

Ancient Aleut cave difficult issue for Natives

by Jeffrey R. Richardson
for the Tundra Times

To archaeologists, the ancient burial cave which came to light in the Aleutians this summer may seem like a new and exciting discovery.

But to others, the cave was not news, and exciting would hardly describe their emotions now that its existence has been widely publicized.

"This is not a true discovery to the Aleut people," said John Larsen, president of The Aleut Corp. "The location of the cave has been known to Aleut elders. They were not anxious to see it located."

The burial site, which scientists

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believe may be a thousand years old, is part of an old village complex which has held archaeological interest for some time, though little if any evaluation has been conducted there.

The site was selected by The Aleut Corp. under Section 14(h) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which provided for acquisition of lands of particular historical or cultural interest to the people of a region.

The sensitive question of what to do once the cave, with its remains of more than 30 people and valuable artifacts, has become known to outsiders, had to be answered in a hurry.

"This took us by surprise. It was a situation we had to react to rather quickly. This is the first time we've had to deal with something of this type," Larsen said.

Taking some of the pressure off, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service told the corporation the agency would comply with any decision taken by Aleuts. They decided to remove the remains, put them through a preservative process, which can take up to a year or more and re-enter them in the region "to keep them safe from disturbance," said Larsen.

"We've had a lot of calls expressing concerns, more about removal from the state. The justification for removal in this case is well-appreciated by shareholders. Once the cave became known, the floodgates



The cave contained the remains of more than 30 people and valuable artifacts. Aleut leaders said that if the cave became known — its location currently is being kept secret — it would be looted.

would be open. It most certainly would be looted. People debated. I debated and made a call on it," Larsen explained.

The fear of looting arises from thefts of artifacts from other sites over the years. Larsen added that 95 percent of the artifacts were not display quality.

Some that were may eventually be displayed at The Aleut Corp. office in Anchorage.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Bruce Batten said the location of the burial site is still being kept under wraps while officially sanctioned work to remove remains and ar-

tifacts proceeds.

Citing the "immeasurable value" of the items to present-day Aleuts, Batten noted that the Aleutian Islands are particularly vulnerable to looting because of easy coastal access, remoteness and lack of enforcement capabilities.



Photos courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service