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# ESKIMO Whaling In Alaska

*By John Bockstoe*

**O**f all the environmental issues being debated in Alaska today none is more potentially volatile than the question of the Eskimo bowhead whale hunt, for a storm is brewing — and its winds will surely be felt in Washington, D.C. (See news story, page 11.) At the heart of the matter lies the fear of conservationists that the bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*) population of the Western Arctic — the stock lives in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas — is being reduced by Eskimo hunting at a rate that may soon lead to its extermination. The conservationists' concern is intensified by the fact that the Western Arctic bowhead stock is the last important stock of bowheads left on earth: all the others, near Greenland and Spitsbergen, and in Hudson Bay and the Okhotsk Sea were nearly extirpated by European and American commercial whaling fleets between the 16th and 19th centuries. The conservationists also feel that because there is the least amount of scientific knowledge about bowhead whales, the Western Arctic stock should be carefully husbanded.

I know of no Eskimo who would question the value of maintaining a viable stock of bowheads in the Western Arctic, but many Eskimos view the conservationist concern as an effort to tamper with their domestic affairs and to alter the whale hunt, which has gone on for more than a thousand years and which is one of the mainstays of coastal Eskimo culture from St. Lawrence Island to Point Barrow.

Eskimos began hunting bowheads in Northwestern Alaska at about A.D. 800 and there is archaeological evidence to suggest that the practice developed on St. Lawrence Island about 1,000 years earlier than that. This probably came about in both areas when the human population had reached a high enough level so that several whaling crews could be sent out from each village. This cooperative hunt made it much easier to take these enormous animals, each yielding 40 to 50 tons of food and raw materials. There is little wonder



that with such a bounteous gift of the sea the whale became one of the central figures in the culture of these Eskimos. The great surpluses of food that came from whaling during the 8-week spring hunt allowed the Eskimos leisure time to develop a rich artistic and religious life, and until the 19th century, the whales and Eskimos existed as co-inhabitants of a stable ecosystem.

In 1848, however, that stability was destroyed forever. In that year a Yankee whaler, Capt. Thomas Roys of Sag Harbor, Long Island, sailed north after a poor season off the Chilean coast and discovered the rich whaling grounds of the Bering Strait. Not only were the whales plentiful, but he found the bowheads to be slow swimmers, comparatively docile, and, most important, they had thick coats of blubber (an average of 100 barrels of oil for a good-sized adult) and a great quantity of baleen. It was baleen — the long fibrous mouth plates used by the bowheads to filter plankton from the water — that eventually nearly caused the extinction of the Western Arctic population. As women's fashions

evolved through the 19th century, they called increasingly for narrow waists, and baleen was the best material for corset stays. At the beginning of this century baleen's price rose to more than \$5 per pound, making each adult bowhead worth more than \$10,000.

Roys quickly filled his ship in the Bering Strait and by October 1848 he had reached Hawaii to resupply his vessel. There he published an account of his phenomenal success in *The Friend*, Honolulu's missionary newspaper. This journal was routinely carried around the world by New England whalers, and before long, Roys's story was printed verbatim in *The Whaler's Shipping List* in New Bedford, Massachusetts. This newspaper was regularly read by all American whalers, and within a few years more than 200 ships were operating in Bering Strait. The ice and weather took a terrible toll of ships and men, but the profits were worth the risk, and the whalers pressed farther north of Bering Strait, reaching Point Barrow in 1854 but not venturing east of there for another 20 years.

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Above — Eskimos from Barrow butcher a bowhead whale. Expansion of subsistence whaling in the 1970's has become an environmental issue in the Arctic. Right — Author John Bockstoce is a recognized authority on Eskimo whaling and whaling history. In his 10th year on a Point Hope whaling crew, Bockstoce is curator of ethnology for the Old Dartmouth Historical Society Whaling Museum, publisher of his recent book, *Steam Whaling in the Western Arctic* (reviewed in last month's ALASKA® magazine).

way to their summer feeding grounds in the Beaufort Sea.

These shore stations thoroughly changed the character, but not the technique, of Eskimo whaling: the stations, which could send out as many as 20 crews in the spring, hired large numbers of Eskimos, paid them for their labor and required only that the baleen be retained by the company. Natives from all over the northern Interior drifted to the coast to become commercial hunters, and before long the number of crews operating had increased two or three times above the aboriginal level. The number of whales taken increased at first, but despite the increase in hunting effort, the numbers taken soon declined, for the bowheads had been severely reduced. Their scarcity, in turn, drove the price of baleen

ly in all of Alaska, a figure that was possibly less than a quarter of the aboriginal take.

The subsistence phase differed from the aboriginal phase in another fundamental way. Since the early 1880's the Eskimos had used darting guns and bomb-lance shoulder guns as part of their whaling equipment. These implements were developed by Yankee whalers to help hasten the kill. The darting gun was a small, smooth bore attached to the end of the harpoon shaft. It enabled the harpooner to shoot a small bomb into the whale at the instant he harpooned the animal. The bomb was designed to explode a few seconds later, deep in the whale, and thus greatly restrict its flight. The shoulder gun, usually of brass, weighed about 35 pounds, fired a similar bomb through the air and was accurate up to about 20 yards. It allowed the gunner to dispatch a whale from a distance, out of the range of its lethal flukes.



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Although this massive foreign invasion systematically reduced the number of whales in the Western Arctic, the Alaskan Eskimos did not come into any significant direct contact with the whalers until after 1880. By that decade, however, the progressive scarcity of the whales caused the Pacific Steam Whaling Company of San Francisco, and other operators, to establish shore-based whaling stations at Point Hope and Point Barrow to take bowheads in the early spring as they swam through the leads in the ice — far in advance of the whaling fleet — on their

higher and ultimately caused its collapse in 1908, when spring steel was introduced as a cheaper substitute for corset stays.

The industry's collapse ushered in the third phase in the history of Eskimo whaling, a return to whaling as a subsistence activity. With bowheads commercially valueless, the number of crews fell almost to the aboriginal level, but after 60 years of commercial exploitation, few whales were left for the subsistence hunters: in the second decade of this century probably about 10 bowhead whales were taken annual-

The subsistence phase of Eskimo whaling lasted nearly 60 years and was characterized by a fairly constant level of hunting effort, for the number of whaling crews operating at Point Barrow, Point Hope and on St. Lawrence Island remained relatively constant. Interestingly enough, by the 1960's the number of whales taken by the Eskimos increased slightly — to about 15 taken annually in Alaska — during the period when no significant increase in the hunting effort occurred. This modest increase in the whales taken suggests that the whale stocks may have been rebounding slowly from the severely reduced level at which the population stood in 1910.

Beginning about 1970 Eskimo whaling entered its most recent and most controversial phase, characterized by a rapid expansion in the hunting effort and in the number of whales taken. Before 1970 one of the most important factors in limiting the number of whaling crews had been the great expense and scarcity of whaling equipment. Today, a well-equipped whaling captain has about \$8,000 invested in



*Eskimos butcher a whale at the Saint Lawrence Island village of Gambell. Villagers at Gambell brought home two whales during the spring 1977 hunt, compared with one animal last year.*

whaling equipment, which includes his whaling boat, shoulder gun, darting guns, tent, sleds, snow machines, rifles, bombs and cooking gear. Furthermore, his weekly food bill for a crew of 10 can reach \$500. Until recently, before the ready availability of high-paying jobs on the pipeline, it was very difficult for a young man to be able to amass so much money quickly; but during the heyday of pipeline construction it could be earned, after taxes, in less than 6 months.

In the 1970's the number of whaling crews has increased dramatically. At Barrow the number has increased by more than 50% over the level in the early 1960's; there has been a substantial increase on St. Lawrence Island, a small increase at Point Hope, and the villages of Nuiqsut and Kaktovik

(Barter Island) on the North Slope have begun autumn whaling to catch the bowheads on their return migration from the eastern Beaufort Sea. Most important, 48 whales were taken by Alaskan Eskimos in 1976, and the 1977 spring catch was 28 animals. (Two of the 28 were lost after being killed; an additional 73 whales were reportedly struck and lost.)

This dramatic rise in the number of whales taken has led to an outcry by conservationists, who claim that, although there is no good estimate of the number of bowheads in the Western Arctic population today, the number is certainly very small (1,500-3,000 is a figure some biologists give). They claim that 48 whales is in excess of the caloric needs of the Eskimos who hunt them. At the core of

their concern is the number of whales that are wounded and lost, some of which undoubtedly die. They state that, at the very least, one whale is wounded and lost for every whale landed, and that of the wounded ones, many die.

Unfortunately, we lack substantial knowledge about the size and character of the bowhead population. Thus, complaints about the size of the Eskimo kill being in excess of what the whale population will bear are based, at best, on rough estimates of the number of whales alive today. Without a solid factual base the debate is bound to be rancorous, but the trend in the number of whales killed is disturbing, and a solution must be sought very quickly in the best long-term interests of both the whales and the Eskimos. □