

# Taught by his elders, Aga hunts seals for Larsen Bay's subsistence needs

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KODIAK — Brad Aga's Aleut ancestors paddled kayaks to the seal rookeries and hunted with bows and ivory-tipped arrows.

He cruises in a high-powered Boston Whaler and shoots his prey with a .22 Magnum.

But in spite of these vast differences in weaponry and transportation, Aga hunts by many of the principles that governed the hunters of old. No feat of technology has replaced the need to be quiet and stealthy in stalking prey.

Shooting the seal at the right time — not a moment earlier or later — is just as crucial today as it was 100 years ago. Taking care of the meat properly is no less a concern of the modern hunter than it was for his predecessor.

Aga knows that villagers are counting on him to bring them seal so they can make soup, braided gut and other food. It's this sense of responsibility to provide for his people that is perhaps Aga's closest tie to seal hunters of long ago.

Aga is 20 years old, and a decade of hunting and trapping around his Native village of Larsen Bay has taught him values that some fear may be disappearing in this age of technology.

He frequently shares his game with his elders, honoring a tradition that has lasted for generations. Providing for them is Aga's way of thanking them for teaching him the subsistence way of life.

His uncle, Victor Carlson who raised him, took him hunting when Aga was 10. He also learned from his grandparents, Charlie and Alberta Aga, and his aunts, Dora Aga and Marina Wasillie who taught him how to prepare the seal's meat, fat, flippers and other parts for consumption.

"A little bit of everybody kind of pitched in... giving me their opinions on how to hunt... When you're out there putting everything together, and after you've done it for a long time, everything starts to fit," says Aga.

Unconsciously, Aga was applying the lessons taught by his elders the day he and his helpers, Jeff Naumoff and Zack Taylor, went on a seal hunt in Uyak Bay.

The three young men were joined by Vicki Sullivan of the Kodiak Area Native Association, who wanted to observe and document the activity, and Larsen Bay Community Health Representative Sandra Johnson, who acted as coordinator.

The hunt was just the beginning of this traditional activity. Once the seals were shot, their meat, fat and intestines would provide food for a community potlatch that was to take place the following day.

Sullivan said that KANA wanted to document the entire experience, from hunting seal, to cleaning and preparing it for consumption, and finally, the meal itself.

The primitive seal hunters went out on their kayaks for days at a time and often got caught in bad weather. Although Aga and his crew may not travel far from their village, they still are vulnerable to the forces of nature.

However, on this particular day, about the only rough spot was a point where the water got a little sloppy.

"When we get to Amook (Island) where the wind blows against the mountain, it will calm right down," said Aga as the party left the beach in the Boston Whaler. Aga said Uyak Bay is a good place to hunt because, in case the weather does come up, "you can get into different coves and hide out really easy."

Aga wasn't worried about weather



Brad Aga, photo at left, cleans a seal as some of the children in the village watch. Shown above in the skiff are, from left, Zack Taylor, Jeff Naumoff, Brad Aga and Sandra Johnson. Naumoff takes care of the seal shot at Uyak Bay, photo lower right. Below, Dora Aga braids seal intestines with a strip of fat.

land as well as his eyes do, Aga sneaked through tall grass where deep crevices were hidden. He crawled as he reached the top of the hill, trying to conceal his presence from the seals which cavorted on the beach beneath him.

He stopped for a moment, then suddenly sprang up and ran down the hill. He quickly laid down as if he were a soldier waiting in ambush. He aimed toward the water, then relaxed his hold on the gun as the seal disappeared. He aimed again, then moved to a sitting position.

He shot, but made no contact. He laid down again, giving the signal to the guys in the skiff to come to the beach. Once again, Aga got into the skiff, empty-handed.

Aga decided to use a different strategy in which the skiff would play a more active part in the actual kill. He told Naumoff to go on the outside of a pod of seals and move toward the point on an island where he would wait, prepared to shoot.

This plan worked. Aga shot a young seal by the rock and fetched it with the butt of his rifle. The seal "will not taste tough and wild like the older seals," said Aga as he got back into



the skiff.

Aga decided to use the same strategy in going after the next seal, but momentarily it appeared that he might not have to go on the beach.

"There's one there," Taylor pointed, as Aga began to get out of the skiff. Aga quickly aimed, but decided it was too late to get a good shot. He aimed at another spot, but relaxed his grip on the rifle again.

"Go on the outside of 'em, Jeff, and loop 'em. There's a bunch on that rock, too," he said, pointing to another area.

Aga walked to a point, laid down and in minutes he shot a seal. The seal floated, so Naumoff and Taylor didn't have much of a problem retrieving it. They pulled it out of the water at the stern and walked it along the side of the skiff toward the bow.

Aga got back into the skiff and inspected his kill.

"We've got one more to get," he said.

As the skiff approached another islet Aga told Naumoff to drop him off and once again "loop" the seals toward him.

The seals were spread out. Every once in awhile, bulbous heads would pop out of the water for a few seconds, then disappear, leaving round wakes.

These seals seemed to be more illusive. As the skiff came near the islet where Aga waited for an opportune time to shoot, he told Naumoff to go around again.

Naumoff made another sweep and soon the discharge of Aga's Magnum reverberated with the sounds of screeching gulls and terns. He shot a large seal by the rocks.

The pursuit was over. Taylor and Naumoff pulled the seal — the largest of the three — into the skiff, then picked up Aga. Next the crew opened up the seals by making short incisions on their bellies.

Aga says it's important to do this right away because the seals are "so fat and so closed up" that they "bloat up real quick" if not taken care of. The seals were hung over the side toward the stern.

Once more Aga took control of the whaler while his helpers swabbed the decks.

When Aga got back to the village he laid the seals on the beach and

began cleaning them. A few kids and adults and several dogs gathered around to watch. One of the dogs sniffed a seal's nose defensively.

Aga opened up the seals by making a long cut from the small incision up to the neck. Then he cut down to the flippers. He pulled out the intestines and cut up hunks of fat and meat for the braided seal gut.

Some of the fat would be left to ferment and made into "stink oil." Considered a delicacy by the elders, "stink oil" is used on dried or boiled fish and other meat.

Aga also cut out ribs, liver and other parts of the seal. He didn't save the hides of the two big seals because they are no good in the summer, he said. The hair is too short and it falls out.

Aga was taught to clean seals by elders like Wasillie, Carlson and Dora Aga.

"One thing about the elders, when they teach you, they'll never come out and show you," said Aga. "When I got my... first seal... they said, 'You skin it around its flippers and cut down there. You're on your own.'"

"You'd never see them again until it was all cut up and done. You have to do everything on your own. They'll show you what to do and tell you what to do, but they're not going to stand there and watch over you and lecture you while you do it. You have to kind of learn on your own. That way, you get a better understanding of everything."

"In eight years, I've learned a lot, just being by myself and watching the animals."

The elders are glad they taught Aga so well, because now whenever he gets a seal, he brings them a portion of his kill.

Aga rinsed the intestines, the dark red meat, flippers and fat, and put them in plastic bags.

The makings for the prized dish — braided seal gut — were brought to Jessie Panamoff and Dora Aga who cleaned the intestines by cutting short slits about two inches apart and flushed the innards out by squeezing and rinsing them under the faucet.

They soaked the intestines in fresh water overnight to make them firmer — easier to braid.

The next morning the women braided the guts. Jessie Panamoff, an Athabascan Indian was raised in Fort Yukon where there were no seal or other seal mammals available. She learned to braid seal guts from Julie Malutin, an elder from Karluk.

Panamoff braided the seal's intestines with a long, wide strip of fat that had pieces of meat on it. She tied off the end with a leather string.

"You have to keep going 'round and 'round and 'round," she said as she nimbly intertwined the strands. She noted that one must always keep tension on the guts. She frequently rinsed them off.

"After awhile, your fingers get sore," she said. When she ran out of fat, she continued braiding the intestines. Some prefer that part because they don't care for the fat, she said.

"You can fry fat up and eat it with dry fish," said Jessie. She said that some make soup out of the backbone with potatoes and dried *petruski*.

Dora Aga was about 10 years old when she started braiding seal guts.

"I watched a lot of old ladies do it," she said. She compares it to knitting

and crocheting. "Same thing. You've got to watch what way you're doing your stitches anyway... You have to remember what way you're going."

"That's all. Front and back. Getting started is the hardest part about braiding seal guts. After that, it's easy."

Dora said she "taught quite a few of them that wanted to learn (seal braiding) with yarn or string."

She was disappointed that the girls in the village weren't learning to make traditional foods, like braided seal gut.

"I try to teach them but — (they say) 'Eek! I don't want to touch it... Eek! I can't stand the smell of it,' and all that stuff. Smell! It makes me hungry. That's what I tell them."

"There's a little bit of smell, like any other meat, such as beef, pork, duck. Everything has an odor to it, but you eat it. Look at duck, when you clean the ducks. Look at fish, they have an odor and look at how tasty they are. You don't go by the smell. That's what I tell them. You don't eat the smell. You eat the food. Nope. It's good stuff."

She flavors the guts with pickling spice and onion, boiling it for about two hours.

"Then they're not so tough."

Although Aga has hunted for her supper many a time, she said she never shot a seal. She caught baby seals that were abandoned on the beach and brought them up.

"They make good pets, I tell you."



You call 'em, and they come right back. You clap your hands and whistle and they come swimming full bore back. You can train them. They tame easy. They cry just like a baby."

Aga doesn't agree with the opinion that seal meat tastes better in winter and that it's too "fishy" in the summer.

"The meat is good anytime of the year. They eat fish constantly, so they can't be fishy. That's what they live on — flounder, cod..."

Except for the head, which will go to the bears, Aga will keep just about all of the seal. She boils the tongue

with spices and cooks the flippers which taste like pigs' feet, she says. She ferments the fat to make stink oil for dried fish.

As she put the braided seal gut in the pot, Aga expressed satisfaction in her work.

"Look how beautiful. Really pretty."

"It's a work of art," exclaimed Sullivan and Johnson.

"Our people took pride in what they did," said Aga. "And they didn't go to school or college to learn it. Subsistence way of life. It's not 'eek' with me. I eat anything and everything. No kidding. As long as it's edible."

Another village elder known for her expertise in braiding is Clyda Christensen. When she was younger she watched her elders do it and thought there was nothing to it — until she tried herself.

"I always had a hard time" getting started, she said. "This one time I was trying it and my son (who was 14 or 15) says, 'I know how.' I said, 'Ah, you don't know how. When did you braid seal gut?'"

"He said, 'I seen Gramma doing it.' So he came over and showed me. 'You put it like this,' he said. That's how I learned after that."

Christensen said she uses "almost the whole works" of the seal. After she soaks the lungs, she blows them, so they will expand and fills them with bacon, onions, green pepper and bakes it.

She either fries the seal's kidney and heart or puts them in soup.

Besides seal flippers, ribs and braided guts, the menu at a community potlatch included other Alutiq dishes.

Sophie Katelnikoff, cook at the Larsen Bay Senior center, prepared *shu-zhuq*, a concoction of fermented salmon eggs, mashed potatoes, oil, sugar and sour berries.

For dessert, she made a sauce consisting of cranberries that were boiled in a little water, mashed up, sweetened with sugar and thickened with corn starch.