

REPRESENTATIVE SARA HANNAN

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

Alaska State Capitol
120 4th Street
Juneau, AK 99801
Office (907) 465-4766
Toll Free (877) 465-4766
Rep.Sara.Hannan@akleg.gov



House District 33
Downtown Juneau
Thane, Lemon Creek
Douglas Island, Gustavus
Excursion Inlet, Skagway
Haines, Klukwan

Sponsor Statement

House Bill 122

"An Act relating to the Funter Bay marine park unit of the state park system; relating to protection of the social and historical significance of the Unangax cemetery located in Funter Bay and providing for the amendment of the management plan for the Funter Bay marine park unit; and providing for an effective date."

HB 122 will transfer the parcel of land the Unangax cemetery in Funter Bay is on from the Department of Natural Resources Division of Land Mining and Water to the Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Recreation. The cemetery parcel will be added to the Funter Bay marine park unit of the state park system for land management.

HB 122 will preserve the cemetery and ensure its protection so that we may remember those who died and recognize the social and historical significance of the site.

The Unangax people were forcibly removed from the Pribilof Islands and interned in Southeast Alaska when the Japanese invaded the Aleutian Islands during WWII. Some were sent to Killisnoo near Angoon, others were sent to Burnett Inlet, some were sent to other Southeast locations and the rest were sent to Funter Bay near Juneau. They were given little notice and the villagers could take only what they could carry. It was hasty and very traumatic. The Unangax were abandoned in old cannery bunk houses not meant to house so many people and not built for protection from winter's harshness. Entire families were sheltered in small cubicles that were separated sometimes only by blankets. The living conditions were unsanitary and there was inadequate food supply, no medical care, and no facilities for bathing, cooking or using the bathroom.

Less than 30 miles away in Excursion Inlet, 700 Nazi Afrika Korps officers were imprisoned at a POW camp. The Nazis, sworn enemies of the United States and allies, were treated far better than the Unangax because their conditions were guaranteed by international law. The 700 German prisoners all returned home after the war without a single one dying during their imprisonment.

Back on the Pribilofs, the homes of the Unangax were occupied by the U.S. military and looted, vandalized and some were even burned down. The Unangax men were forced back to the Pribilofs to harvest seal during the summer months because the revenue was a

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source of income for the U.S. government. The men did not want to leave their families but were told that they would not be permitted to return to their homes after the war if they did not help harvest seal. This is a disturbing parallel to when the Russians enslaved the Unangax nearly two centuries earlier and forced them to harvest seal on the then uninhabited Pribilofs.

The Unangax were left in the camp almost two years after it was considered safe to return home. The deadly conditions of the camp left the Unangax people to suffer needlessly. As a direct result of this policy, many Unangax interned in Southeast died and some are buried in a cemetery in Funder Bay. The descendants of those who were lost have maintained the grave sites for 75 years.

