

Alaska's Fur Industry

NORTH WESTERN A

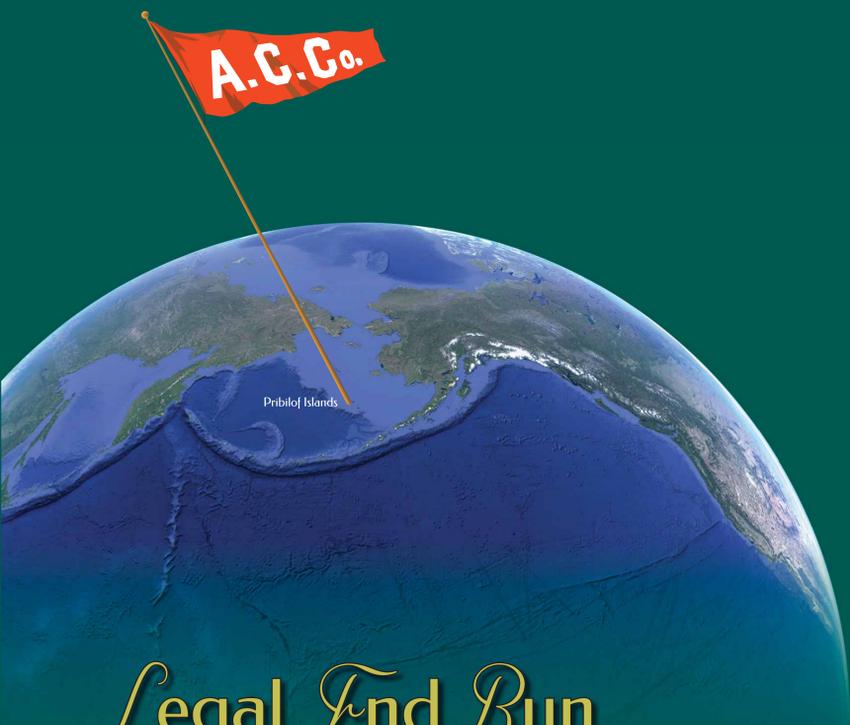
Sea otter and fur seal pelts—the most valuable resources to the Russians—immediately attracted Americans to Alaskan waters.

No Holds Barred

By the 1830s, the Russians implemented conservation measures to rebuild the populations of overhunted marine fur bearers, particularly the fur seals on the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea. However, in 1867, American traders descended upon the islands to cash in on the lucrative pelts. With no American hunting restrictions, they killed so many fur seals in one year that Congress designated the Pribilof Islands a special reserve and sent agents to oversee hunting.



Killing seals on St. Paul Island
Photo courtesy of University of Alaska Anchorage
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Fortune and Fur

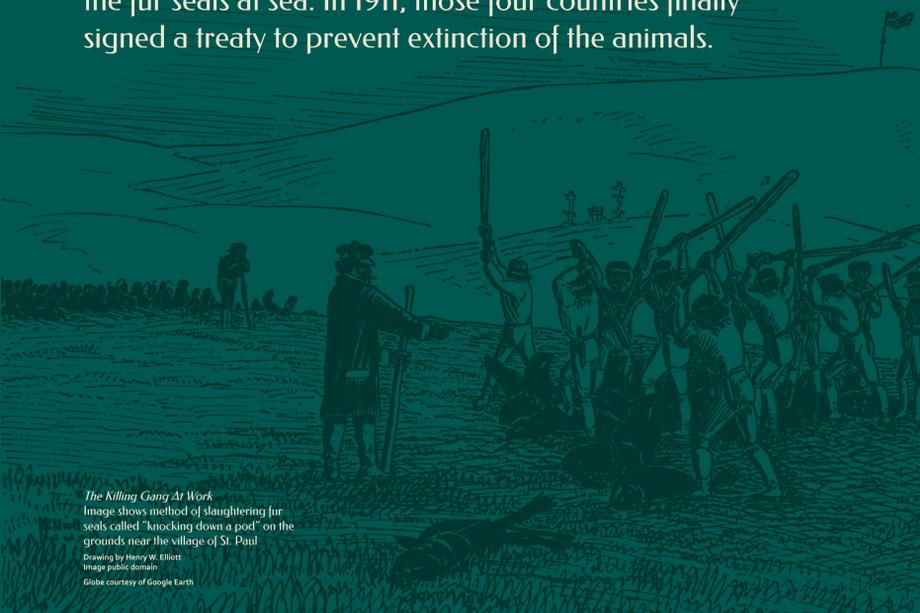
In 1870, the U.S. Department of the Treasury awarded an exclusive 20-year lease for hunting on the Pribilof Islands to the Alaska Commercial Company. During the next 40 years, the ACC made a fortune. The rent and royalties they paid to the U.S. nearly covered the \$7.2 million the U.S. paid for Alaska.

Legal End Run

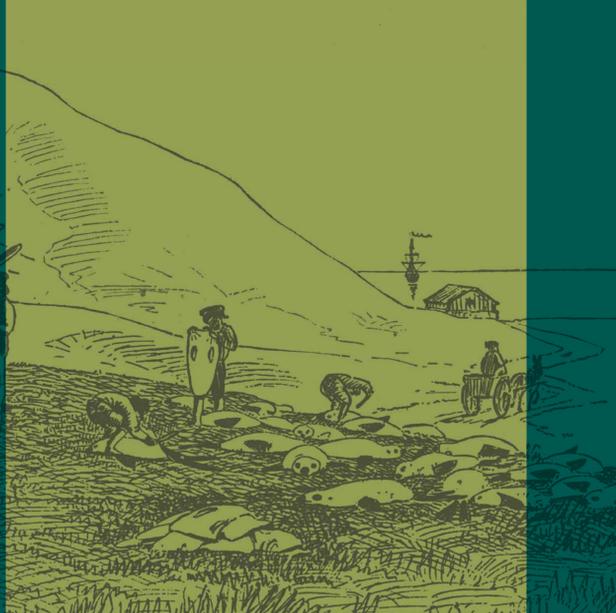
The people known as Unangan, forcibly relocated to the Pribilof Islands by the Russians, continued to hunt for the ACC. The ACC's hunting lease, though well-intended, controlled many aspects of their lives and it failed to reduce overhunting. British, Russian, Japanese, and other American fur hunters sidestepped the ACC's exclusive lease by hunting the fur seals at sea. In 1911, those four countries finally signed a treaty to prevent extinction of the animals.

Business as Usual

The ACC purchased most of the Russian-American Company's fur trading posts throughout Alaska and hired many of their employees, many of whom were Russian-Native creoles. The RAC's established trade network helped the ACC outcompete other businesses. Many Native people said the Russians just changed their name.



The Killing Gang At Work
Image shows method of slaughtering fur seals called "knocking down a pod" on the grounds near the village of St. Paul
Drawing by Henry W. Elliott
Image public domain
Globe courtesy of Google Earth



Timeline:

March 30, 1867	April 9, 1867	June 20, 1867	October 18, 1867	July 27, 1868	July 27, 1868	August 1, 1868	August 15, 1868
Seward and de Stoeckl negotiate Treaty of Cession	U.S. Senate ratifies treaty	Russia and U.S. exchange ratifications	Ceremonial transfer of territory at Sitka	Congress appropriates \$7.2 million to complete purchase	Congress passes Customs Act for Alaska	U.S. Treasury issues check	Russia cashes check

150th Anniversary
Alaska Treaty of Cession
1867~2017