

The Daily Astorian.

MONDAY.....MAY 1, 1876.

ALASKA.

The Seal Fisheries at the Islands of St. Paul and St. George.

Habits of the Seal—Methods of Capture—Process of Preserving the Skins—Population of the Islands—Condition of the Natives.

The Congressional inquiry relative to the contract between the Government and the Alaska Commercial Company of San Francisco, directs public thought to the subject of seal catching in Alaska waters. Under the original lease, the Company were permitted to take annually from Saint Paul 75,000 fur seals, and from Saint George 25,000. In 1874 the contract was amended giving the Company the right to take 90,000 seals in Saint Paul, and limiting the number to be taken from Saint George to 10,000. The terms of the lease require the Company to establish and maintain a school on the Islands, to sell no liquor to the natives, and to pay the Government of the United States \$55,000 a year for the period of twenty years.

There is no doubt that the lease of the islands is highly lucrative. The great success of the franchise is owing to three principal causes: First—The Alaska Commercial Company, owing to the fact that they have the sole control of the three Asiatic Islands on which fur seals are found, as well as our islands of Saint Paul and Saint George, virtually manage the sale of eighty per cent, of all the fur seals killed in the world. Second—The decree of fashion has raised the price to sell skins in the market fully seventy-five per cent, during the past five years. Third—Time and experience have given this controlling Company most valuable advantage. The Company employ experts in selecting the seals that are most valuable in the market and have no difficulty in sorting 90,000 out of a flock of three millions which are the select of the whole tribe. Care is taken to avoid butts in the skin, and also to preserve the skins properly; hence the high prices obtained in markets of the world. The former mode of indiscriminate killing of the fur seals was as detrimental to the value of the skins as it was to the existence of the breed.

The cession by Russia of the two fur seal islands imposed upon our Government the obligation to prevent not only the extermination of the fur seal, but also the extermination of the natives.

POPULATION OF THE ISLANDS.

The following shows the population of the islands as given last year:

Table with 2 columns: Island Name, Population. Rows for St. Paul (Males 110, Females 118, Total 228) and St. George (Males 57, Females 63, Total 120).

In the report of Henry W. Elliott, Special Agent of the Treasury Department, many interesting facts concerning the character of the country, the habits of the fur seal, and the condition of affairs on the islands are to be found. In connection with a survey of affairs in the Territory of Alaska, Mr. Elliott was accompanied by Lieut. Washburn Maynard, an officer selected by the Secretary of the Navy. In presenting the report to the Treasury, Mr. Elliott says: "On the subject of Alaska, it is safe to assert that no other unexplored section of the world was ever brought into notice so suddenly, about which so much has been emphatically and positively written, passed entirely upon the whims and caprices of the writers, and, therefore, it will not be at all surprising if the truth in regard to the Territory does frequently come into conflict with many erroneous popular opinions respecting it."

DESCRIPTION OF THE FUR ISLANDS.

Saint Paul's Island is the largest and most important of the Alaskan group, and is the most southerly land. It has a superficial area of about 35 square miles of diversified, rough and rocky uplands, small rounded hills, which either set down boldly to the sea or fade into wet, mossy flats and dry, drifting sand-dune tracts. It has 42 miles of shore line, 16 1/2 of which are used by the fur seal en masse.

Saint George's Island is next in importance, and has an area of 27 square miles and 39 miles of coast line, of which two and a quarter miles are visited by fur seals.

Vegetation on these lands, such as it is, is fresh and luxuriant during the growing season of June and July and the early part of August, but the beauty and economic value of trees and shrubbery seem to be denied by climatic conditions.

NUMBER OF SEALS ON THE ISLANDS—THEIR HABITS.

The number of seals on these two islands of the groups is estimated at 4,700,000. Of this number there are 3,000,000 breeding seals. The non-breeding seals, consists of all the yearlings, and all the males under six or seven years of age, seem nearly equal in number to the breeding seals. After leaving these islands in autumn or early winter, the seals do not visit land again till the following spring. They spread themselves out over the vast north Pacific, following schools of fish, or frequently shoals or banks where abundance of fishy food is found. The habits of the fur seals are very peculiar.

SEALS SELECTED FOR SLAUGHTER.

It is estimated by Mr. Elliott that two-thirds of all the males that are born—and they are equal in number to the females born—are never permitted by the remaining third, strongest by natural selection, to land upon the same ground with the females, which always herd together en masse. Therefore, this great band of so-called bachelor seals is compelled when it visits land to live apart entire from the breeding grounds, and in this admirable perfect manner of nature are those seals which can be properly killed without injury held aside, so that the natives can take them without in the slightest degree disturbing the peaceful quiet of the breeding grounds, where the stock is perpetuated.

HOW THE SEALS ARE SLAUGHTERED.

In the early part of the season large bodies of the young batchelors do not haul up on land very far from the water, and the men are obliged to approach shyly and quickly between the dozen seals and the surf, before they alarm and bolt into the sea. In this way a dozen men running down the long sand beach will turn back from the water thousands of seals. As the sleeping seals are first startled they arise, and seeing men between them and the water, immediately turn, lunge and scramble rapidly back over the land. The natives then leisurely walk on the flanks and in the rear of the drove thus secured, and direct and drive them over to the killing ground. On firm, grassy ground a drove of seals may be driven at the rate of half a mile an hour. They require little urging, being permitted to halt and cool off, as heating injures their fur. They never show fight unless a few old seals are mixed in. The seals, when brought up to the killing ground, are herded there until cool and rested; then squads of fifty to two hundred are driven out from the body of the drove, surrounded and huddled up one against the other. The natives then take heavy clubs of hard wood, with which they strike the seals down by heavy blows on the head. A single stroke of the heavy oak bludgeon will crush in at once the slight thin bones of a seal's skull, laying the creature out lifeless. After the killing a long, sharp knife is thrust into the chest. The body of the seal, preparatory to skinning, is rolled over or put upon its back, and the natives make a single, swift cut through the skin, down along the neck, chest and belly from the lower jaw to the nub of the tail. The skins are taken from the field to the salt-house, where they are laid out open, one upon the other, like so many sheets of paper, with salt profusely spread upon the fleshy sides.

THE SEAL SKIN OF COMMERCE.

The common or popular notion regarding seal skins is that they are worn by the animals just as they appear when offered for sale. This is a wrong notion, for few skins are less attractive than the seal skin as it is taken from the animal. The fur is not visible, being concealed entirely by a coat of stiff over-hair, dull gray, brown and grizzled. The best of these raw skins are worth from \$5 to \$10, but after dressing they bring from \$25 to \$40, and it takes three of them to make a lady's saque and boa.

Drifts and Tow Heads 1876.

Upper Astoria, Clatsop county, Oregon. } April 24, 1876. At a Special meeting of the Columbia River Fishermen's Beneficial Aid Society, the following regulations for the government of all concerned were adopted. That the following drifts and tow heads be established for the fishing season of 1876. First Drift. From Woody Island to Brown's point. Second Drift. From Brown's Point inside of Snag Island to the 12th red buoy. Third Drift. From the 15th buoy to Tongue Point. Fourth Drift. From Tongue Point to a point a little west of Booth's Cannery, at a place to be designated by a spile or some permanent mark. Fifth Drift. From the termination of the 4th drift to Smith's Point. Sixth Drift. From Smith's Point to the Pacific Ocean. Seventh Drift. From the red buoy in the Prairie channel to Tongue Point up or down. Eighth Drift. The big snag in Chinook shoot will be considered a tow head. The fishermen in Astoria, in council have mutually agreed to bind themselves to be governed by the foregoing drifts, and it is expected from boats outside of the Society that they will also conform to the same. Any fisherman who is not fortunate enough to be a member of this Society has still another opportunity to join this Society, by applying before the 10th day of May, 1876, in accordance with the notice published elsewhere in the ASTORIAN. After which time the initiation fees will be raised to twenty-five dollars. By order of the Society, THOMAS DEALEY, Sec.

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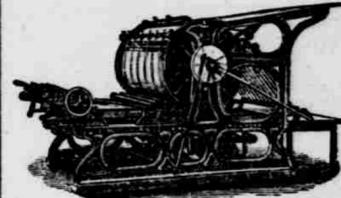
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