

# Gambell man 'finds' footprints where he left them

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Roger Siwooko has returned to his home village of Gambell after 22 years of living and working elsewhere and he says that "I left my footprints on the ice 22 years ago and they are still there. I feel it."

"You'll get a straight answer to any question from Siwooko, who, at the age of 48 and after holding several "city" jobs, has retained the knowledge of subsistence hunting he learned as a youngster as well as learning how to cope with the advent of western economic system.

Siwooko, his wife, and five of his six children, returned to Gambell, on St. Lawrence Island, five years ago after a 22-year leave.

"You know I spent 17 years in Anchorage, five years in Bethel. You know I feel it after spending some 22 years away, when I come out here, fall time, when I was out on the ice, and I just said to myself, 22 years ago I left my foot prints on the ice and I feel it now. Isn't that something? To know you've been hunting all your life and you go somewhere for years and come back and then go hunting out on the ice and feel in your mind that you've left your footprints on the ice. You see them in your mind.

"I think that's the way Natives feel about our land. That's the way I feel about my life here," Siwooko said.

"You see I have two jobs here in Gambell. One job is a plant operator with the Alaska Village Electrical Corp. and the other I work seasonally as a cook at the Gambell High School."

At 17 years of age, Siwooko left St. Lawrence Island to work as a boatman on a hospital ship the M.V. Health for six months until the ship was docked permanently.

"Later in the forties, I worked as a pot washer and then as a cook at the hospital in Nome.

Ever since then I have worked as a cook at the Anchorage Alaska Native Service Hospital and at the Bethel Public Health Service Hospital."

Walrus hunting has slowed down on the island since he left, according to Siwooko, but hunters are still taking walrus as the opportunities arise. "Walrus hunting has been going on ever since Eskimos were born," he says with a laugh. "But for this spring, the walrus hunting has been going on since the end of whaling season."

St. Lawrence Island whalers struck and landed the first bowhead whale of this year when Nelson Aloa of Savoonga and Leonard Apongalook of Gambell striking and landing their first whales on April 14.

The village of Gambell reached its quota the next week.

By the last week, there was no more ice near Gambell and with walrus hunting all but over, Siwooko says a few village hunters got walrus. He was unsure of the numbers.

"I thought we were going to have a lot of ice, you see, but

not this year," Siwooko said. "The ice went out early all throughout the Seward Peninsula and at both Diomed and St. Lawrence Islands. We got about two good weeks of good hunting, see, that's all. Two weeks this year. For all hunting. You know the hunting depends on the weather, the winds and ice conditions. It is really hard here on the island. You see, too, there is a four-hour shift on the sea current from north and south. Fog is the number three trouble we have here.

"So those factors make life here very hard. Sometimes we hunters have to run away from the sea, or else if we don't, we will end up down somewhere in the Bering Sea," Siwooko said. And at home on the island, Siwooko says that although he loves living on the island, he gets tired of the winds and sometimes gets to wishing to return to the mainland. In the fall of 1975, Siwooko said the temperature for several days was a minus 85 degrees with the wind chill factor.

Life in the villages is most

difficult. Local store prices are high, jobs few, and seasonal. A ready source of income from selling walrus ivory was halted this year by a combined law enforcement bust which reached from the local region to national black market connections. One hunter said that his crew is taking much less, about only 10 percent of last years catch...so he reasoned the price he should get should or could go as far as ten times more?

Gasoline, Siwooko says, costs about \$3 per gallon. "And that starts an impromptu story about the price of eggs... There's still a lot of excitement yet, you know around the island. We will be egg hunting, murre egg hunting. It starts from the last part of June but after the fourth of July the eggs won't be any good to eat because the baby is growing. And it depends on the weather too. We have to go around 30 to 40 miles from here to gather some murre eggs.

"You know, a long time ago before the whiteman came, spring time was the only time we ate eggs. For two dollars you can buy a dozen AA large eggs."

Siwooko said. When asked if the eggs cost so much because they are shipped by air (and the answer is yes), he replied with a laugh, "No, bring in by kayak! That's why is so much."

Summer finds the adult salmon drawn to reach the streams where they hatched on the island. "The fish come in the rivers on the island after the fourth of July. Maybe around the 15th. Some of the Dolly Varden trout stay in the big lagoon at the south side of the island year round, see, but most of them, they go out to the sea."

"The longest river is about 15 to 20 miles long. Some people think this is a small island, but you know you can't walk in a day around the island."

Salmon, Dolly Varden, trout, greyling and whitefish can be found in the island's fresh water streams.

"There used to be lots of codfish too," Siwooko says. "But the Japanese fished them out during WWII. We used to catch 15 to 20 pounders. Now they're coming back too."