented the NPS, but the others were representatives of three of the twelve regional native corporations set up by ANCSA, corporations owned by Alaskan Natives in north and northwestern Alaska. The Shared Beringian Heritage Program stressed goals important to Alaskan Natives: “to provide for the continued opportunity for customary and traditional subsistence uses of resources within Central Beringia, and recognition of unique and traditional activities by indigenous people”; “the reestablishment of cultural traditions”; “to meaningfully involve indigenous people and local communities of the Beringia region in the administration and management of programs”; and “to encourage and assist in the return, retention, storage, display,
and interpretation of native artifacts from the Beringian region in or near the communities from which they originated.”

By the early twenty-first century, Russian and American leaders had made renewed progress toward the creation of an international park, a sign of the modern reintegration of the Pacific. The NPS reported that several projects had been “developed and initiated at the local level,” ranging in scope “from cultural celebrations to educational opportunities for village youths.” An official of the NPS had also instituted a Beringia Days celebration every October in Anchorage to provide visibility for this work. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation reaffirmed support for the park, and the regional Chukotka Administration established a Nature-Ethnic Park Beringia. The Chukotka Administration also commissioned a feasibility study for the creation of the Russian component of the Beringia Heritage International Park, which might encompass the Nature-Ethnic Park Beringia. The results of that study are due soon.

Conclusions

The controversies surrounding fishing rights, oil exploration, and the creation of parks in Alaska illustrate how complex economic development and environmental issues have grown in the Pacific and in the world since World War II. State, national, and international governmental bodies were involved in working out arrangements among the various interest groups, and the number and variety of those groups had exploded from earlier times. Alaskan fishermen battled out-of-state companies, just as they had in territorial days, but more than in the past they also had to contend with Japanese and Russian competitors. Nor was that all. By the 1970s and 1980s, other industries, most notably the oil industry, found the Aleutians and the Bering Sea enticing, forcing fishing firms to seek agreements with companies from those industries. Much of this type of conflict had taken place between different interests seeking to use the public domain in earlier periods in American history. As historian Samuel P. Hayes has shown in his classic study of conservation during the Progressive Era, ranchers, farmers, timbermen, and others battled for rights over the public domain.

More was involved in Alaska after World War II, however. Alaskan Natives gained seats at the political bargaining tables, as the recent fight over the Beringia Heritage International Park has amply demonstrated. Then, too, environmental groups and NGOs played expanding roles in the north. Inter-
ested in a broad spectrum of topics, these groups increasingly championed quality-of-life issues, such as the right of natives to continue using snow machines in their travels, as well as the conservation of natural resources.

Changing attitudes lay behind altered practices in Alaska with, again, events occurring along the Aleutians and in the Bering Sea serving as valuable barometers of those alterations. In their attitudes toward king crabs, those who established Wakefield Seafood closely resembled Americans surging west across the North American continent and into the Pacific in how they viewed the natural resources: they hoped to put them to immediate profitable use, with little thought for the future. Whalers, oilmen, timber operators, and others in Alaska shared that point of view as they developed their industries, and some continue to adhere to that outlook to the present day. Old attitudes died hard. In 2005, Alaskans expanded their hunting of wolves from airplanes, a form of hunting renewed in 2003 after years of being outlawed.⁹⁷ New ways of thinking, on the other hand, resulted in a changed appreciation of Alaska’s environment, including the state’s natural resources. Some Alaskans, often prodded by out-of-state individuals and groups, adopted a longer-term approach to resource management. Lowell Wakefield came to recognize that new methods were needed. Writing in 1965, he observed in a thoughtful essay, “Commercial fishing has not progressed very far beyond buffalo hunting on the Western Plains.” However, he continued, “just as homestead rights and grazing leases have stabilized and greatly increased production from the plains, some such approach will one day come for the oceans. . . . The sort of thing that I can picture will be fishermen’s cooperatives.”⁹⁸ What he was searching for, of course, was a way to break free from the “tragedy of the commons,” a path, unfortunately, never fully followed, with today’s world fisheries crisis as a result.

As Alaskans sought a balance between economic development and environmental preservation, they rejoined the Pacific economy and, more generally, the Pacific world. Alaskans had never completely left that world, but between about 1910 and 1940 they had been tied more closely to Washington, Oregon, and California than to other parts of the Pacific. World War II reaffirmed Alaska’s full Pacific presence, and after the conflict ties between Alaska and other Pacific regions were tightened. For example, much of the pulp from the Tongass National Forest went to Japan. No doubt North Slope oil would have done so as well, had it not been for national legislation forbidding that trade. Salmon roe from the native fisheries in the Yukon was consumed in Asian-Pacific regions. The movement of people across national boundaries in the North Pacific may be just beginning. Alaskan Natives have
paid ceremonial visits to Chukotka. Less heralded has been the movement of Russians back into Alaska. In the 1960s, a small group of Staroveri (Old Believers), whose ancestors had left Russia in the 1800s, established several villages on the southern Kenai Peninsula and near Kodiak. Some became “major participants” in the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. Moreover, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, “many people” emigrated from Russia to Alaska, where they took up jobs, including some in the salmon industry.⁹⁹