

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members

FROM: Clarence G. Pautzke
Executive Director



ESTIMATED TIME
1 HOUR

DATE: November 30, 1999

SUBJECT: Halibut Subsistence

ACTION REQUIRED

Review alternatives and analysis and give direction to staff.

BACKGROUND

Management measures for halibut subsistence were first developed in September 1996 because of a conflict between the IFQ/CDQ regulations and customary and traditional practices of Alaska Natives in IPHC regulatory Area 4E, whereby halibut CDQ fishermen were retaining undersized halibut for personal use. The Council formed a Halibut Subsistence Committee, initiated a regulatory amendment, and in June 1997, took action on the part of the proposed action which allowed Area 4E CDQ fishermen to retain undersized halibut while commercial fishing. That measure took effect June 4, 1998, and sunsets December 31, 1999. The Council did not include a sunset, but IPHC wanted to collect and review halibut mortality data resulting from such retention. Meeting jointly with IPHC in October 1998, the Council requested an extension of the program. IPHC considered the request at its 1999 annual meeting, and responded on March 3, 1999, as follows:

“In 1998, the Commission approved the retention of halibut less than legal size for the CDQ fisheries in Area 4E, for a two-year period. The Commission recognizes that the evaluation of this program at the end of 1999 will require information and also received a request from NMFS for specific regulations concerning reporting of undersized halibut retention. The Commission has therefore approved a regulation for 1999 requiring the manager of any CDQ organization that authorizes halibut harvest in Area 4E to provide accounting of the number and weight of undersized halibut taken and retained in these fisheries. The report must also include details of the methodology used for collection of such data.”

Meeting jointly with IPHC this October, it was noted that the Commission will review a possible extension at its January 2000 meeting. The Council may want to send a second letter of encouragement to the Commissioners concerning the extension, possibly suggesting that there be no sunset date this time around.

The broader issue of subsistence has not yet been addressed by the Council. NMFS requested by letter on July 7, 1999, that the Council reactivate its consideration of the issue. The federal takeover of subsistence management occurred on October 1, 1999. Then at the October 1999 meeting, the Council wanted to review its previous list of alternatives and the analysis from 1997 at this December meeting.

The list of alternatives is under C-7(a). The staff needs direction on next steps to move forward on this issue. The Council will need to identify the alternatives it still wants to consider, and then we will revise the analysis accordingly, taking into account new NMFS directives on the preparation of EA/RIR/IRFAs. It could be scheduled to come back for initial review in April, and final action in June 2000.

ALTERNATIVE 1. Status quo.

ALTERNATIVE 2. Allow the harvest of halibut for subsistence.

OPTION 1. Define subsistence.

Halibut subsistence regulations are needed to allow the continued practice of long-term customary and traditional practices of fishing halibut for food for families in a non-commercial manner for non-economic consumption. Subsistence is defined as 'long-term, customary and traditional use of halibut.'

OPTION 2. Define eligibility for halibut subsistence:

Suboption A. Members of Alaska Native Federally-recognized Tribes with customary and traditional use of halibut and other permanent residents of such Native villages.

Suboption B. Alaska rural residents as defined in ANILCA and identified in the table entitled 'Alaska Rural Places and Native Groups with Subsistence Halibut Uses,' and will also include other communities for which customary and traditional findings are developed in the future.

Suboption C. Tribal members and other permanent residents of Native villages who have legitimate subsistence needs.

OPTION 3. Define legal gear.

Suboption A. Rod-and-reel gear

Suboption B. Hook-and-line gear (including set and hand-held gear) with a range of:

1. 2 hooks
2. 10 hooks
3. 30 hooks
4. 60 hooks.

Suboption C. Allow Tribal governments to contract with NMFS to register designated fishermen to fish for the community using:

1. 1 - 3 skates of gear, up to 60 hooks each
2. Any gear type

OPTION 4. Allow the customary and traditional trade of subsistence halibut.

Suboption A. Prohibit the customary and traditional trade of subsistence-caught halibut.

Suboption B Allow the customary and traditional trade of subsistence-caught halibut limited to:

- (i) an annual amount of:
 1. \$200
 2. \$400
 3. \$600

- (ii) and exchanges with:
1. other Alaska Tribes
 2. any Alaskan rural resident
 3. any Alaskan resident
 4. anyone.

OPTION 5. Define a daily bag limit of between 2-20 halibut.

OPTION 6. Develop cooperative agreements with Tribal, State, and Federal governments to collect, monitor, and enforce subsistence harvests and develop local area halibut subsistence use plans in coastal communities.

ALTERNATIVE 3. Provide for personal consumptive use of halibut.

OPTION 1. Define legal gear.

Suboption A. 1-3 hooks per line

Suboption B. 1-3 skates, up to 60 hooks each

Suboption C. Any gear type.

OPTION 2. Define legal gear by area.

Suboption A. Statewide

Suboption B. IPHC halibut regulatory area

Suboption C. Through local use plans.

OPTION 3. Define trade and barter of personal use halibut.

Suboption A. Prohibit the customary and traditional trade of personal use halibut.

Suboption B. Allow the customary and traditional trade of personal use halibut.

NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Subsistence Halibut Fishing (C-7)

Comments From Simeon Swetzof, Saint Paul Island, Alaska

December 13, 1999

Mr. Chairman, members of the Council, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. As a subsistence harvester and commercial fishermen from Saint Paul Island, I have a personal stake as well as a community responsibility to speak about this issue.

I want to present several ideas for review as you pursue the analysis of the harvest of halibut for subsistence use.

1. Subsistence Use on St. Paul Island:

Subsistence fishing and hunting have been a critical part of Aleut culture since time immemorial. With the introduction of commercial fishing in the form of the CDQ and IFQ fisheries, our fishing methods and the type of gear we use have changed, but the sharing and the traditions involved in the subsistence use of halibut continue to play a key role in our culture.

The intense nature of the halibut CDQ/IFQ seasons on St. Paul, as well as the unpredictable weather on the Pribilofs, absorbs all of our time as fishermen. As a result we would like to be able to retain for subsistence use halibut caught while commercial fishing during the CDQ/IFQ season. In this manner we will be able to continue our traditions of sharing with our families and the elderly in our community. We therefore support further analysis of Alternative 2 in your agenda item C-7(a).

In this regard we and other communities face a situation similar to that faced a couple of years ago by IPHC area 4E. We would like the Council in its analysis to consider our request for adoption of a measure similar to that which was approved for area 4E in 1998. This measure allowed area 4E CDQ fishermen to retain halibut less than legal size for subsistence use.

Except, that we request that the Council and the IPHC consider allowing subsistence users to retain halibut of any size pursuant to traditional practice. To ensure fair play accounting practices similar to those adopted by area 4E fishermen would be put into place. That is, subsistence fish would be accounted for overall, but would not be counted against our CDQ/IFQ commercial quotas.

2. Definition of Legal Gear (Alternative 2, Option 3):

We request that the Council consider an additional suboption for analysis under Alternative 2, Option 3 (Definition of Legal Gear).

This would be labeled:

“Suboption D: Use of Commercial Gear - allowing retention of subsistence halibut when landing commercially caught halibut.”

The purpose of this suboption is to allow analysis and consideration of extending the 4-E halibut provision to other areas. However, as constructed here the suboption would also allow retention of legal sized halibut for subsistence purposes while commercial fishing.

3. Customary and Traditional Trade (Alternative 2, Option 4):

I believe that the customary and traditional forms of trading subsistence halibut on St. Paul should be protected. These practices differ on a regional basis.

On St. Paul we share subsistence halibut with family and the

extended community and occasionally trade it for food staples or other types of fish or meats, such as smoked and salted salmon or moose meat, that we cannot obtain on St. Paul. We therefore agree with the changes recommended by the AP for analysis under Option 4 because it more fully reflects the various forms of customary and traditional trade.

3. No Bag Limits (Alternative 2, Option 5):

I believe there should be NO bag limits on subsistence fishing. Subsistence fishing by its nature is a self-limiting activity because of the work involved and because it is shared with family, friends, and the community elders.

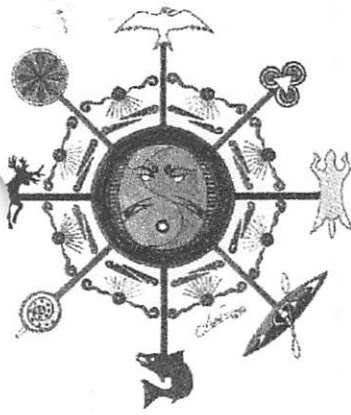
In addition, St. Paul's unpredictable weather limits our ability to fish every day. Being a small boat fishing fleet of vessels that are mostly 32' or smaller, we try to meet as much of our subsistence need as is possible when the weather permits it. Bag limits would prevent us from being able to meet our needs. We therefore agree with the AP's recommendation to add another sub-option to Option 5 entitled: "no-daily bag limit."

I urge the Council and the IPHC to consider our above requests

and to accommodate our traditional subsistence use of this resource. I believe we have been and are being responsible both to the resource and to our community.

Thank you , Mr. Chairman and members of the Council.

Simeon Swetzof, Jr.



Bering Sea Coalition

22541 Deer Park Drive
Chugiak, Alaska 99567

**Testimony of Larry Mercurieff, Coordinator
Bering Sea Coalition
and the
Bering Sea Council of Elders**

on the

**Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review
for a Regulatory Amendment
to create and define a halibut subsistence category**

before the

**North Pacific Fishery Management Council Advisory Panel
December 7, 1999**

Witnessed by: [Signature]

My name is Larry Mercurieff. I am the Coordinator for the Bering Sea and Gulf Coalition, and the Coordinator for the newly formed Bering Sea Council of Elders. The Bering Sea and Gulf Coalition is focused on the health of the Bering Sea ecosystem and the cultural viability of the coastal and river communities tied to the Bering Sea. The Coalition is an organization composed of individuals and organizations from Pt. Barrow to Atka and the coastal communities in the Gulf directly tied to the Bering Sea. The Bering Sea Council of Elders is composed of Elders from six regions of Alaska and is focused on the cultural and community well-being of the people in the Bering Sea.

The Bering Sea Coalition and the Bering Sea Council of Elders strongly supports the positions developed by the Alaska Native Halibut Subsistence Working Group. The positions of this working group were developed with a clear understanding of how subsistence halibut fishing has customarily and traditionally been conducted throughout the halibut range in coastal Alaska. The positions outlined by the Alaska Native Subsistence Working Group accurately reflects the ways Alaska Natives have culturally taken and used subsistence caught halibut.

I am an Aleut. My people have survived and thrived for nearly 10,000 years in the Bering Sea and Alaska Peninsula. Unequivocally, Aleuts, Yupiks, Alutik, Thlingit, Athabaskan, and Tsimpshians have had and continue to have strong cultural ties to the taking and use of halibut. Anthropologists have consistently found large concentrations of halibut bones and halibut bone tools and other implements in midden sites dating back over 8,000 years. For this reason, it is appropriate and just that modern day regulatory regimes acknowledge and support the continued cultural and traditional uses of halibut, particularly given that there is no domestic law that has ever extinguished this inherent right.

I cannot emphasize enough the cultural and nutritional importance of halibut to coastal peoples of Alaska. I am aware that this body has never dealt with a subsistence issue before in its history, so I am providing you with copies of an article I wrote that was published in the latest special edition of Alaska Geographic on the Bering Sea. The article attempts to describe some of the significant cultural aspects and meaning of halibut to the Aleut people. I urge the panel to read this article to understand that when Alaska Natives talk about the subsistence halibut fishery, we are talking about considerably more than the important use of halibut for food. It is difficult to describe in five minutes the tremendous cultural, spiritual, and nutritional importance of halibut to us. The subsistence halibut fishery is our outdoor classroom; it is about the opportunity for young men to learn the ways of the adult men and to connect with adult men; it is about a cultural rite of passage for young men who learn about the winds, tides, currents, weather patterns, halibut physiology and behavior, cultural ethics and values, communal sharing, and cultural worldview; it is about our physical and nutritional sustenance. It is a significant means to connect directly to our history, our ancestors, our culture, and our physical surroundings. And perhaps most significantly, it is a spiritual experience about connection to life that cannot be put into words.

When this body makes its recommendations, you will be directly affecting all of these dimensions in the way of life of Alaska Natives. For those of you who are parents and grandparents, or who work with young people, you can relate to the tremendous implications of having ways for on-going and positive interactions with our young. In our society today there seems to be less and less opportunities for such interactions between adult and young, less roles for adult men to be active mentors for young men where one can teach the values of stewardship, sharing, cooperation, consideration of others, self-responsibility, respect for adults and elders, self-awareness, and simply what it means to be a man. This is only one of a list of very significant cultural aspects of the subsistence halibut fishery for Alaska Natives, but an aspect I believe most people from any culture or society can readily understand and relate to. It is because of such deep cultural dimensions that the Alaska Native subsistence fishery is unlike any other fishery this body customarily deals with. To say that it is similar would be a gross oversimplification of culturally sophisticated ways that have continued without interruption for hundreds of generations.

I have heard that some members of this body and the Council itself are concerned about whether or not there can be too little regulation of the subsistence halibut fishery or that a subsistence fishery without bag limits, as is being proposed by the Alaska Native Subsistence Halibut Fishery Working Group, would be subject to abuse. I would argue exactly the opposite-less outside regulation means less abuse. Alaska Natives, when it comes to culturally significant foods and the subsistence way of life, have proven its highly successful self-regulation by virtue of the fact that **no subsistence specie in Alaska was ever placed in jeopardy in what anthropologists call our pre-history, when Alaska Native populations were at least three times higher than what it is today.** Indeed, when settlers came to Alaska they found a land with tremendous populations of wildlife-a testament to the highly successful cultural systems of self-regulation-systems that continue to this day. Significantly, it may be no accident that Alaska wildlife populations have steadily declined in a hundred years of outside governmental regulation and management. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that when local people are not given a vested and meaningful interest in any decision-making process affecting them, local cooperation is problematical. Local cooperation is maximized the more they are involved in the process.

I do not know of anyone or any governmental agency that can document wholesale abuse of wildlife by subsistence user communities in Alaska. We can point to individual abuse, but that is the rare exception and not the rule. And when such individual abuse occurs, the local community deals with them effectively. Alaska Natives understand more than any other populous in Alaska that their subsistence rights can be jeopardized by the actions of a handful of Native peoples, because we are painted with a broad brush. For this reason, every tribal organization, every Alaska Native community, do more to prevent abuse and to deal with abuse than any law enforcement ever could-if given the opportunity.

Talking specifically to the Alaska Native Working Groups recommendation for no bag limits: First of all, Alaska Natives are taught from the outset never to waste what is taken for food, and never to take more than is needed. This ethic is strong in all Alaska Native

communities. No more halibut has ever been taken by any Alaska Native community than is needed. This fact starkly contrasts to the fact that at its peak, 20 million pounds of halibut were thrown overboard as bycatch in the commercial fisheries every year. Today the bycatch level is 14 million pounds. Statewide, Alaska Native subsistence take of halibut today is approximately .003 percent of just the amount of halibut wasted in the commercial fishery, and this is not even adding in what is taken and sold in the commercial fishery. Even if there was waste by Alaska Natives, it would be astronomically small in comparison to the waste in the commercial fisheries.

In addition, as far as no bag limits are concerned, this provision is essential to communities in the Bering Sea where we have had, in some years, an entire month when we could not fish in our small boats due to inclement sea conditions. It is not unusual to have only a handful of days in any given summer month that our small boats can subsistence fish. We therefore urge your support of this and all the other recommendations of the Alaska Native Halibut Working Group.

Thank you.

Angoon Community Association

P.O. BOX 188 - ANGOON, ALASKA 99820 - (907) 788-3411 - FAX (907) 788-3412

TRANSMITTAL SHEET

DATE: Dec. 10, 1999
NAME: Gilbert Fred / Frank Gene
CO : Anchorage - Hilton
FAX : (907) 265-7140
NUMBER OF PAGES TO FOLLOW: 2
FROM: Marlene Zuboff
OPERATOR: Raynelle
COMMENTS: Attached is Resolution # 99-27
that the council adopted this afternoon

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Angoon Community Association

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Phone: (907)788-3411 * Fax: (907)788-3412

IRA COUNCIL MEMBERS

Wally R. Frank, Sr., President
Matthew J. Fred, Sr., Vice President
Edward J. Gamble, Sr., Secretary
Matthew J. Fred, Jr., Treasurer
Matilda Gamble, Council Member
Walter Jack, Council Member
Peter McCluskey, Jr., Council Member

RESOLUTION OF THE ANGOON COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION NO. 99-27

- WHEREAS: The Angoon Community Association (ACA) is the Tribal Government Body, as authorized by the acts of Congress of June 18, 1934, (48 Stat. 984), and May 1, 1936 (49 Stat. 1250), and
- WHEREAS: Article V-Powers, Section 1(a) states "To negotiate with the Federal and Territorial (state) Governments on behalf of the Community...", and
- WHEREAS: the Native Halibut subsistence working group was created in compliance with Executive Order 13084, "Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments," signed May 14, 1998, which require Federal Agencies to respect Tribal Self-Government and sovereignty, tribal rights, and tribal responsibilities whenever they formulate policies "significantly or uniquely affecting Indian Tribal Governments", and
- WHEREAS: Executive order 13084 requires "The Native Halibut Subsistence working group" and other agencies", when developing regulatory policies, agencies must provide for "meaningful and timely" consultation with tribes, and must also consider the compliance costs imposed upon tribal governments, and
- WHEREAS: the Federal Governments "trust responsibility" to tribes includes special obligations to protect tribal resources and protect the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to Self-Determination; trust doctrine includes duties to manage natural resources for the benefit of tribes and the Federal Government already has cases of being held liable for damage caused by mismanagement, and
- WHEREAS: the Angoon Community Association (IRA) encourage's "Memorandums of Agreement" recognizing tribal inherent government to government rights to manage tribal lands, and customary and traditional Fish & Wildlife resources in order to ensure full compliance with executive order 12898, which directs Federal actions to achieve environmental Justice in minority populations and low-income populations, now therefore
- BE IT RESOLVED THAT: The Angoon Community Association, Federally recognized Tribal Government on behalf of its Tribal Members respectfully request the "Native Halibut subsistence working group", hold hearings in Village Alaska to ensure full Tribal participation as outlined in executive order 13084 is realized, and
- BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT: The Angoon Community Association (IRA) tribal government also request the "Native Halibut Subsistence working group" support Tribal management and or co-management for the purposes of enhancing the Federal Governments "Trust responsibilities" to Alaska Natives, this would alleviate agency responsibilities and ensure accurate data of harvest levels in traditional areas is obtained, and

ANGOON COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION
RESOLUTION NUMBER 99-27

PAGE 2 . . .

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED: that copies of this resolution be sent to Southeast Native Subsistence Commission, the International Pacific Halibut Commission, Board of Fisheries, Native American Fish & Wildlife Society and Alaska's Delegation in Washington D.C.

SIGNED: Wally R. Frank Sr.
Wally R. Frank, Sr., President

CERTIFICATION

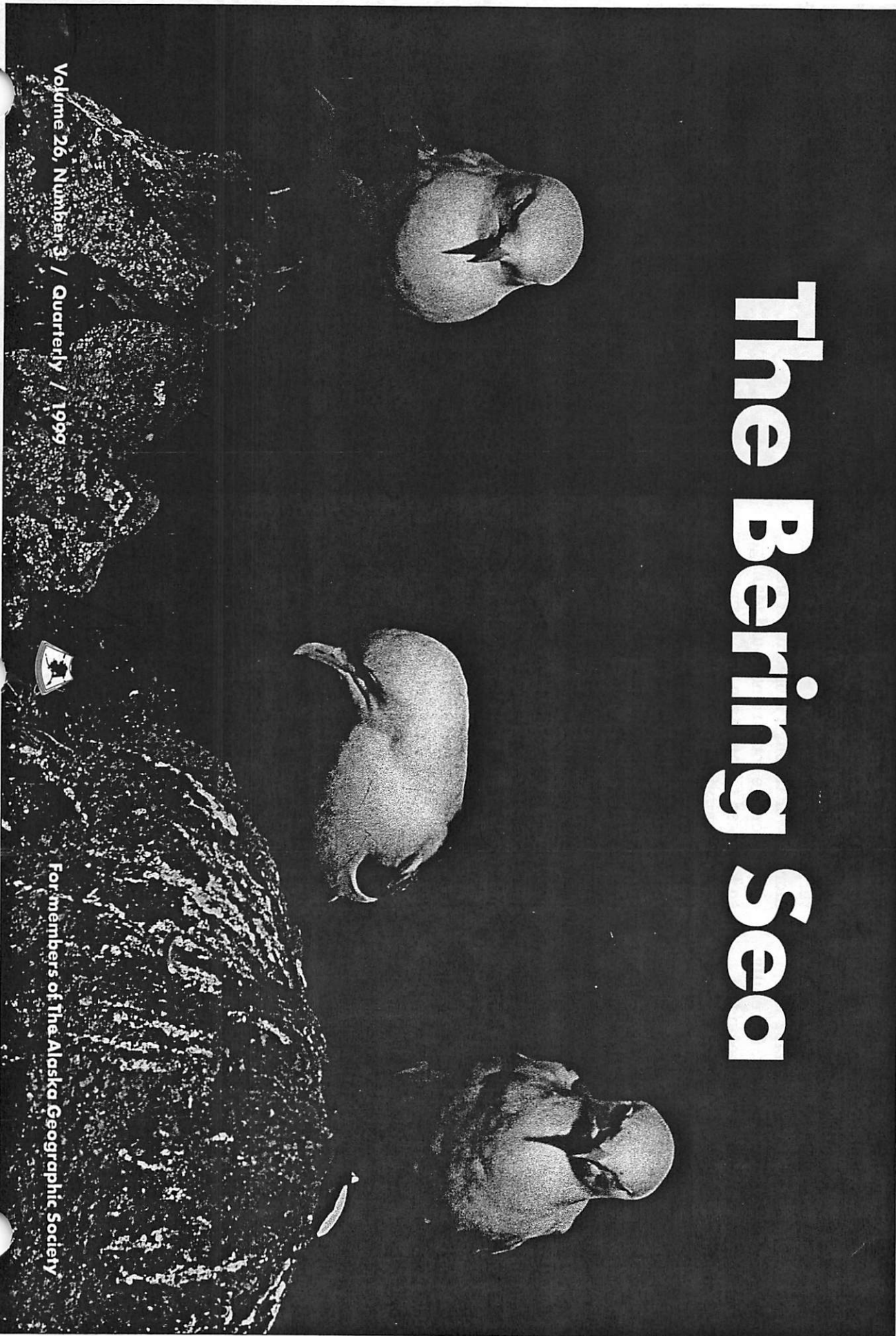
I, the undersigned, as the Secretary of the Angoon Community Association hereby certify that the Council of the Association is composed of Seven (7) members, of whom 5 constituted a quorum were present at a meeting thereof duly and regularly called, noticed, convened and held this 10th day of December, 1999; and that the foregoing resolution No. 99-27 was adopted at such meeting by affirmative vote of 5 Aye and 0 Nay.

In witness thereof, I have set my hand as Secretary this 10th day of December, 1999.

ATTEST: Edward J. Gamble Sr.
Edward J. Gamble, Sr., Secretary

ALASKA GEOGRAPHIC[®]

The Bering Sea



Volume 26, Number 3 / Quarterly / 1999

For members of The Alaska Geographic Society

Passed out by Larry, Mervin, etc - 7

I knew the halibut on my hand line was large, probably a female, probably more than 5 feet long and weighing nearly 200 pounds. I could tell she was hooked by the lip and likely to come off if I was not alert to every movement. Carefully, I maintained steady pressure on the cotton line, using every part of my body to hoist the fish to the surface.

Halibut are among the strongest fish in the Bering Sea, known to fight so fiercely that inexperienced fishermen can be injured once a fish is aboard the small craft, between 14 and 22 feet, that we Aleut typically use around St. Paul Island, my home in the Pribilof Islands. Novice fishermen often let the halibut fight after it is landed before subduing it; but beginning as children we would always hear, "Respect the sea and the halibut, otherwise you can hurt yourself." Self-reliance, awareness and respect are only a few of the life lessons taught to us by the halibut and the Bering Sea.

I took my time as I hoisted the halibut from 150 feet off the rocky sea bottom, one-quarter mile offshore and 11 miles from the village of St. Paul, which is predominantly Aleut. The wisdom and lessons of my elders were

guiding me now: *If she wants to fight, go with her energy; don't fight back. Honor her life force and she will know to give herself to you.* I knew that if the fish turned her head down, she would have more power through momentum than either I or the cotton line could manage, so I worked to maintain steady pressure.

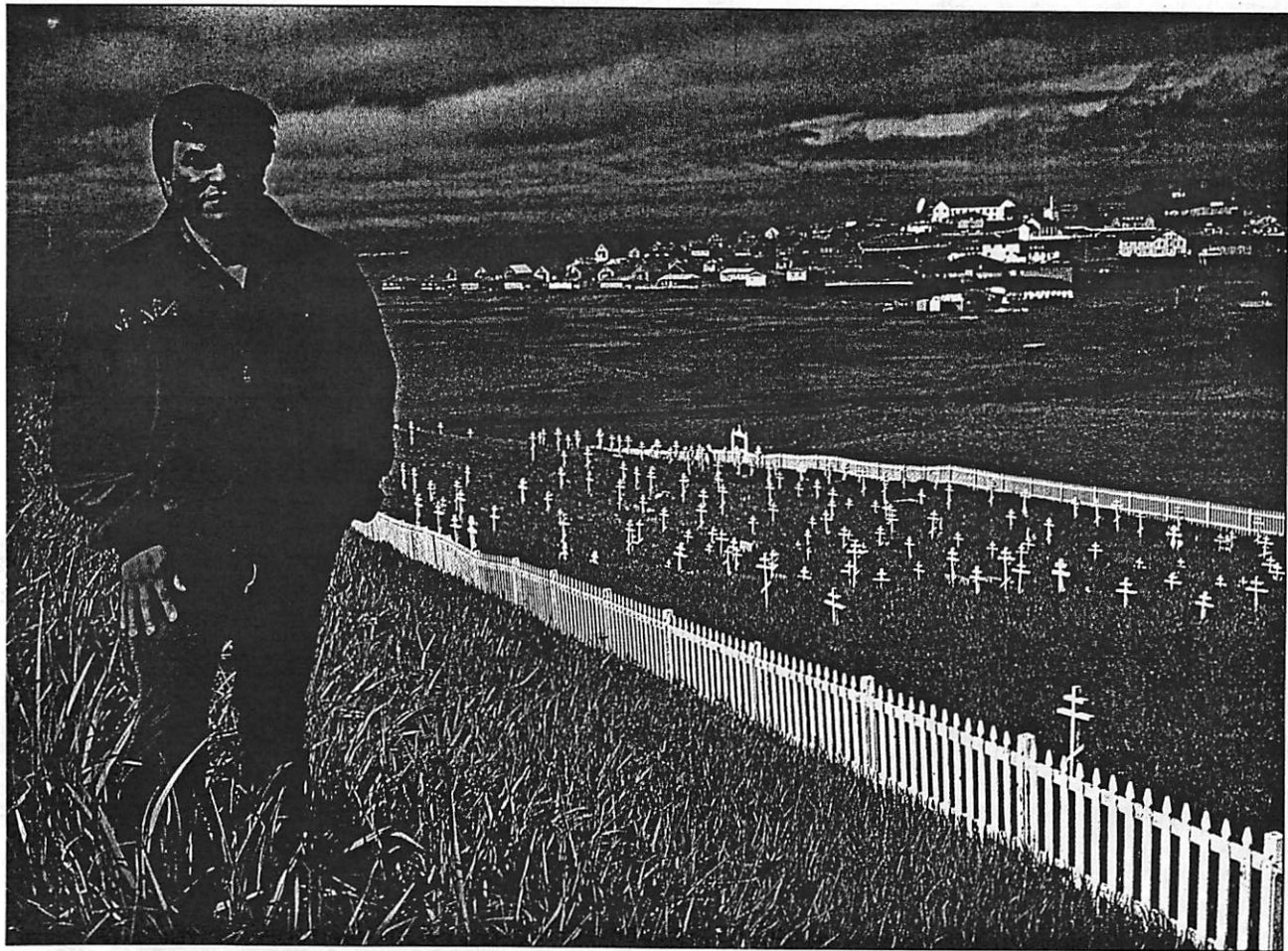
Any hesitation by me now and the halibut would know instantly, causing her to swiftly turn down, perhaps ripping the hook from her mouth or breaking the line. Fishing with a hand line differs from a rod and reel; we tie a hook and sinker — weighing 2 or 3 pounds — to one end of a nylon or cotton line about 170 feet long then jig by moving the hand line up and down. I've seen all kinds of bait — aluminum foil, orange peels, bacon rind — but these days most people use herring or squid.

I could sense this was a powerful, wise, old halibut. She knew to conserve energy until the last death struggle — or an opportunity to escape. The fish did not fight on her way up, a way of acknowledging my skill. Suraj Ma Anand, who is not Aleut and was making her first halibut trip, gasped at the size of the fish. I knew I would need help to gaff so I instructed Suraj while I continued to slowly bring the halibut to the surface. *Do not let the nose of the halibut hit the air before you are ready to gaff,* inner voices of generations advised, *otherwise it will start fighting.* Because I had caught this fish adjacent

FACING PAGE: *Susie Angaiak of Tununak picks dried herring from woven lines of grass on Nelson Island. (Roy Corral)*

Heart of a Halibut: Coming of Age in the Bering Sea

By Larry Merculieff



Larry Merculieff strolls his homeland on the island of St. Paul, where the only community, also named St. Paul, population 761, overlooks the southern shore. Merculieff has served in various leadership positions with the Pribilovians and in state government for more than two decades. (Roy Corral)

to a riptide area filled with large rocks, I had to watch the speed and direction of our drift while I labored to bring up the fish. Riptide zones can cause a boat to drift a half-mile in 10 minutes and the drift's direction can reverse in the same short time. To succeed with this fish, I had to shut out all distractions.

Finally the halibut was to the surface; I could see she was indeed female,

5-1/2 feet long, hooked only by the lip, just as I had felt when she first struck the line. One misdirected strike with the gaff now and she would rip the hook from her mouth and be gone. But before I could gaff, the boat rocked to the riptide's swells and the halibut's nose lifted into the air. The fish's muscular back arched immediately, her tail thrashed in the

air, and she headed back to the bottom.

Keeping slight pressure on, I let the line go. I had to be completely one with this halibut if I were not to lose her. I had to know her intentions before she acted on them: Too much pressure on the line and she would be gone; too little pressure and she would be gone. I had to know exactly when the halibut was about to reach bottom so that she could be turned back up using her own momentum. Today people might call this "Zen" fishing — the ability to take action without interference of thought — but for me, it is the ages-old way of the Aleut.

I felt the halibut begin to turn. Gently, I increased pressure on my line, bringing her head back up, and continued hauling again. On the end of the line there was no struggle, only weight. The fish was conserving energy for when we would face each other again.

For Aleuts who have relied on the Bering Sea for more than 10,000 years, taking a halibut in the proper way is a ritual; mastery is a rite of passage into

adolescence and ultimately manhood. For me, the Bering Sea is my history book and halibut fishing connects me directly with ancestors who, using lengths of strong kelp before the advent of cotton, would have sensed the energy of the halibut just as I did with my hand line. They loved the sea, just as I did. For my ancestors and me, the smell, taste and feel of this place in the middle of the Bering Sea are wondrous.

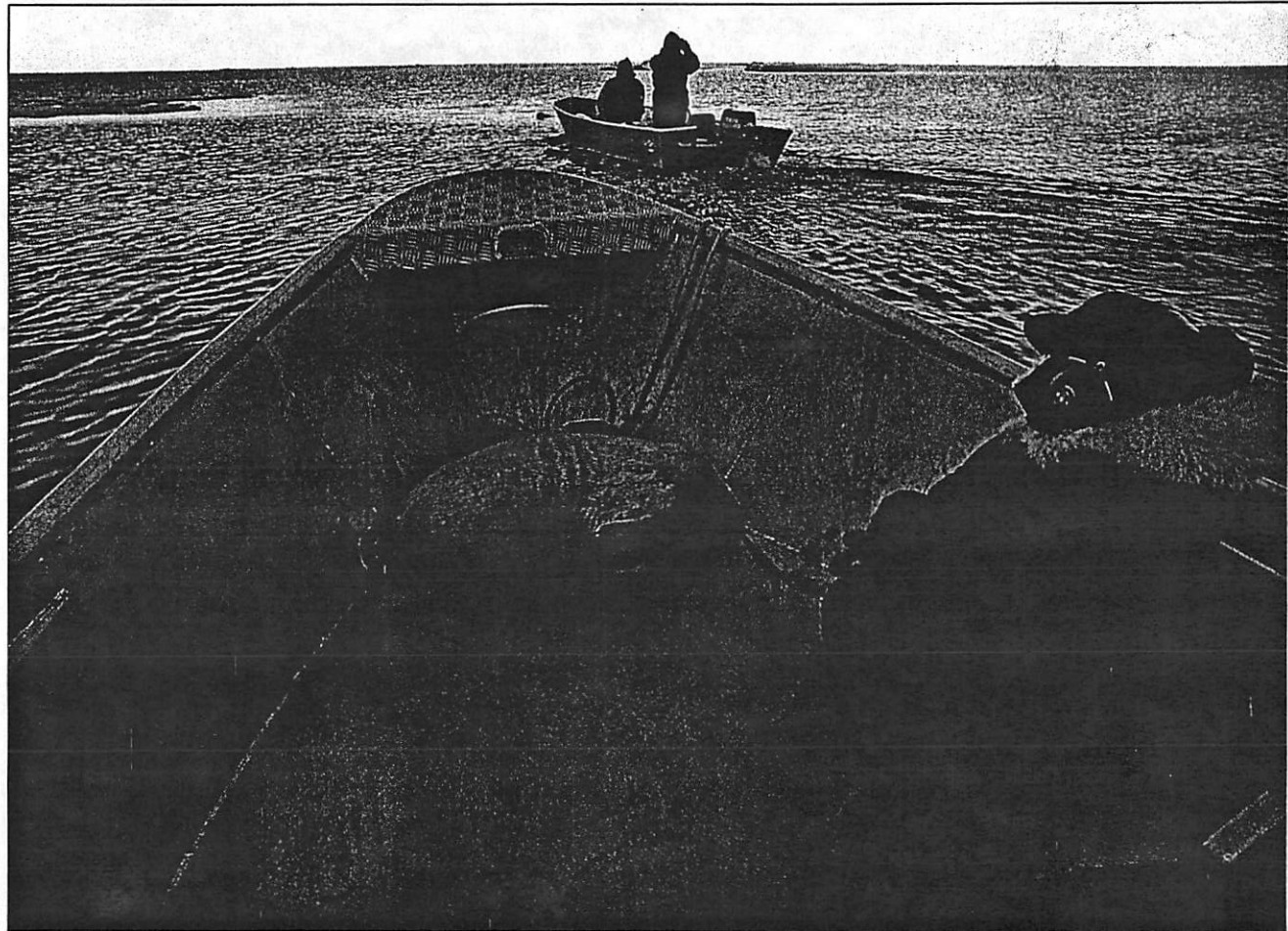
By the late 1700s, when Russian fur hunters first invaded our homeland, the Aleut's seafaring technology was the most sophisticated of any North American culture. Our people traveled tens of thousands of miles in high seas *iqyak* — kayaks — to Southern California, the Pacific Islands, the coast of Japan. I have built a traditional Aleut kayak, and I know its superiority stems from an ability to move with every nuance of the water — a design that shows profound understanding of the fast-changing Bering Sea, its 60-foot waves and lethal storms.

Like the kayak to the sea, I had to connect with the halibut before I could hope to bring the fish on board. Many experts talk today about "making the connection" when they mean everything from improved communication with a

spouse or child to bettering one's exercise program. But when we Aleut talk about "connection" with a creature or the sea, we mean the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional bond with nature that is the foundation of traditional knowledge and wisdom.

Hoisting the halibut up, I thought back to how I got to this moment. I was

5 when I was first introduced to the seafaring ways of my ancestors. Clustered around a windburned fisherman known in St. Paul as "Old Man," we children watched as he cut halibut on the green grass next to his home. He had just returned with a load of fish caught from a 14-foot, New England-style double-ended dory powered by a 10 horsepower outboard. This halibut would feed



Using modern technology and equipment, Canar Sundown and others hunt seals on Scammon Bay, north of Cape Romanzof on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta. (Roy Corral)

For decades indigenous people of the eastern and western Bering Sea were isolated from one another by political boundaries. But in the early decades and final decade of the 20th century, Natives were allowed to contact one another across the Ice Curtain. This woman was photographed before 1909 outside a dwelling in the Russian Far East. The stones keep the animal hides covering the dwelling in place during high winds. (Photo No. B72.27.135, The Anchorage Museum of History and Art)



village elders first, then his extended family and finally his immediate family, a traditional sharing based on respect.

That summer day, we were entranced as Old Man skillfully butchered the halibut for specific meals — bones for soup, steaks, cuts for fish pies. More fascinating to me was seeing what the halibut's stomach held: sandlance, octopus and small king, Tanner and horsehair crabs.

Suddenly Old Man cut out the

halibut's heart, the size of an oversized walnut, and held it out to us, moving inside the circle of children. "Whoever will eat this halibut heart raw will always catch as much halibut as you will need whenever you go out fishing," he proclaimed. Startled, we all stepped back. Then, without thinking, I said, "I'll eat it!" And I did.

Without me knowing, Old Man initiated me into a tradition that determines who is ready to go to sea. Aleut wisdom taught that youth with courage enough to eat a raw halibut heart will make good students. The ritual reveals who is a risk-taker, willing to experience the unknown to learn new things. Our entire community reinforced these ways by offering learning opportunities to children and then rewarding curiosity. From the day I ate that halibut heart, my extended family and the village men would take me fishing whenever they had a chance.

A month after my encounter with Old Man, my first halibut gave itself to me on a hand line. I was on an outing with my father, John Merculieff, who lived his whole life on St. Paul. As is custom, I was required to consume the fish's heart, to become "one" with the halibut, and I sensed its spirit enter me the moment I swallowed. For hours as we continued fishing I gazed at the halibut that had chosen me, experiencing for the first time profound connection with a creature that had sustained my people for millennia.

Is it any wonder our ancestors viewed the Bering Sea as a divine being?

My first halibut went to extended family and one piece was kept for me to eat. Catching the fish was exhilarating for a 5-year-old but there was nothing like the delight and gratefulness in the faces of those who shared it: *Give away your first halibut and halibut will always come to you.*

The Bering Sea is a comprehensive school where one is taught not just how to make a living but how to live in harmony with oneself, family, community, animals and the earth. But as is tradition, I did not ask a lot of questions as a boy. I was encouraged instead to simply observe our fishermen and mimic them. In fact the number of words in this essay are more than those expended in all my years of learning to fish. Whenever there were words, they were filled with lessons: *If you do not have proper respect, you will die or you will not find food. Feel the texture of the water because it is different under different circumstances. She will give warnings because she is compassionate.*

I remember listening to my father and the other men speak in Aleut with a reverence for halibut and the sea. They would talk about the turning of the tide, or whether the bottom was "coming up" in fishing spots where the sea floor was basalt rock.

Awareness of the most subtle change in the sea bottom increases a halibut



fisherman's success. Most halibut feed within 3 feet off the bottom although many times we have caught a fish 60 feet off the bottom if it followed bait on our hooks as we hauled up the lines. I learned that, depending on age, halibut forage in distinctly different bottom terrain; in fact, Aleuts know the sea the way city dwellers know the aisles of their local grocery store — 3-foot halibut in one fishing area, 4-footers in another, 5-foot fish some place else.

Children wearing marine-mammal-skin garments play among a selection of grass baskets in front of the store at Teller on the Seward Peninsula. (Photo No. B72.27.72, The Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

Through experience, and without benefit of compass or map, I learned the sea bottom topography within a six-mile radius of St. Paul, as well as

the three islands adjacent that make up our region of the Pribilofs.

I witnessed how men absorbed information through all the senses, how they could read the clouds, the color of the water, the direction and speed of drift. They knew the timing between tides, movement of wind, the sea bottom and the general movement of the sea. As a young fisherman amid teachers of few words, I began to understand the value of self-awareness and the need to stay connected to the sea, air and land to catch halibut — and to stay safe. I was learning to communicate in the ancient language that had allowed our people to thrive for hundreds of generations.

I went through my next rite of passage at 11 when my father gave permission to use his boat and motor

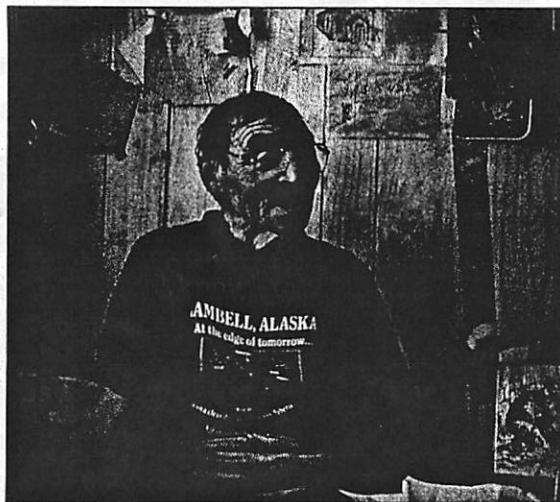
FACING PAGE: *Bertha Ohman picks wild celery on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta. The shoreline vegetation is an important component of the Bering Sea ecosystem, holding the soil, providing nutrients and sheltering young animals before they go to sea. (Roy Corral)*

RIGHT: *Beach rye and other Bering Sea shore vegetation is woven into containers and platters for everyday housekeeping and as an outlet for displaying cultural artistry. Rachel Smart of Hooper Bay, here posing with her grandson, made this coiled grass basket. (Roy Corral)*





for halibut fishing. There was no competency test to earn this privilege; my father knew I was ready. By 11, I could navigate safely without a compass despite summer fog that coincides with the return of halibut from their southern migration. Seeking to avoid



the cold, the fish move to deeper water just north or south of the Aleutian Islands, some 300 miles from St. Paul.

Even as a boy, I could feel, smell and read the texture of the sea and air and know when it was time to return to avoid a storm. I knew what part of the day halibut preferred to feed, where and when they go to give birth. I knew how to “ride” a skiff or dory when caught in large swells or breaking sea. I knew the sea bottom.

Although confident at a young age, I also retained respect for the Bering Sea and the halibut it held. The price of arrogance in the face of the Great Mystery — the divine mystery of creation — could mean death. I knew that even for the most accomplished mariner, there always was more to learn about halibut and the sea.

The way of the hand line allows a

FAR LEFT: Estelle Oozevaseuk, a storyteller and elder from Gambell, recalls changes that she has seen in her Bering Sea homeland. Traditional knowledge has enabled scientists to build a framework in which to assess current changes in the environment. (Al Grillo)

LEFT: Retired whaling captain Steven Aningayou describes the intricacies of traditional whaling to a 1991 visitor to Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. (Al Grillo)

fisherman to feel the halibut directly, to communicate almost as if through a telephone line. Through the hand line, I can sense a halibut is near the hook even before it strikes and I can prepare for the lightning fast bite; otherwise, the fish will take the bait before I can set the hook.

Through the line's subtle movements, I can tell if the bait is being sucked in but not taken by the fish. I can tell if the halibut is merely moving its body across the bait before deciding whether to bite. Once on the line, I can tell how the halibut is hooked — by the lip, jaw or gullet, or snagged on the body. This knowledge guides how the fish is brought up — quickly or slowly, gently or vigorously. I can tell the size of the halibut and how much it will fight before ever hoisting my line. All this information helps determine success but it is unavailable to commercial

fishermen who use longlines, in which 50 or more hooks are set on a line as much as three miles long and sunk to the ocean floor to be retrieved by a hydraulic winch — a technique that eliminates intuition or the use of one's senses. Young Aleuts today who use longlines without first learning the traditional ways lose much in their understanding of the fish.

Finally, after the fish surrenders, I bring the great halibut into our boat with Suraj's help. Her eyes well with tears. The halibut's end is filled with meaning; she has given her life with dignity, power and grace so that our lives may be sustained.

We spend the day butchering the fish, honoring it in the traditional way by making sure to waste no part. We return her skeleton back to the sea so that the fish will once again choose to feed someone else. We drum and offer a thanksgiving prayer. Even after some of the fish is given away to my extended family, there is still plenty to meet our needs for months.

After 44 years of fishing, the spirits of the halibut and Bering Sea continue to teach me, their Aleut apprentice. This wisdom is the true gift of the halibut

A walrus skin is stretched to dry before being sewn into a boat frame for a Savoonga hunter on St. Lawrence Island.
(Jon R. Nickles)

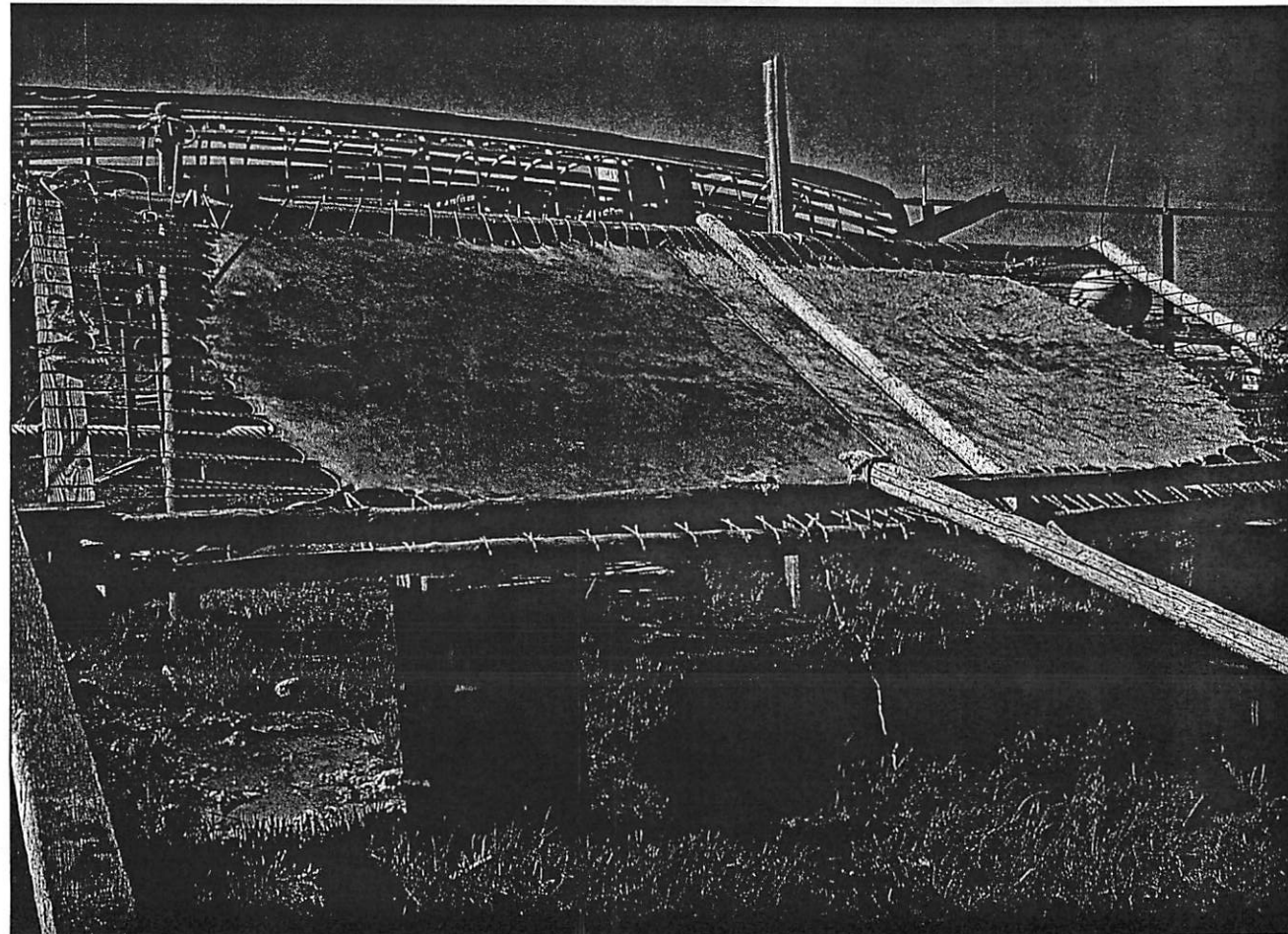
heart, given to all who have courage to accept it.

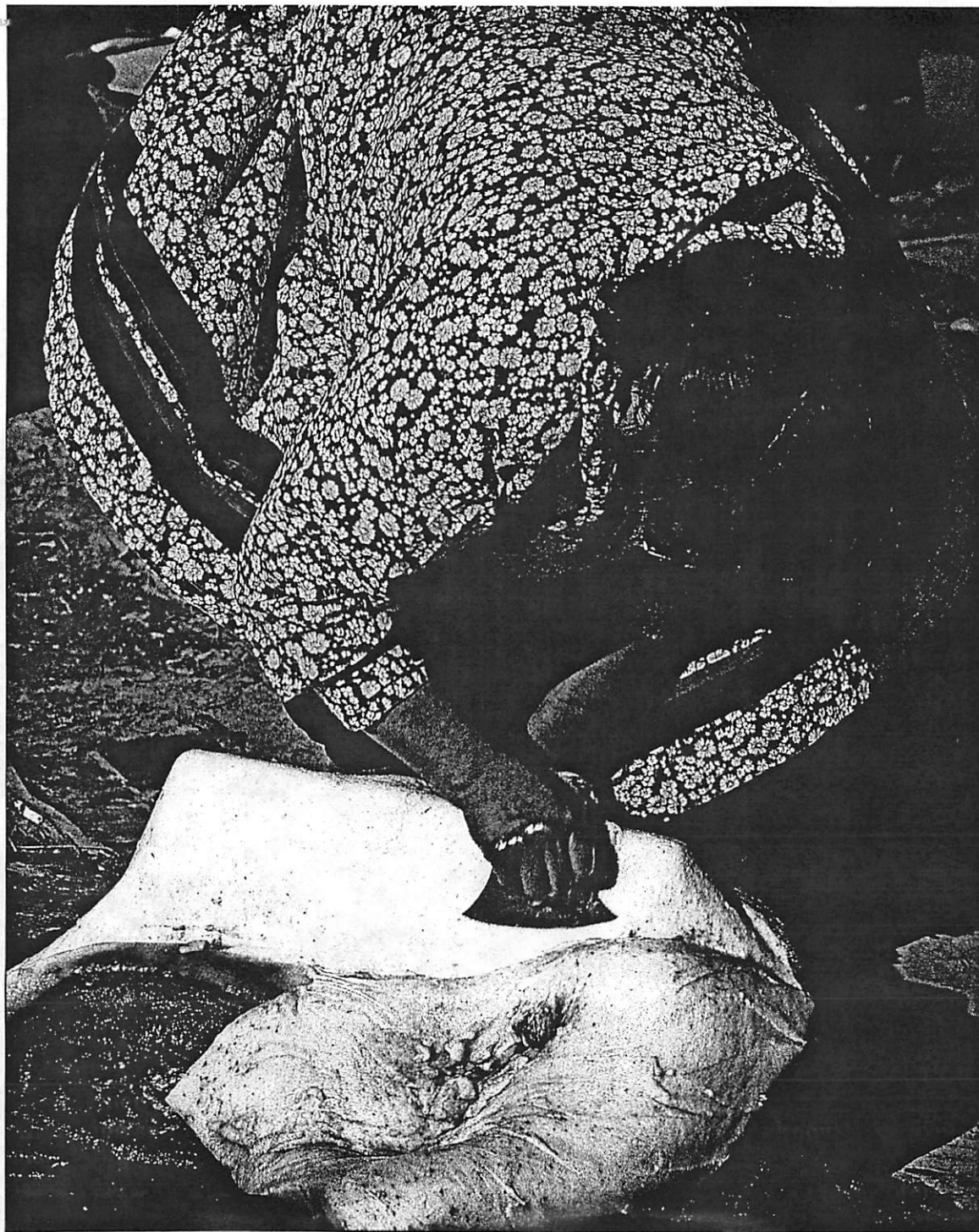
Today the Bering Sea is in trouble: Populations of fish, seabirds and marine mammals — many taken for traditional food — are dwindling. On the decline are four species of eider; two species of murre; two species of kittiwakes; red-faced cormorants, northern fur seals;

Steller sea lions; harbor seals; spotted seals; sea otters; herring; sandlance; capelin; and pollock, lucrative target of the bottomfish fleet.

If unchecked, these losses threaten the future of coastal communities — many of them Native — in a pattern I believe is not unlike the loss of South American cultures when rain forests are cut.

Native people, researchers and





LEFT: Using a traditional woman's knife called an *ulu*, a Yupik woman separates a fat layer from a seal hide. (David Rhode)

FACING PAGE: A Savoonga youngster holds a sculpin found in a tidepool along a St. Lawrence Island shore. Traditionally the fish could be used to supplement soup or as bait. (Jon R. Nickles)

environmentalists are earnestly seeking ways to help the Bering Sea. There is much talk about the value of traditional knowledge and wisdom, which I believe can provide valuable insight into the Bering Sea's failing ecosystem and people's place in it. But scientists and others who genuinely seek to understand this way of knowing have a hard time because we believe it is connected to wisdom that comes from the heart, the bridge into the spiritual and the divine.

I am among a handful of Alaska Natives called to lecture and write about traditional knowledge and wisdom for educational or scientific forums and I am convinced there are many ways in which traditional understanding can complement science. For instance, it was Pribilof Aleuts who first noted that seabird chicks were falling off cliffs and dying in large numbers. The people also noticed that breastbones of some adult seabirds protruded and chest muscles appear caved in, both irregular conditions. Aleuts have reported that fur seal pelts are thinning and that more

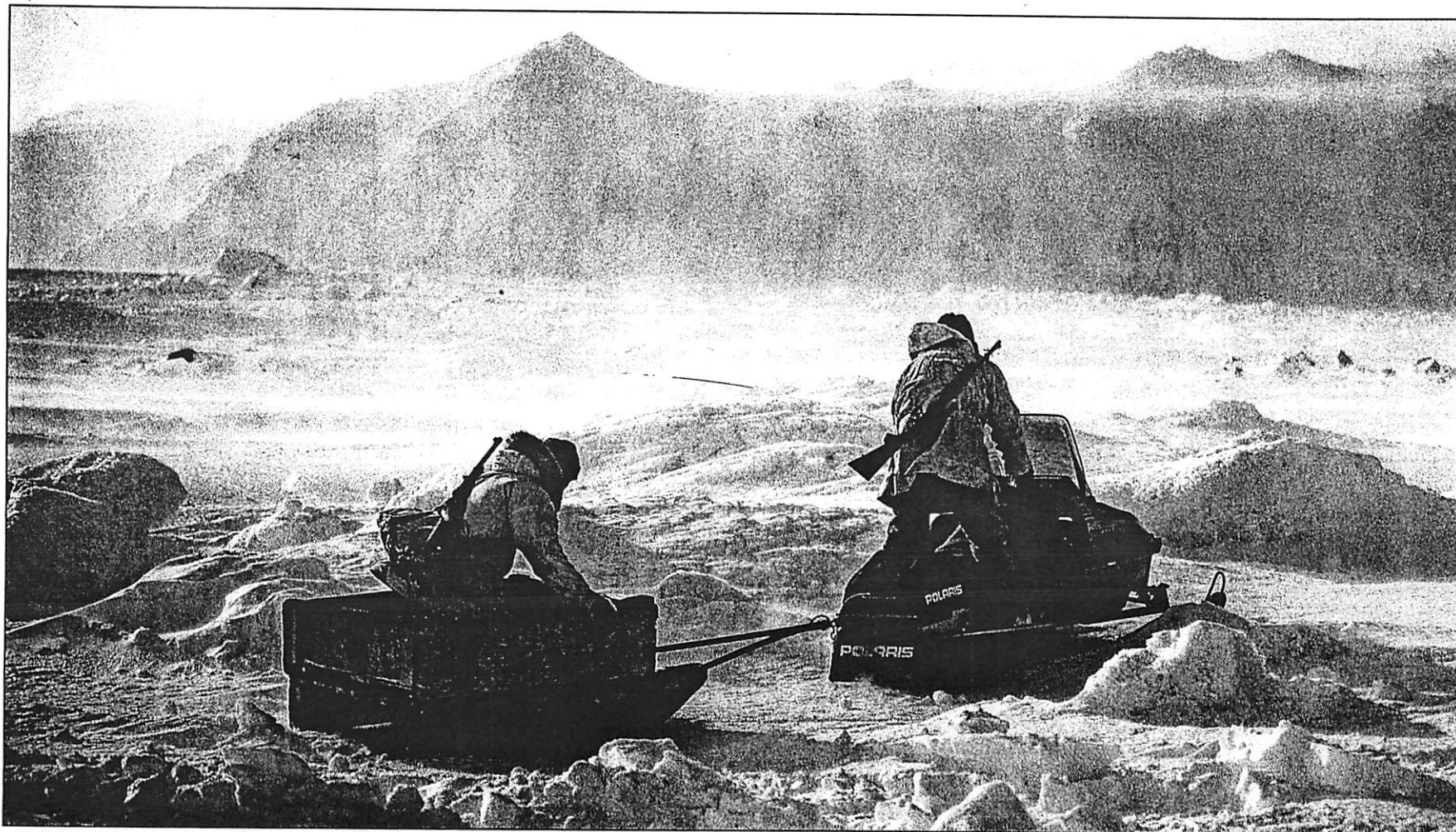
seal pups are being preyed on by sea lions than anyone could recall.

These details told us that sea creatures were “food stressed,” that is, something was amiss in the Bering Sea’s usual predator-prey web; Natives observed this a full 10 years before Western science made an identical conclusion.

To the north, Inupiat Eskimo began noticing a thinning of the sea ice — an early indication, some experts say, of global climate change. Over the years other Alaska Native groups have contributed similar anomalous observations about the natural world — beluga whales spotted hundreds of miles from sea in the Yukon River, for

instance. These reports are based on centuries of knowledge about the way things ought to be.

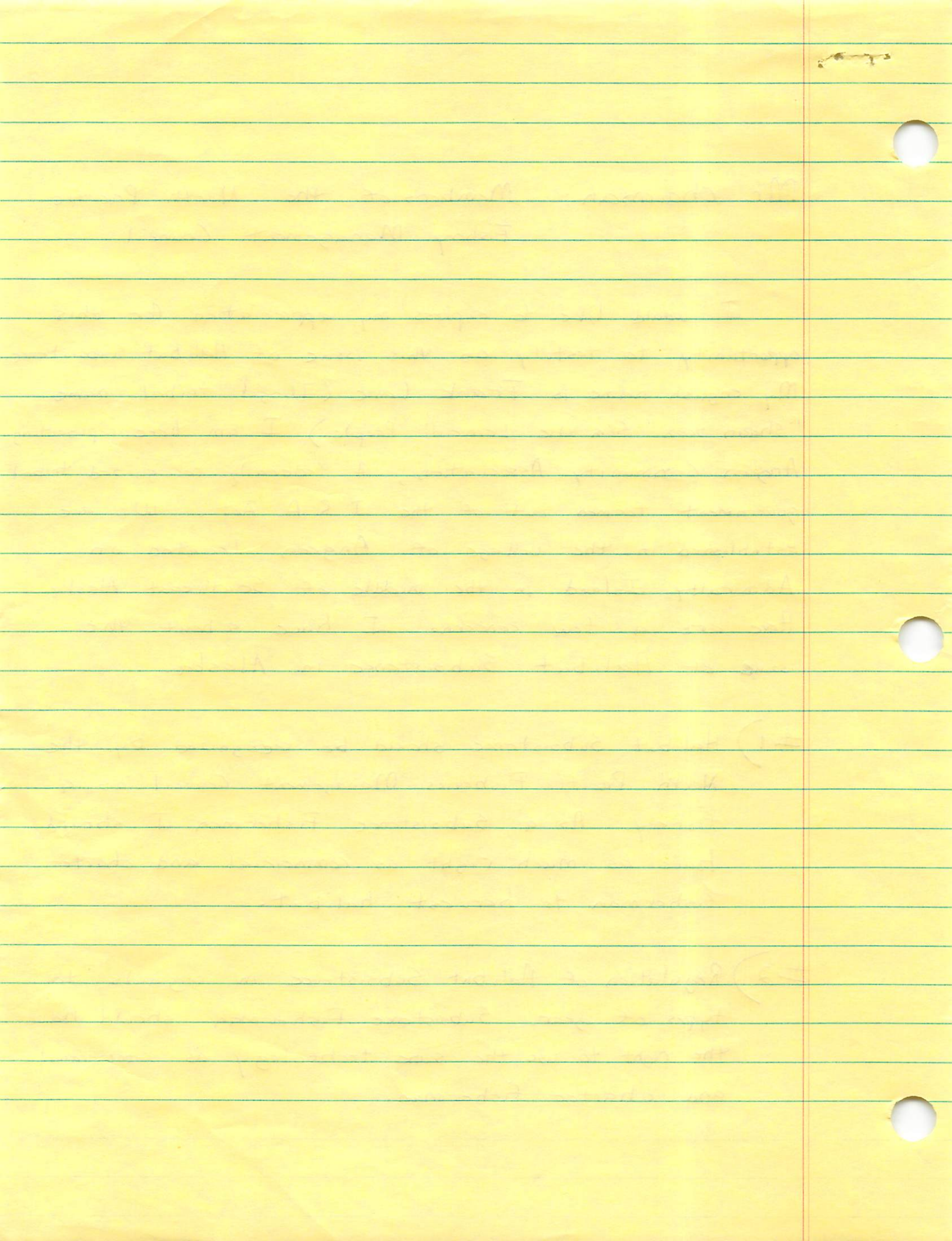
Diomedé hunters work their way through rough ice on the Bering Sea. Russia’s Big Diomedé Island rises in the background. (Al Grillo)



Mr. Chairman; Members of the North Pacific
Fishery Management Council.

I would like to express my appreciation for this opportunity to testify on this issue of Halibut Subsistence. My English name is Frank Lane (Tlingit tribal name "Shaan Soox" from the Leinardi People). I am here representing Angoon Community Association, a federally recognized tribal government formed out of the I.R.A. Act. We are established in the village of Angoon located on Admiralty Island in the middle of Southeast Alaska. Here are a few concerns I have about the issue of Halibut Subsistence in Alaska.

- #1) Halibut Subsistence should be recognized by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council as a fishery. As a Subsistence Fisherman I should have as much right as commercial and charter fisherman to harvest halibut.
- #2) Regulation of Halibut Subsistence in regards to types of gear. Subsistence Fisherman should have the right to use the same technology as commercial and charter fisherman.



#3) Bag Limits of Halibut Subsistence -

I was taught to respect any resource upon which I depend on (Halibut being one of them) Thinking of the future prevents me from harvesting more than I should. Waste is totally out of the question. I say this in respect of my Cultural Heritage. I see no need of limits in my community.

Once again I would like to reemphasize my concern to the council for recognition of "Halibut Subsistence" as a fishery. The fact is this fishery existed before the commercial and charter industry was established. It was a way of life for my fore fathers and will continue to be for future generations, a resource to depend on.

Thank You

Mr. Chairman.

