

Tuntut Carlia'istait – ALUTIIQ REINDEER HERDERS



CARIBOU AND ALUTIIQ CULTURE

Caribou (Latin: *Rangifer tarandus*) have never been indigenous to the Kodiak region, yet archaeological data and historic sources indicate that Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people traded with their mainland neighbors for caribou meat, hides, hair, bone, antler, and even teeth. Islanders used the animals' warm skins in clothing, their long white hair for embroidery, and their resilient antler for weapons. Caribou were a valued resource on Kodiak, a pattern that continued in the 20th century when the federal government introduced reindeer—domesticated caribou.

THE REINDEER PROJECT

In the 1890s, the U.S. Department of the Interior started the Alaska Reindeer Project. By importing reindeer and teaching Native people to raise them, officials hoped to create a steady supply of game and encourage entrepreneurship. In 1924, the government sent 32 reindeer to southern Kodiak Island, an area with abundant sedge grass and moss—reindeer food. The animals were to be cared for by the community of Akhiok.

AKHIOK'S REINDEER MEN

In preparation for Kodiak's reindeer project, Akhiok's Chief Simeon Agnot became an apprentice in the Alaska Reindeer Service. He traveled to Cantwell, Alaska, to learn herding, then returned to Akhiok to train others to care for the animals.

In the winter, the herders worked in two-week shifts, living in a remote cabin and watching over the reindeer in their pastures. In spring, the herders drove pregnant females to Cape Alitak for fawning. In summer, the reindeer were

allowed to graze unattended, while the herders worked in local canneries, until it was time to drive the reindeer back to winter pastures. In 1931, eight Native stockholders formed the Alitak Native Reindeer Corporation and obtained a grazing lease to take ownership of the herd. By the early 1950s the Alitak herd held about 3,000 animals.

I started reindeer herding when I was about 12. That was our livelihood—before working in all those canneries . . . We were selling the meat to those canneries for about 12 cents a pound. My dad has signals and whistling. When they ran round and he whistled, they stopped.

Ephraim Agnot, son of Simeon Agnot

THE GREAT FIRE

In the early 1950s a catastrophic fire burned thousands of acres of tundra around Akhiok. The disastrous fire, started by a stove in the herders' cabin, forced village residents to evacuate until firefighters from Kodiak's naval base could control the blaze. The herd escaped during the fire. With no pasture for the animals, they could not be easily managed from Akhiok. After the fire, Akhiok's reindeer herding industry faded. Most herders took jobs in the fishing industry. Simeon Agnot, his family, and a few others continued to work with the herd until 1961, when the elder Agnot retired. A few feral animals survive today in scattered herds around the Ayakulik River drainage.