

## Reindeer herding: Tough existence

(From The LAND)

"Reindeer" immediately brings a romantic image into most people's minds—Dancer, Prancer, Donner and Blitzen, flying through the air with Santa's sleigh, "Rudolph with his nose so bright..." and visions of graceful animals gently tended by a herder on the quiet tundra.

The reality can be shattering. For those who raise, herd, slaughter and sell reindeer to provide an economic base for survival, their life is a tough and spartan existence by any standards. The reindeer herder wages a constant battle against cold, snow and ice in the winter-time, mosquitoes and some of the toughest walking terrain in the world during summer.

He fights predators, his allotted range area is huge, and he is his own butcher and salesman. Despite the hardships, there are a number of Native Alaskans willing to be reindeer herd operators.

Reindeer, not native to North America, were introduced into Alaska to supply the coastal

Natives with a dependable source of meat. Largely through the efforts of Dr. Sheldon Jackson, a missionary, 1280 head of reindeer were introduced into Alaska from Siberia between 1892 and 1902.

Lapp herders were brought to Alaska to teach Native herders the techniques of successful reindeer husbandry.

The reindeer industry flourished in Alaska, and in 1932, the population was estimated at over 600,000 animals. Herds were distributed throughout the coastal area from the Alaskan Peninsula to Barrow in the north.

After some non-Native ownership of deer for commercial purposes, the Reindeer Act was passed by Congress in 1937, limiting ownership of reindeer to Natives only.

In the mid-thirties, due to severe weather, over-grazing, and a lack of successful reindeer management, the reindeer population dropped drastically until it reached a low of 26,000 animals in 1950.

Current Revival in

### Reindeer Industry

Since then, the industry has been making a slow comeback. A revival of interest in establishment of reindeer herds throughout the coastal areas of Alaska has been expressed by Native groups from Pt. Barrow, Kotzebue, and Dillingham. One of the basic considerations of ANCSA was to establish an economic resource base for the Native people, and reindeer herding is one of the few potentials for economic use of Native lands.

Unfortunately, the introduction of reindeer herds creates conflicts with wildlife species such as caribou, wolves, and bears.

The State of Alaska has little control over introduction of reindeer to private lands. The private land holdings will not be large enough in most cases to provide a grazing area; therefore, BLM managed lands will be required for additional grazing.

The NANA corporation (NANA Reindeer Enterprises) has applied for a grazing permit covering (d)(1), (d)(2), village and regional lands in the Kotzebue Area. They have moved 1000 head of reindeer onto village selected lands on the Baldwin Peninsula.

Currently BLM's Fairbanks District Office is completing an Environmental Analysis Record (EAR) concerning the application. The preliminary EAR will be distributed to a wide variety of interest groups for comments, and the revised EAR will be the basis for a BLM decision in regard to NANA's application.

### Statewide Reindeer Policy Needed

The Reindeer Act has not been revised since it was written in 1937, and the regulations to provide no Animals Unit Months (AUM's are a measurement of grazing needed to support one reindeer) fees as well as little basis for trespass action.

There is also no basic mechanism for range administration when the grazing area is split between several different land owners.

Since policy conflicts on reindeer could exist at several levels, i.e. between Native subsistence and commercial use, between State agencies, and between agencies within Interior, BLM, in cooperation with State and Federal agencies, is in the process of preparing a policy position paper on reindeer grazing.

This paper may identify areas of the National Resource Lands where (1) no reindeer grazing will be allowed (because of conflicts); (2) reindeer grazing may be allowed (with adequate mitigation); and (c) reindeer grazing will be possible (no major conflicts).

This policy will be coordinated with the State and with Federal agencies and Native groups and submitted to the State Clearinghouse in the Office of the Governor of Alaska for review and response. A statewide policy on reindeer grazing should be established sometime in 1976.