

Audubon endorses Pribilof seal hunt

In its spring meeting in Seattle recently, the National Audubon Society recommended renewal of the four-nation treaty permitting the limited harvest of fur seals at St. Paul Island in the Pribilofs. Without the treaty, the annual harvest would be unregulated; under the treaty, only sub-adult (non-breeding) males are harvested—no females, pups or breeding males. The treaty also prohibits any harvest on the high seas

In its resolution, the Audubon Society emphasized the protective aspects of the treaty, debunking the popular argument used by critical wildlife protection groups, that the harvest is causing a decline in the fur seal population.

"We are unaware of any scientific evidence to indicate that current levels of commercial harvest of sub-adult male fur seals is contributing to the population decline," the resolution said. Some of the factors of the decline cited by the Society's resolution

were: entanglement of seals in fishing nets; disease; increased predation; and fluctuating food supplies, probably due in part to competition with the commercial fishing industry. Fur seal herds in the North Pacific are currently estimated at 1.2 million or more.

The 1957 treaty between the United States, the U.S.S.R., Canada and Japan, allows the U.S. and U.S.S.R. to harvest several thousand fur seals, of which a percentage go to Canada and Japan. Until last year, Pribilof islanders did the actual work of the hunt under the stewardship of the federal Commerce Department.

For over 200 years, the Aleut people of the region have been harvesting the fur seals. Even today, a major portion of the local Native cash economy is directly related to the annual hunt.

