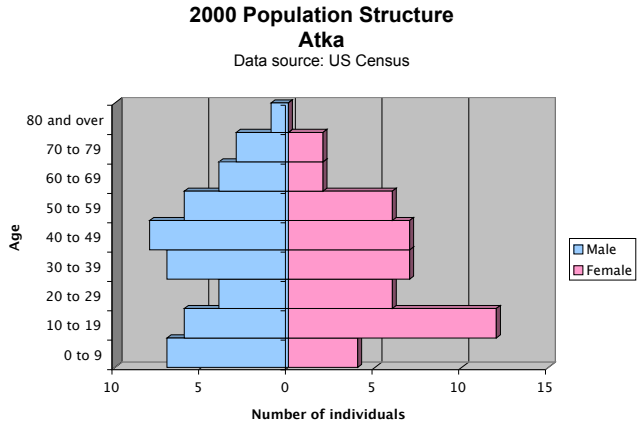
Atka

People and Place

Location

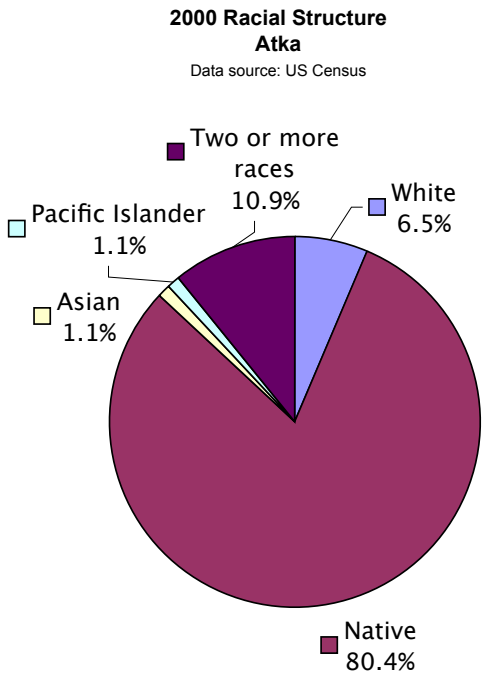
Atka is located on Atka Island towards the end of the Aleutian Island archipelago.

Atka is the western most fishing community in the Aleutian Islands chain: 1,200 air miles southwest of Anchorage and 350 miles west of Unalaska. Atka encompasses 8.7 square miles of land and 27.4 square miles of water.



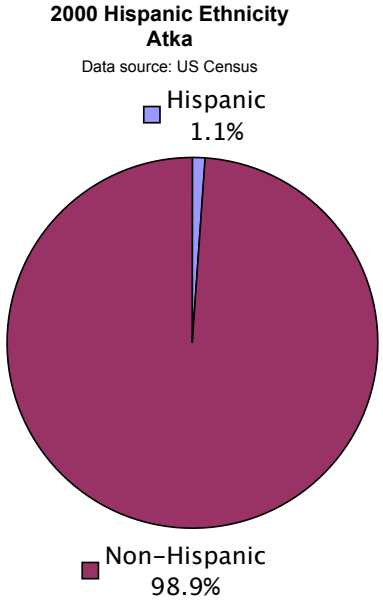
Demographic Profile

A population of 92 was recorded for Atka by the 2000 U.S. Census. The population has fallen consistently from the maximum of 132 listed for the 1880s and 1890s when census records we first calculated. The racial composition of Atka in 2000 included: 80.4% Alaska Native, 6.5% White, 1.1% Asian, 1.1% Hawaiian Native, and 10.9% two or more races. A total of 91.3% of the population recognized themselves as all or part Alaska Native or American Indian. Only 1.1% of the population identified themselves as Hispanic.



Unlike many fishing communities, the genders were in equal balance in Atka according to the 2000 U.S. Census. While 15.2% of the population was over 55 years of age, 31.5% of the population was 19 years. The median age was 35.5 years, comparable to the 2000 national median of 35.3 years.

Of a total of 41 houses in the community, 32 were occupied year-round in 2000, 9 housing structures were vacant and 4 of these were occupied seasonally. Only 6.5% of the total population lived in group quarters. Almost 40% of the total population had a highschool diploma while 25% had some college education, but no degree.



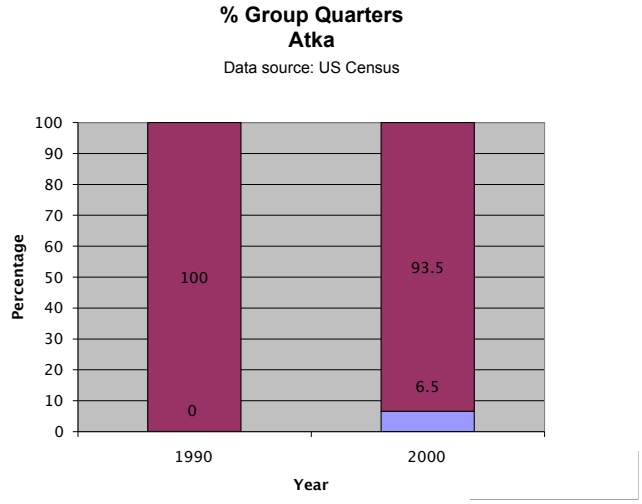
History

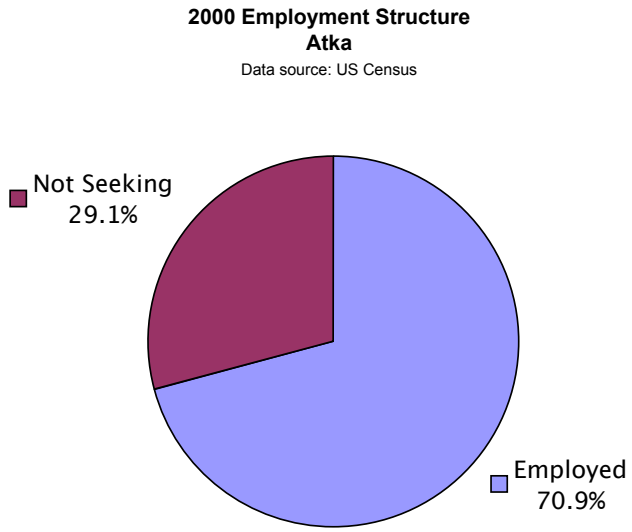
Atka Island has been populated by Unangans, speakers of the Aleut language, for at least 2,000 years. Archaeological evidence suggests that the contemporary village site itself has been occupied since prehistoric times. Atka was valuable to Russians, who first arrived on the island in 1747, as both a trade site and a safe harbor. A number of hunters were enslaved and relocated to the Pribilof Islands to work in the fur seal harvest 40 years after Russians first made contact with the people of Atka. The remaining population

was largely dependant on sea otter hunting and had no immediately viable cash economy after this subsided in the late1800s. Atka remained heavily resource dependant, though. Reindeer were introduced to the Island in 1914 (currently a herd of over 2,500 head of reindeer continues to provide fresh meat). During the 1920s the community became relatively affluent due to fox farming.

Following the Japanese attack on Unalaska in June 1942, the U.S. government evacuated Atka residents to internment camps in the Ketchikan area in Southeast Alaska while the town of Atka was burned to the ground to prevent Japanese forces from making use of the structures and resources. Residents were not permitted to bring belongings, so family heirlooms, religious icons, and other elements of material culture were destroyed. The village was later rebuilt by the U.S. Navy and residents were permitted to return in the summer of 1945. Several of the people who moved to Atka at that stage had previously lived in Attu, a village located at the end of the Aleutian Island archipelago, and had been captured as prisoners of war by Japanese forces in 1942. Significant reparation measures are being taken on behalf of the federal government to compensate people from Atka for wartime damages and losses.

The Aleutian language is still spoken in one-fourth of homes. The St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, rebuilt after the wartime destruction of the town, remains a central part of village life.





Infrastructure

Current Economy

The economy of Atka is predominantly based on subsistence living as well as commercial fishing. There were 9 permit holders who held 17 permits in 2000 according to the Alaska Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (ACFEC). A small on-shore fish processor, Atka Pride Seafoods, services the local fleet. A number of offshore fish processors carry out crew changes through Atka which, because of limited facilities, may place stress on the community, but is also an opportunity to be capitalized on by local businesses.

At the time of the 2000 U.S. Census, 70.9% of the potential labor force was employed and there was no unemployment. A total of 29.1% of the population over 16 years of age were not in the labor force, and 7.5% of the population lived below the poverty level. Year-round income opportunities in the village are mostly limited to education and government related work. The median household income in the same year was $30,938 and the per capita income was just over $17,000.

Governance

Atka is a second-class city which was incorporated in 1988. It is governed locally by a “strong mayor” and seven-member city council which meets monthly. Atka does not belong to an organized borough; therefore, the city is responsible for many services. The Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Inc., a federally recognized, nonprofit, tribal organization of the Aleut people in Alaska which contracts with federal, state and local governments, also provides services in Atka. Some of these services include public safety

(Village Public Safety Officers) and health programs (emergency, elders, behavioral, outreach and advocacy oriented programs). Special taxes in Atka include a 2% raw fish tax and a 10% accommodation tax. Atka is a member of the for-profit regional Aleut Corporation under the Alaska Natives Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). Atxam Corporation is the Native village corporation. The total land entitlement under ANCSA is over 100,000 acres. The Native village of Atka is federally recognized and eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) by virtue of their status as an Indian tribe. It has organized itself under the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), with a constitution and elections as prescribed by the Act. Atka is involved in a Community Development Quota program under the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Community Development Association. The nearest National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) regional office, Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) office, and Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) office are all in Unalaska.

Facilities

The community water and sanitation systems, which service all households, are operated by the City. Hydroelectric potential is under development at Chuniisax Creek. Electricity is currently diesel powered and provided by Andreanof Electric Corporation. All houses use fuel oil for heating and there are three providers of fuel on the island which also service vehicles.

Atka has a state-owned 3,200 foot lighted paved runway which is currently being renovated with federal grants. Scheduled air services are available twice weekly from Unalaska and can also be chartered from Cold Bay. The cost of a roundtrip plane ticket from Atka to Anchorage is about $900 (based on the closest available date to September 1, 2003 for Peninsula Airways flights). Coastal Transportation provides freight services during the peak fishing season from May to October. A new dock and port facility, operated by the City, were recently completed 5 miles from town. The development of several facilities associated with the fishing industry, with the help of the Aleutian Pribilof Island Community Development Association in the 1990s, has resulted in significant economic enhancement in the community (Obeso, 1994).

Tourism is limited in Atka. There are short-term accommodations available. Atka is within the Aleutian Region school district and one school on the island, with two teachers, serves 19 pupils ranging from grades K-12. The school gym is used widely for community gatherings including bingo nights. Public security is provided by a VPSO associated with the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Inc. Health care is provided locally primarily by the Atka Health Clinic also operated by the Aleutian Pribilof Island Association.

North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Commercial fishing is of great significance to the economy of Atka. According to the ADF&G and reported by ACFEC, 17 permits were held by 9 permit holders in Atka in 2000 (10 fished). There were three vessel owners in the federal fisheries, no vessel owners in the salmon fishery, and 19 crew members with residence in Atka.

Commercial fishing permits are issued according to specifications of species, vessel size, gear type, and fishing area. The commercial vessel fleet delivering landings to Atka was involved in halibut (10 vessels) and sablefish (five vessels) fisheries in 2000. In accordance with confidentiality regulations, data for fish landings in the community are unavailable.

Permits for halibut issued in Atka for 2000 pertained to one hand troll (not fished), 7 longline vessels under 60 feet (6 fished), and one longline vessel over 60 feet. All permits designated for halibut for statewide waters. Permits for sablefish issued in 2000 pertained to four longline vessels under 60 feet for statewide waters (three fished). Additionally, one permit for a salmon set gillnet limited to the Atka/Amlia Islands and three permits for miscellaneous salt water finfish longline vessels under 60 feet for statewide waters were issued but not fished.

The existence of processing facilities in some communities is an important part of the community's involvement in the fishing industry. Atka Pride Seafoods, the only processor in Atka, is a small plant with the capacity to process crab, halibut, and sablefish, operating seasonally to serve the local fleet and employing only local residents. The plant struggled with initial economic hardship due to the extension of start-up costs over several years, but is now experiencing consecutive years of profitability.

Atka Seafoods operates its own electric system.

Atka did not receive federal salmon disaster relief funds in 2003 to offset any loss of revenue from fish taxes due to low salmon prices. In 2002, the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Community Development Association (APICDA) received $57,163 as part of a federal fund set up in accordance with the Endangered Species Act to offset costs to fisheries and communities due to Steller sea lion protection regulations.

Sport Fishing

Recreational sport fishing activity is very limited in Atka. No sport fishing licenses were sold in Atka in 2000. This may be due in part to the remoteness of the community and the infrequency of transportation from larger population centers. Additionally, the town does not have the facilities to support a large tourism industry.

Subsistence Fishing

Numerous social, economic, and technological changes have influenced life in Alaskan fishing communities and subsistence harvests and practices continue to provide fishing communities with important nutritional, economic, social, and cultural requirements. Data from 1994 compiled on behalf of the ADF&G's Division of Subsistence provides useful information about subsistence practices in Atka. All households participated in the use of subsistence resources, including harvesting, sharing, and consuming resources, illustrating the importance of subsistence to life in the community. Of the total population, 96.4% used salmon, 92.9% used non-salmon (cod, flounder, greenling, halibut, rockfish, sablefish, sculpin, char, and trout), 92.9% used marine mammals, and 85.7% marine invertebrates.

The total per capita harvest for the year was 439.28 lbs. The composition of the total subsistence harvest can be shown by the percentages of the resources which demonstrate the amount of each resource category used by the community relative to other resource categories. Salmon constituted 21.58% of the total subsistence harvest while non-salmon fish made up 9.03%, land mammals 21%, marine mammals 34.3%, birds and eggs made up 1.81%, marine invertebrates were 1.19%, and vegetation made up 1.09% (ADF&G, 2000). The wild food harvest in Atka made up 284% of the recommended dietary allowance of protein in 1994 (corresponding to 49 g of protein per day or .424 lbs of wild food per day).

Permits are not required for subsistence fishing in the waters fished by the community of Atka and there were no annual harvest assessment programs in place as of 2001. Residents of Atka and members of the Native Village of Atka, an Alaska Native Tribe, who hold a valid Subsistence Halibut Registration Certificate (SHARC) issued by NMFS, are eligible to harvest subsistence halibut. These allocations are based on recognized customary and traditional uses of halibut. Regulations to implement subsistence halibut fishing were published in the Federal Register in April 2003 and became effective May 2003.