

Student witnesses seal entanglement on St. George

by Todd Lestenkof

Did you know that one of the reasons the United States government bought Alaska was because of the Northern Fur Seals that inhabit the Pribilof Islands? Harvesting fur seal pelts was a booming commercial industry until 1984. Since the U.S. government began commercially harvesting fur seals, they have kept records of their population. The St. George Island fur seal population

has been declining for about 20 years now. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has been trying to determine the causes of the present decline.

One theory suggests that the seals are effected by the flotsam-jetsam factor. The large commercial fishing fleet that annually works the Bering Sea extrudes copious amounts of debris. The debris that harms the seals are discarded packing bands, ropes, plastic trash, and pieces of fishing nets.

"There are 36 seals that were found entangled out of approximately 15,000 counted on St. George Island during July of 1995," said Mike Williams.

"The preliminary entanglement rate for St. George was slightly higher than the rate on St. Paul Island during that same month," he added.

This year was the first year that NMFS completed an accurate estimate of the seals entangled in sea trash on St. George. I witnessed some pretty gruesome cases of entangled fur seals when I worked for NMFS this past summer. When counting the number of bachelor seals in a rookery, they are herded in a large group and released toward the sea. This is done to get a good view, and an accurate count, as the animals pass by.

This summer, as I was observing the seals filing by in a line, I witnessed the brutal legacy of man's blatant disregard for the environment. When we spotted an animal that was entrapped in debris, our job was to capture that animal and free it from death's noose. To do this we had to run along-side the animal and lasso it rodeo style with a noose pole that was 8 to 10 feet long. After noosing it, we would put the seal

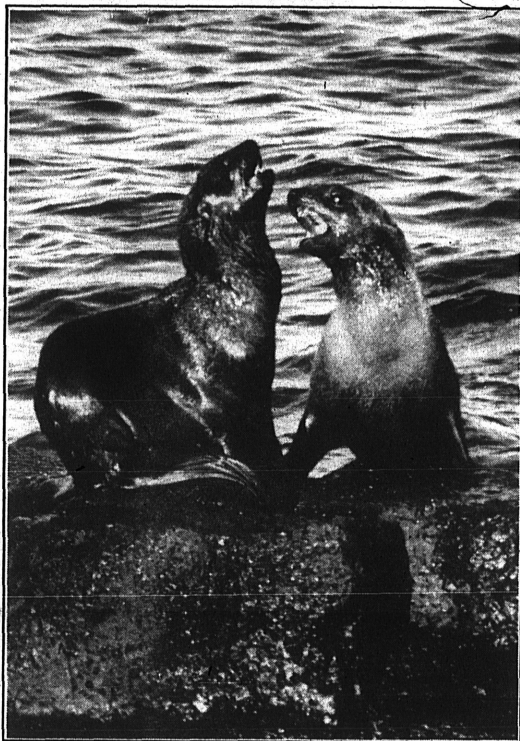
on a restraining-board that held it down for the procedure of cutting the packing band or other debris off. Finally, we would shave a spot of fur near the shoulder area to identify the animal in future encounters.

Some of the seals became entrapped when they were very young and grew up to be full size animals. Sadly, with the debris wrapped around their throats, these victims actually survive long enough to become adults, helpless to untangle themselves and suffer-

ing all their natural lives.

"When NMFS can determine the causes of the declining seal population on St. George Island, the situation may be reversed," concluded Williams. "If everyone can help to decrease marine debris right now, it will help decrease fur seal entanglement in the future."

Editor's Note: Todd Lestenkof is a student on St. George Island. He attended the Indigenous Broadcast Center's Alaska Native Youth Media Institute last summer.



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