

MEKORYUK ON NUNIVAK STARTS HALIBUT CO-OP

By TIM BRADNER

Halibut, a fishy business anyway, is putting some meaning into "Economic Development" in Southwestern Alaska.

Storm-lashed Nunivak Island off the southwest coast is hardly in the mainstream of state commerce.

Yet 300 villagers at Mekoryuk, on the north shore, are changing Nunivak's reputation as a lonely, fog-shrouded Bering Sea island populated

with little but reindeer and Musk oxen.

Mekoryuk has an experimental new Halibut Co-Op.

And despite their isolation, Mekoryuk's Eskimo residents are showing a "business acumen" that could and will, given time, put them on top of any business dealing with commercial interests in the state.

Subsistence fishing—fishing to eat—has long been the rule along parts of the coast. Na-

tive fishermen never realized that commercial quantities of halibut might exist near their villages.

But a free-lancing fishery biologist, Leonard Revet, an \$1,200 OEO grant, two VISTA volunteers and an aggressive group of Mekoryuk fishermen proved that it did.

Revet, formerly with the state Fish and Game in Kodiak, watched the Halibut runs into Bristol Bay and figured that an arm of the run

could extend up along the southwestern coast—past Nunivak and a string of lower Kuskokwim and Yukon villages.

Armed with a few facts and some big ideas, Revet went to Mekoryuk as a possible starting point for a southwestern coast native fishing cooperative.

Own Expenses

He paid his own travel expenses and when he got to Mekoryuk he found highly in-

terested village people and two VISTA volunteers—Eric Hagen and Jeffrey Keahon ready to pitch in and go to work.

Hagen, 22, was in Fairbanks for a few days this week.

"Working with these people in starting the co-op this year was a real pleasure," he told the Tundra Times, "These people have the business awareness that they could take what was started

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Mekoryuk Halibut Co-op . . .

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this summer and build it into a sizable enterprise."

"They're really ripe for this right now. Despite the communication problem on Nunivak, with only occasional mail planes, people at Mekoryuk have had a lot of contact with the outside world."

Communication

"It's possibly because Nunivak is a game reserve with a lot of visitors, that they've been able to develop this communication."

Eric, from Vermont, said he hadn't much more experience with fish other than a little sport fishing back in New England.

The other volunteer at Mekoryuk, Keahon, also had just a little sport fishing to his credit when they helped start the co-op.

"Technically, we could never have done it without Revet. Even after a season at it, I don't know much about fishing or biology—and Leonard is pretty competent."

Starting

The Mekoryuk experiment started in late July near the beginning of the Halibut run. Eight village men went out with boats to test-fish in various places, using either "skates" (long lines with floaters and hooks attached), or "drop-lines" (weighted hooks that drop directly down into the water).

Fishing then began in earnest. Two fish orders from the Swanson Brothers store in Bethel, responding to earlier queries from Nunivak, requested a 100-pound and then another 500-pound shipment of fish.

Three village women were working constantly cutting and filleting the halibut. From there the fish was stored in boxes and frozen in a 7,000-pound capacity open-door freezer loaned from the BIA's reindeer project.

A 2,000-pound order from the Northern Commercial Company in Bethel really got work going.

With eight fishermen working and three women filleting, the capacity of the co-op was soon found to be around 600 pounds a day—processed.

Freezer

Problems with the freezer loaned by the BIA soon became apparent.

"It was an old van freezer mounted on the back of a truck," Hagen said, "It didn't freeze fast enough and with the constant opening and shutting of the door, we had a lot of trouble keeping the temperature down. It was good for reindeer meat, but not fish."

"The small freezer would be fine for a small-order business over a long period of

time, but to stay in the large order business a flash freezer is what is needed."

Flash freezers are larger, more expensive units with separate freezing and storage rooms. Fish and meats can be frozen quickly and stored in large compartments economically.

Failed

The state Department of Economic Development had a plan to equip villages throughout coastal parts of the state with flash-freezing units to promote commercial fishing.

The plan failed when it became apparent that the freezer units required heavy power sources—as much as a 25KW generator—to supply electricity to the freezers.

The cost of the generating units would have been as much as the freezer itself. Two diesels are required—one for "standby." Concrete foundations for the engines, a power shed, and electrical switching gear would also be needed.

Glazing with ice is necessary in a commercial fish-processing operation, Hagen also said, to keep the moisture in the fish while frozen.

The filleted halibut is dipped in ice water and then frozen—the coating of ice acts as a jacket to keep moisture.

But with the old van freezer keeping the glaze on the fish—with temperatures fluctuating in the compartment—was extremely difficult.

Orders

At first the Co-op rushed to meet orders, and then had difficulty drumming up new business from the Bethel and Anchorage areas.

A number of small, private requests for fish came in, Hagen said, and larger orders were being sought from food distributors in Anchorage. Anchorage Cold Storage Company bought a quantity.

Communication posed quite a problem—once to twice a week mail planes limited soliciting that Mekoryuk people could do.

"If we could have someone on the outside, in Anchorage maybe, handling part of the sales work and expediting, I think we could do a lot better," Hagen said.

The Mekoryuk Co-op, after getting off to a shaky start this year, can only look forward to better things next year.

Hagen said that the Mekoryuk people already were visualizing an expanded cooperative, with as many as 25 fishermen from that village alone out after halibut.

The co-op could even be expanded to other villages in the southwest, such as Hooper Bay, and with a little or-

ganization an inter-village southwestern Alaska cooperative could be formed.

Gross income for the project this year was around \$2,000, Hagen estimated.

Bigger Boats

Expanding the fishing would mean bigger boats needed for village fishermen so that they could stay out several days fishing, he said.

Now, 14-foot open skiffs are used with outboard motors. In the exploratory phase of the fishing, gas was bought for the fishermen from a \$1200 grant from the office of Economic Opportunity, to help the project.

Once fishing started on a commercial basis, though, the men had to buy their own gas.

In the first part of the season, halibut were running heavy and large. A 99-pound fish was landed by one man.

Toward the end of the run, though, size began dropping.

\$40 a Day

Some of the eight men, mostly younger village men, who worked this season were able to make \$40 a day from their fishing, at times.

Hagen said he saw no reason why larger numbers of fishermen couldn't make more once technical limitations were overcome and markets found.

"The fish are certainly there. I don't see any reason why people in the cities wouldn't buy them if we can get the fish there," Hagen said. "The people here are certainly willing to work hard in the co-op effort."

"You've got all the ingredients to begin an economic base for this region. All it takes is a little push, a little help, to get things rolling."