

The Aleut salmon fleet of King Cove, Alaska, is composed of about 50 vessels.



Katherine Reedy-Maschner

Aleuts and the Sea

Archaeology on the Alaska Peninsula is helping indigenous fishermen maintain ancient traditions

by **HERBERT MASCHNER and KATHERINE REEDY-MASCHNER**

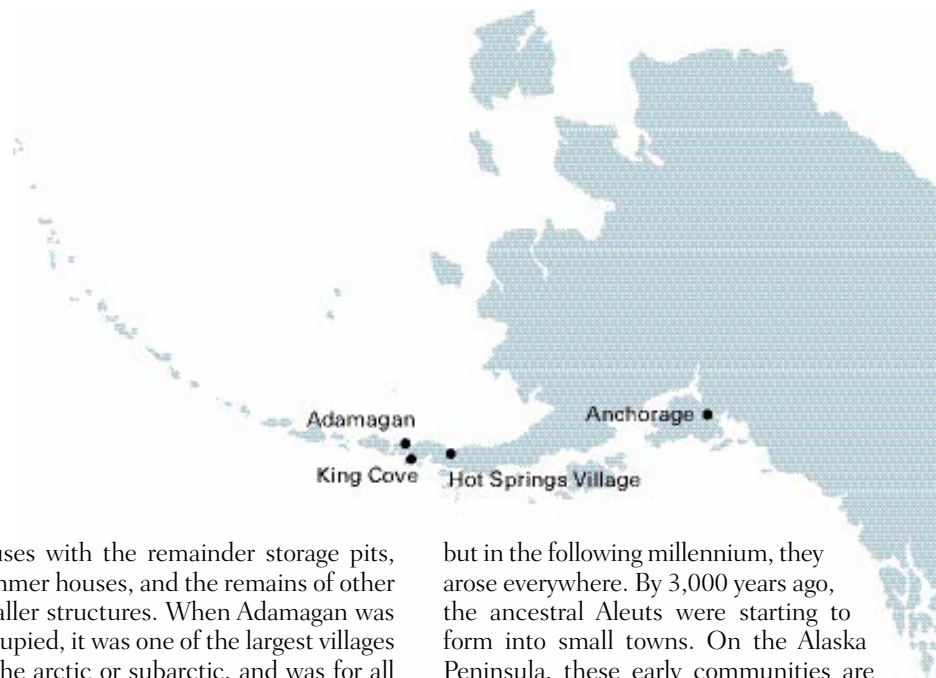
On an early June evening in the Aleut community of King Cove, Alaska, pickups race between houses and the harbor where men are finishing their diesel repairs, checking their electronics, and mending nets. Wives, mothers, and girlfriends deliver food, supplies, and essentials needed for many days on the open ocean. The boat crews listen as elderly men tell tales of harrowing storms, engine fires, and friends lost overboard. Then, almost as if on signal, King Cove harbor begins to empty. The southern horizon fills with setnetters, drift gillnetters, and seiners heading into the dangerous waters of the North Pacific, their sodium lights blazing as the midnight sun sets far to the north. For the next three weeks, these boats will harvest hundreds of thousands of sockeye salmon, a fish that is the life blood and foundation of modern eastern Aleut culture.

Much like their ancestors, the Aleut

of the Alaska Peninsula today survive on their ability to harvest foods from the sea. The salmon, cod, crab, halibut, and other foods that are distributed to community elders come from the nets, pots, and lines of the commercial fishermen. Traditions that began millennia ago are played out everyday with modern boats and equipment. But because of changes in the global economy, especially the growth in cheap farmed salmon, and the politics of environmental conservation, like restrictions on fishing to protect endangered species such as the Steller sea lion, these traditions are threatened, and the future of the Aleut as an independent culture is now in question. As part of an effort to preserve their way of life, the Aleut are turning to archaeology and anthropology to recapture their historical identity; which they now know has a long and spectacular presence in the archaeological record, one that is telling us much about the ancient Aleut, and much about their modern relationship with the sea.

When we first began our research in the area 10 years ago, we had little idea that our work would have an impact on the Aleut fishermen of today. We were drawn to ancient Aleut villages, which are spectacular in size, duration of occupation, and preservation of remains. These massive, ancient communities are the reason our team has endured bear attacks, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, 120-mph winds, 20-foot seas in small boats, plane landings on beach dunes, and near starvation after a bear ate most of our food.

One focus of our work has been a small hill where the North Pacific and Bering Sea are separated by a few hundred feet of tundra. Here, where nine active volcanoes dominate the horizon, sits Adamagan, an Aleut village occupied in the first millennium B.C. At its peak, the village had up to 1,000 residents and covered nearly 37 acres. Even today Adamagan has 900 surface depressions, over 250 of which are the remains of semisubterranean winter



houses with the remainder storage pits, summer houses, and the remains of other smaller structures. When Adamagan was occupied, it was one of the largest villages in the arctic or subarctic, and was for all purposes, a hunter-gatherer town: a rare development in the histories of foraging peoples around the world.

The first of these large Aleut villages to be excavated was the village at Hot Springs in Port Moller. In 1926, archaeologist Edward Weyer of the American Museum of Natural History excavated here and found masks of whalebone, figurines of ivory and other artifacts. However, the Hot Springs site was considered unique until the late 1980s, when archaeologists for the Bureau of Indian Affairs reported finding several large villages. In 1995, our team of archaeologists, glaciologists, and coastal geomorphologists began a survey in the region. Since then, we've located over 300 ancient villages and our team has recorded the complete glacial, sea level, and volcanic histories of the region. We've excavated in a number of villages and conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with the local Aleut on everything from place names to traditional knowledge about the behavior of salmon, sea lions, and cod. Based on our studies and the work of many others over the past 100 years throughout the Aleutian region, we now have a detailed picture of the history of the eastern Aleut.

The first inhabitants of the Aleutian region arrived at the end of the last ice age. By 9,000 years ago they were moving into villages. The site at Anangula, on a small island in the central Aleutian Islands, may have been the earliest village in the New World. There were only a scatter of villages for the next 4,000 years,

but in the following millennium, they arose everywhere. By 3,000 years ago, the ancestral Aleuts were starting to form into small towns. On the Alaska Peninsula, these early communities are organized around large, extended family households of perhaps eight to 15 people, with dozens of households in a town.

Individual identity and shamans were becoming increasingly important. Labrets, which are carved and decorated plugs or pins of ivory, bone, or jet that project through holes cut in the cheeks or lower lip, become common, along with nose rings, nose pins, and other items of body decoration indicating the increasing importance of markers of identity and status.

Shamanism is difficult to discern in the archaeological record, but the Hot Springs site gives us our best clues. Here small anthropomorphic ivory figurines, some with faces, some without, have grooves as if they were hung on a cord, perhaps around the neck of the wearer. Many have facial decorations indicating that tattoos might have been an important part of individual identity. Found in three village sites in the region, whalebone masks played a similar role. Although too small to wear as an actual mask, they also have may have hung on a cord. One collected in 1926 has human teeth inset in the mouth, giving it a powerful, supernatural appearance.

Hunting success was of critical importance in these early villages and was the key means by which males gained status and prestige. Composite harpoons, many with decorations, were the primary weapons. The importance of sea-mammal hunting is seen not just in technology, but in the remains of the animals themselves. In deeply buried house floors at the site of Adamagan, skulls of walrus and sea

lions with holes in them from club blows are buried in pits below the houses as offerings. At Hot Springs, a young adult male's skeleton was found surrounded by porpoise skulls marking his status as a hunter. Zoomorphic figures carved of ivory and bone into whales, seals, fish, and birds—all important elements of the relationship between the ancient Aleut and their landscape, were worn as amulets on hats and clothing to provide luck in hunting and as proof of past hunting success.

Sometime around A.D. 1150, the Aleut world changed. Houses nearly tripled in size—extended families of 30 to 60 people lived in a single house. They moved much of their primary storage from external areas to inside the house, as if to protect it from unrelated kingroups. A new kind of house developed to support larger groups and internal storage, one that had a large central room surrounded by smaller chambers that were connected to the main room by short passageways. Gone were the shamanic symbols of power, replaced by armor, shields, and the recurve bow that were used only for warfare. Villages were often located near defensible sites or island refuges. While sea mammals and ocean fish were still important to the diet, there was an overwhelming emphasis on salmon, as all of the major villages moved on or near major sockeye spawning streams and lakes.

We don't know why this shift in social organization, politics, and economy



Aleut fisherman Tom Hoblet prepares dried coho salmon, or *ucela*, using traditional methods that are thousands of years old.

Herbert Maschner

occurred. Perhaps it was warfare, or a shift in the structure of the north Pacific ecosystem, or a change in salmon populations. Whatever the cause, when the Russians arrived in the region during the mid-eighteenth century, the eastern Aleut were living in these same large houses now formed into massive communities. They had hereditary elite with nobles, a middle class, and slaves. They were waging wars

against other Aleut, as well as the Yupik and Alutiiq Eskimo peoples to the east. They were hunting whales on the open ocean and harvesting millions of salmon in the streams and lakes of the region. This powerful relationship with the sea lasted through the Russian occupation, the early American era, and the twentieth century. Today, it is a relationship that is dominated by the commercial salmon, halibut, cod, and crab fisheries.

But now the Aleut are caught in a global political economy that has jeopardized their existence. Facing competition from fish farms in Norway, Chile, and elsewhere, the value of their wild salmon has plummeted. Beginning in the 1990s, a coalition of environmental groups has lobbied to cut them off from their traditional fishing grounds, charging the Aleut indigenous fisheries with damaging the North Pacific ecosystem. They allege that Aleut fishing practices endanger the protected Steller sea lion. But studies have repeatedly shown that Aleut fishermen have no impact on the Steller sea lion or endangered bird populations. They do not even use the large-bottom dragging boats that are known to damage coral reefs and devastate some fisheries. But the Aleut are often the subject of attack because they are easy targets compared to the companies that run the large factory



These shamanic figurines from the site of Hot Springs date to 3,000 years ago

Herbert Maschner

ships that are doing heavy damage to the ecosystem.

Federal management agencies often spend only a few weeks a year on the North Pacific before making sweeping reductions in access to the fisheries, damaging the local economy and displacing families, but seldom seeking the knowledge of the Aleut, who spend the entire year observing fish and sea mammals in

their natural habitat. For thousands of years the Aleut survived and adapted to an environment of catastrophic earthquakes, tsunamis, climate change, and hundreds of volcanic eruptions. But now, after 600 generations as fishermen, sea mammal hunters and warriors, the Alaska Peninsula Aleut are finally faced with their own extinction because of the side effects of fisheries management policies, U.S.

environmental groups, and cheap farmed salmon.

They are fighting back, using archaeological and anthropological records to recapture some of the important aspects of their heritage. With access to analysis of thousands of fish, bird, and mammal bones, they now have the data to show they have been harvesting salmon and other important species for thousands of years, something federal agencies have long ignored. Settlement-pattern studies show that they have traditional rights to certain halibut-and cod-fishing areas that have been cut off in order to protect the Steller sea lion. With both our archaeological and ethnographic data complementing their long oral history, they recognize that their place as villagers and fishermen on the Alaska Peninsula landscape is unprecedented in the northern world.

A key moment in our relationship with the people of King Cove came on a stormy spring evening in 2000 when nearly 100 people came to the community center to see a slide show on what we had learned about the prehistory of the region. After the talk there was one question: Would we tell this story at the Alaska Board of Fisheries meeting?

Our chance to help came in February last year at a Board of Fisheries meeting in Anchorage. The Aleut fishermen of the region had proposed a number of regulatory changes that would allow them more time to fish. The fishermen of King Cove and the Aleutians East Borough asked us to give testimony and we submitted a document to the Board that discussed the importance of the fishery to Aleut cultural survival, described the 6,000-year history of Aleut salmon use, and argued that this was a traditional fishery that was so integrated into Aleut culture that Aleut society could not exist without it.

Individual fishermen and regional representatives spent the meeting arguing for increased access to the only lifestyle any of them had ever known. Looking around the room at the people of the Alaska Peninsula, many of whom are our friends, it was painful to wonder if, after thousands of years, this would be the last generation of Aleut fishermen. Then came our turn—a five-minute presentation of 10 years of archaeological and anthropological research on everything from fish bones, settlement patterns, and chronology, to genealogy, kinship, and social organization. Alaska Public Radio reported that the evidence “hit the Board like an earth-



Katherine Reedy-Maschner

Coauthor Herbert Maschner and Aleut elders Irene Chistiansen (left) and Lucy Kenezuroff discuss finds at an 1,800-year-old site in King Cove.

quake”—they had never before been faced with an argument of historical precedence. A week later the word was out—the time of the June fishery on the western Alaska Peninsula would be tripled. A solid mixture of indigenous testimony and scientific data had made the difference.

We didn’t set out to create an “applied archaeology,” the current academic term for archaeological research that benefits modern-day peoples. But in conducting archaeology and cultural anthropology in the north, we’ve been struck by the realization that there is no line between the past and the present. The archaeological record flows into the oral histories of recent generations and again into the lives lived today on this beautiful and dynamic landscape. Here archaeology is still concerned with the discovery and explanation of the past, but it can also be used to investigate and preserve a modern way of life by unearthing how those lives came to be.

In late June, King Cove is buzzing with excitement as the sockeye-salmon season winds down. VHF radios are alive with conversations between the boats and the households awaiting their return, while children who haven’t seen their fathers in weeks pace anxiously on the dock. Looking southwest across

the Pacific, first one boat is visible, then three, then 20 as the fleet comes over the horizon. A few of the fishermen are proud of their successes, more are disappointed with the low price of salmon and worried about their next boat payment or how they will feed their families through the winter. A few days later, the Fourth of July celebration provides everyone with a needed break from the fisheries and the worries of the future. Children decorate their bicycles with red, white, and blue streamers celebrating a country that did not give many of the Aleut full citizenship until 1966. The peoples of the Alaska Peninsula are proud to be American and they are proud to be Aleut, but most of all, they, like their ancestors before them, are proud to be fishermen. ■

HERBERT MASCHNER is an associate professor of anthropology at Idaho State University. KATHERINE REEDY-MASCHNER is a member of the research faculty in anthropology at Idaho State University. Their research is funded by the National Science Foundation, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Special thanks to the people of King Cove, Sand Point, Nelson Lagoon, and False Pass, Alaska.