

## **Extend fur seal convention**

Public hearings on international treaties must be different than other public hearings. Or at least the public hearing on the International Fur Seal Convention held here Monday was.

Most public hearings are somewhat balanced, with about as many persons for whatever is at issue as against it. And, usually, each side comes up with points or questions that have merit, things that should be considered before any final decision is made.

That's what public hearings are all about, and they are an essential part of the democratic process. Sometimes, even, the people holding the hearings, usually a government, pay attention to what is said and take the good points made by each side into consideration before making a decision.

At issue in Monday's hearing was whether the International Fur Seal Convention, under which the annual Pribilof Island seal harvest is permitted, should be terminated, renegotiated, or extended. The treaty expires next year, but any action to do anything other than allowing it to lapse must be initiated this year.

Monday's hearing was not a balanced one. The overwhelming point of almost all of the numerous persons who testified was that the treaty should be extended without modification at this time. To do otherwise, the panel was told, would result in economic devastation for the Pribilof Islanders, forcing all of them unto welfare, and probably, biological devastation for the seal herds that also make their home on the islands, herds that under the coverage of the treaty and others like it have rebuilt themselves from a paltry hundred thousand or so animals in 1911 to nearly a million and a half now.

All of those making these arguments had facts, figures, reason, and real human concern backing them up. The other side, unfortunately, did not. There seemed to be no merit to their arguments at all; they were crafted of pie-in-the-sky thinking, if it can be called that, and of a strange combination of misplaced emotion for the fur seal and heartless disregard of people. Vague mumblings, unsubstantiated by fact or any empirical data, and all of it made worse because it was all well meaning and sincere.

It was characterized by the suggestion that the Pribilof Aleuts, whose only economic base of any substance at all is the fur seal harvest, would not really suffer all that much should the harvest be stopped. Instead, they could build green houses and raise their own produce, or build a museum so they would not lose touch with and could show tourists what their once proud heritage was, or develop wind powered generator plants, and so on. These suggestions have no merit to them at all, and are in fact nonsensical.

Decisions made in the public interest should not merely be made on some sort of score-card basis, merely by adding up all the pro's and con's and then deciding accordingly. Decisions of that sort should be made on the basis of the merit of each side's argument.

But, in this case both the numbers and the merit of the arguments are overwhelmingly that the convention should be extended, both for the benefit of the fur seal and for the benefit of human beings. To do otherwise at this time would be to make less sense than those arguing against the treaty.