

Reindeer Herding Traditional Native Industry

Thomas Johnson, veteran Eskimo reindeer herder from Nome, indicated to the Tundra Times today that he is opposed to turning over authority for the slaughter of reindeer from the Department of the Interior to the state.

The proposal, Johnson said, is now under consideration by the Interior Department.

"The Reindeer Act," he added, "specified that the natives of Alaska would take over the slaughter house.

"I feel that the Alaskan Natives should assume the authority to administer the slaughter houses through the Alaskan Federation of Natives. Reindeer herding has traditionally been a native industry."

Johnson said the one experiment the state conducted, the construction of a slaughter house at Nome, was a failure.

"It was too far from the reindeer, too close to Nome, and too close to the noise of the jets and the airport," he said.

Because of the inexperience of the state, it failed and the slaughter house closed down, he said.

"The white man made the mistake, and now we have to rectify it. We have thrown 2000 hides away because of transportation problems and lack of facilities.

"We would like to use the slaughter house as a tannery. It was unwittingly built as a slaughter house, and never could be used as one," Johnson said.

Besides the long-standing guarantee of native control over what is a native industry, there is

another reason why the state should not control the industry, Johnson stated.

The state has been assured that it would be given authority over processing meat from domesticated animals, including inspection of the meat. The reindeer is not, in the true sense a domesticated animal, and the procedures for processing meat from domesticated animals would simply not apply to the reindeer industry, he added.

Such regulations may threaten the traditional, natural native way of slaughtering and processing the meat.

"We corral them, shoot them, butcher them, bleed the meat, and then freeze it.

"This is more natural, and the Eskimos call it sweet meat," Johnson said.

The other type of processing, Johnson added, was not right

because the reindeer was slaughtered after the reindeer was overly spooked and frightened which resulted in too much excretion of adrenalin that made the meat taste unnatural.

Thomas Johnson is the president of the Northwest Reindeer Processing company, which is entirely native owned and its employees are entirely Alaskan Natives.