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Letter from the Secretary of the Interior, transmitting report relative to the condition of the natives of Alaska

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L E T T E R
FROM
THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR,

TRANSMITTING

Report relative to the condition of the natives of Alaska.

DECEMBER 16, 1890.—Referred to the Committee on Education and Labor and ordered to be printed.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
Washington, December 15, 1890.

SIR: I have the honor to inclose, for the information of the Senate, a copy of a letter from the Commissioner of Education, of date December 5, 1890, and also a copy of a letter from Dr. Sheldon Jackson, United States general agent of education in Alaska, to the Commissioner, of date November 12, 1890, relative to the impoverished and destitute condition of the native inhabitants in Alaska, consequent upon the destruction of their sources of livelihood by the whaling-fishery, seal-hunting, and walrus-hunting industries, and suggesting the establishment of an agricultural and mechanical college and the instruction by means of the same of the natives in the rearing and management of the domestic reindeer for their support, the same to be introduced from eastern Siberia and northern Europe.

Very respectfully,

GEO. CHANDLER,
Acting Secretary.

The PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BUREAU OF EDUCATION,
Washington, D. C., December 5, 1890.

SIR: I inclose a communication handed me by the United States general agent of education for Alaska respecting the fact that the people of northern Alaska are approaching a condition of starvation, due to the fact that the fisheries have driven away the whales and walrus upon which the people depended for their winter support. The salmon canneries and the fur hunters are completing the destruction of the food supply for the native inhabitants. The agent suggests, in view of these circumstances, a very reasonable plan to prevent the necessity of resorting to the pauperizing policy of feeding the Alaskan people in the same way that we feed the Indians, namely: He proposes

that we at once establish a sort of agricultural and mechanical college, one that would be entitled to the \$15,000 donation under the recent act of August 30, 1890, and introduce through this college instruction in domesticating the reindeer of Lapland and Siberia, to the end that these people shall not only support themselves and take a step in civilization, a step from the grade of the wild hunter to the grade of herdsmen who live on domesticated cattle, and besides this furnish an article of exportation and commerce.

It seems that the whole region is filled with moss meadows (*tundra*) along the Arctic Sea, which furnish the very food that the reindeer requires. The wild tribes on the Siberian side of the Behring Sea are thriving with their enormous herds of reindeer. It only needs that the United States Revenue Marine shall, under direction of proper authority, purchase enough reindeer to commence the experiment station and obtain some of the more intelligent natives to furnish instructors in the college. Once started, the business would grow to gigantic proportions and the most serious problem that threatens Alaska will be solved. It is interesting to note that the governments of northern Europe lay a tax of \$1 per head on the reindeer owned and derive nearly a half a million dollars from that source. Captain Healy, of the United States revenue ship *Bear*, has shown a lively interest in this project and understands the details of its execution.

Ought not this matter to be laid before Congress at an early date with a view to obtain such authority as is requisite for the establishment of the agricultural college experiment station?

Very respectfully, yours,

W. T. HARRIS,
Commissioner.

The SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BUREAU OF EDUCATION,
Washington, D. C., November 12, 1890.

DEAR SIR: In advance of a full report of operations in Alaska I would like to call your attention to the starving condition of the Eskimo on the Arctic coast, as learned during my late visit.

From time immemorial they have lived upon the whale, the walrus, and the seal of their coasts, the fish and aquatic birds of their rivers, and the caribou or wild reindeer of their vast inland plains.

The supply of these in years past was abundant and furnished ample food for all the people. But fifty years ago American whalers, having largely exhausted the supply in other waters, found their way into the North Pacific Ocean. Then commenced for that section the slaughter and destruction of whales, that went steadily forward at the rate of hundreds and thousands annually, until they were destroyed and driven out of the Pacific Ocean. They were then followed into Behring Sea and the slaughter went on. The whales took refuge among the ice fields of the Arctic Ocean, and thither the whalers followed. In this relentless hunt the remnant have been driven still farther into the inaccessible regions around the North Pole, and are no longer within the reach of the natives.

As the great herds of buffalo that once roamed the western prairies have been exterminated for their pelts, so the whales have been sacri-

ficed for the fat that encased their bodies and the bone that hung in their mouths. With the destruction of the whale one large source of food supply for the natives has been cut off.

Another large supply was derived from the walrus, which once swarmed in great numbers in those northern seas.

But commerce wanted more ivory, and the whalers turned their attention to the walrus, and thousands were annually destroyed for the sake of their tusks. Where a few years ago they were so numerous that their bellowings were heard above the roar of the waves and the grinding and crashing of the ice-fields, this year I cruised for weeks without seeing or hearing one. The walrus as a source of food supply is already practically extinct.

The seal and sea lion once so common in Behring Sea are now becoming so scarce that it is with difficulty that the natives procure sufficient number of skins to cover their boats, and their flesh on account of its rarity has become a luxury.

In the past the natives with tireless industry caught and cured for use in their long winters great quantities of fish, but American canneries have already come to some of their streams and will soon be found upon all of them, both carrying the food out of the country and by their wasteful methods destroying the future supply. Five million cans of salmon annually shipped away from Alaska, and the business still in its infancy, means starvation to the native races in the near future.

With the advent of improved breech-loading fire arms the wild reindeer are both being killed off and frightened away to the remote and more inaccessible regions of the interior, and another source of food supply is diminishing.

Thus the support of the people is largely gone, and the process of slow starvation and extermination has commenced along the whole Arctic coast of Alaska. Villages that once numbered thousands have been reduced to hundreds; of some tribes but two or three families remain. At Point Barrow in 1828 Captain Beechey's expedition found Nuwuk, a village of 1,000 people. In 1853 there were 309; now there are not over 100.

In 1826 Captain Beechey speaks of finding a large population at Cape Franklin; to-day it is without an inhabitant. He also mentions a large village of one or two thousand people on Schismareff Inlet; now it has but three houses.

According to Mr. John W. Kelly, who has written a monograph upon the Arctic Eskimo of Alaska, Point Hope at the commencement of the century had a population of 2,000; now it has about 350.

I saw a number of abandoned villages and crumbling houses during the summer, and wherever we visited the people we heard the same tale of destitution.

On the island of Attou, once famous for the number of its sea-otter skins, the catch for the past nine years has averaged but three sea otter and twenty-five fox skins, an annual income of about \$2 for each person. The Alaska Commercial Company this past summer sent \$1,300 worth of provisions to keep them from starving.

At Akutan the whole catch for the past summer was nineteen sea otters. This represents the entire support of 100 people for twelve months.

At Unalaska both the agent of the Alaska Commercial Company and the teacher of the Government school testified that there would be great

destitution among the people this winter because of the disappearance of the sea otter.

At St. George Island the United States Treasury agent testified that there was not sufficient provision on the island to last through the season, and asked that a Government vessel might be sent with a full supply.

At Cape Prince of Wales, Point Hope, and Point Barrow was the same account of short supply of food. At the latter place intimations were given that the natives in their distress would break into the Government warehouse and help themselves to the supply that is in store for shipwrecked whalers.

At Point Barrow, largely owing to the insufficient food supply, the death rate is reported to the birth rate as 15 to 1. It does not take long to figure out the end. They will die off more rapidly as the already insufficient food supply becomes less and less.

In this crisis it is important that steps should at once be taken to afford relief.

Relief of course can be afforded by Congress voting an appropriation to feed them, as it has so many of the North American Indians, but I think that every one familiar with the feeding process among the Indians will devoutly wish that it may not be necessary to extend that system to the Eskimo of Alaska. It would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars annually and, worse than that, degrade, pauperize, and finally exterminate the people.

I think there is a better, cheaper, more practical, and more humane way.

I would, therefore, most earnestly recommend that in connection with the system of industrial education in Alaska you establish an agricultural college through which you can introduce into that country the domesticated reindeer of Siberia, and train the Eskimo young men in their management, care, and propagation.

This would in a few years create as permanent and secure a food supply for the Eskimo as cattle or sheep raising in Texas or New Mexico does for their people.

It would further utilize and make conducive to the national wealth millions of acres of moss-covered tundra in those Arctic regions, now utterly worthless.

In the corresponding regions of Lapland, in Arctic Norway, and in Sweden and Russia are 27,000 people supporting themselves (besides paying a tax to the Government of \$400,000, or \$1 per head, for their reindeer) and procuring their food and clothing largely from their 400,000 domesticated reindeer.

Also in the corresponding regions of Siberia, with similar climate, soil, and environment (and only 40 miles distant at the straits), are thousands of Chuchees, Koraks, and other tribes, fed and clothed by their tens of thousands of domesticated reindeer.

During the summer I visited four settlements of natives on the Siberian coast, the two extremes being 700 miles apart, and saw much of the people, both of the Koraks and Chuchees.

I found them a good-sized, robust, athletic, fleshy, well-fed, pagan, half-civilized, nomad people, living largely on their herds of reindeer. Families own from 1,000 to 10,000 deer. These are divided into herds of from 1,000 to 1,500. One of these latter I visited on the beach near Cape Navarin.

In Arctic Siberia the natives with their reindeer have plenty; in Arctic Alaska without the reindeer they are starving.

Then, instead of feeding and pauperizing them, let us civilize, build up their manhood, and lift them into self-support by helping them to the reindeer.

So far as I know all the industrial schools of the Bureau of Indian Affairs make the raising, management, and care of stock one of their leading industries, and it is a common-sense thing to do.

The same thing should be done in connection with the industrial schools of Northern Alaska, where the environment would make the raising and care of reindeer the great industrial pursuit.

It was my good fortune to make my visit to the Eskimo in the United States revenue ship *Bear*, commanded by Capt. Michael Healy, United States Revenue Marine, who has made an annual cruise in those waters for ten years past. Having seen much of the native population and taken a great interest in their welfare, he has probably a better knowledge of their condition and necessities than any other person. He early realized the advantage that the introduction of domesticated reindeer would be to the inhabitants of northern Alaska, and made a report of the same to the Secretary of the Treasury.

When, therefore, I suggested the feasibility of introducing the domesticated reindeer of Siberia into Alaska in connection with the Government industrial schools, and my purpose to recommend it, he immediately indorsed the proposition and rendered me much assistance in pursuing my inquiries with regard to the subject. He is also ready to cooperate in carrying out any plan that may be devised.

Feeling sure that this important matter will have your hearty assistance, I remain, with great respect,

Very truly, yours,

SHELDON JACKSON,

United States General Agent of Education for Alaska.

Hon. W. T. HARRIS, LL. D.,

Commissioner of Education.