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The Whales Return



Woodcut by Dale DeArmond, noted Alaskan artist.

A few weeks from now, the great bowhead whales will begin to make their way up through the Bering Strait to their summer feeding and calving waters in the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort (BOW-fert) Sea. And the Eskimos will be waiting, just as they have for thousands of years.


Those things have not changed. What *has* changed is that the outside world seems to be closing in around that icy coast, once shared almost alone by the Eskimo people and the marine mammals upon which they lived.

Long ago other Native people hunted the many kinds of whales that sound and blow in Alaska waters (see pages 4-5). With poisoned spearheads and magic charms, the Aleuts matched their fragile one-man skinboats against the awesome size of the gray, fin, sperm and bowhead whales. There were also scattered coastal whaling cultures from Yakutat to Cook Inlet to Kodiak and into the Bering Sea.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, commercial whalers from New England and abroad nearly wiped the great whales from the oceans of the earth. So an international treaty was drawn up to try to save what whales remained.

Among the endangered species is the giant bowhead, *Balaena mysticetus* (ba-LEEN-uh miss-ti-SEE-tus). Once thousands ranged through all the northern seas. But today, except for isolated groups off northern Canada and eastern Siberia, the only bowheads left are believed to be those who follow the retreating Bering Sea pack ice on their spring migration into the Arctic Ocean. And only the northern Eskimos, the last of Alaska's whaling cultures, continue the traditional hunt.

Now it appears that lifestyle also is endangered. Two years ago, for the first time in history, the International Whaling Commission extended its control to cover subsistence hunting. And suddenly, through no real fault of either one of them, both the bowhead whales and the age-old culture of the Eskimos seemed to be caught in the crunch.

Can both survive? How? What other values are involved? See what you think after you take part in the following *Tidelines* TV News Special, "Battle Over the Bowhead." 



WHALE WATCH AT BARROW: Even at midnight, a whaling crew stands ready by their skinboat pulled up at the edge of the ice. Boots hang on tent posts (right) within easy reach if a bowhead should pass by. (Photo by Alice Puster)

A Tidelines TV News Special

BATTLE OVER THE BOWHEAD

This is an imaginary TV news special. The people in it are imaginary, too. But the battle over the bowhead is very real. The events described here actually happened. And these arguments have been heard in one form or another at such widely varied places as international meetings in London or Tokyo or over a steaming cup of tea in a tent pitched on the ice at a whaling camp.

Read the script through. Then select members of your class for each part, and let each one choose a team of "advisers." Each part represents a different point of view, but there are many other arguments besides those presented here. Perhaps you and your advisers can add some of your own as you go along.

Cast of Characters

Moderator

John, Eskimo whaling captain.

Ken, U.S. delegate to the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

Alice, member of the "Save the Whales" organization, Alaska chapter.

Emily, Alaska state legislator.

Steve, member of the IWC Scientific Committee.

Mike, biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Margaret, spokesperson for the oil and gas industry.

Moderator: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. The so-called "Battle Over the Bowhead" is not about whether or not the whales should be saved. We all agree that they *must* survive. And the Eskimos, whose traditions are built around the bowhead, know better than anyone else how empty our northern waters would be without them.

Nor is the battle a simple two-sided question of Eskimo subsistence against bowhead protection. It is far more complicated than that. There are many

issues involved, including conservation, international politics, the impact of oil and gas development in the arctic, the energy needs of the world, environmental protection, civil rights of minority people and, last but not least, survival of the great whales, among the most beautiful, fascinating, mysterious creatures ever to live on earth.

Some of these interests are represented on our panel here tonight. Let's start with you, John. We know it took some pretty heavy bargaining to get the International Whaling Commission

to lift its ban against Eskimo subsistence hunting and allow you a quota of 12 whales. You agreed to that quota — but under protest. That was last year. What's going to happen this spring?

John: We will be hunting — but under our own rules this time. We do not think the International Whaling Commission has any right to limit the number of whales we can take for food. We went along with the quota last year because we were told that if we cooperated, the quota might be lifted. Well, we did cooperate. But the quotas for this year's hunt are almost as bad as last year's. So this spring we will do it our way.

Moderator: Does that mean uncontrolled hunting?

John: No, no! The bowhead whaling will be managed this year by our own Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission. We will set and enforce limits that will not endanger the whales, but will meet the needs of our people. Let the I-W-C regulate the commercial whalers. We will regulate ourselves.

Moderator: Ken, perhaps you should tell us just what the I-W-C is and what it does.

Ken: The International Whaling Commission was formed in 1946 to conserve the whales by bringing commercial whaling under control. Since then, the worldwide whale kill has

been cut almost in half and no more whales have been added to the endangered species list.

The I-W-C sets quotas on whale populations considered large enough to harvest, and protects those species that are threatened. Most of its 16 member countries* were whaling nations when they joined, but now only a few continue to hunt commercially.

Alice: Yes, but two of those I-W-C nations — Japan and the Soviet Union — are the largest commercial whalers left. They account for about 85 percent of the whales killed each year. As you know, our "Save the Whales" group is totally against commercial whaling. And it seems to us that the I-W-C is dealing more in politics than protection.

Ken: It's a very touchy problem. You see, none of these nations *had* to join the I-W-C. We can't force any nation to sign the treaty. But once they are in, they listen to the advice of our I-W-C Scientific Committee and they are expected to abide by the I-W-C rulings. That means staying within the quotas for whales not endangered, and staying away from those species that are.

Another problem is that there are still five whaling nations* that have not signed the treaty. Those nations take about 10 percent of the total catch, including many whales from endangered populations. So we think it is extremely important to get these nations into the I-W-C.

Moderator: What is the United States' official position on whaling?

Ken: The United States wants to end all commercial whaling.

*Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Japan, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, United Kingdom, U.S.S.R. and U.S.

*Chile, Peru, Portugal, South Korea, Spain.

Moderator: What about subsistence hunting?

Ken: The government feels subsistence hunting should be allowed to continue. That's the position it took under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 which provides for subsistence rights (*see Tidelines, Dec.-Jan. issue*).

The I-W-C's move to limit Eskimo whaling put the U.S. in a very difficult position. On one hand, the government wants to protect the rights of minority people. On the other hand, we were afraid that if the quotas were not followed, other nations would ignore the I-W-C rulings.

Emily: I remember how surprised we were in the Alaska State Legislature when the I-W-C extended the treaty to include subsistence hunting. Why the sudden decision?

Steve: As a member of the I-W-C Scientific Committee, perhaps I should answer that. And I can assure you, it wasn't a *sudden* decision.

In the first place, scientists probably know less about the bowhead than any other species. It's just a guess, but we think there were around 16,000 in the western arctic before the commercial hunters first came in 1848. A study of old logbooks shows that between 19,000 and 21,000 bowheads were killed before commercial whaling ended 60 years ago. And since 1931 only subsistence hunting by Natives has been permitted.

The problem was that in recent years the Eskimo hunters have been taking more and more. We warned the United States about this, but little was done. Finally in 1976 when 48 bowhead whales were killed and 43 more were struck and lost we decided the time had come to call a halt. And in 1977, on our recommendation, the I-W-C ordered an end to all bowhead

hunting. At that time, we thought there were only 800 to 1,300 bowhead left.

John: We couldn't believe it! No one told us the I-W-C was worried. If we had known we could have taken some kind of action ourselves.

Alice: But why did you kill so many whales? Bowheads range up to 60 feet long and weigh more than a ton a foot. Surely, your people didn't need that many.

John: Our population has grown, and we have always depended on the bowhead for our physical and cultural survival. We store the meat in ice cellars dug in the permafrost, and it makes up a major portion of our year-round diet. The whaling feast is the most important celebration in our villages. And the highest honor for a man is to have a whale kill to his credit.

But I admit there were more whaling boats out that year than ever before. Some of our people who had held pipeline or construction jobs could afford to outfit a whaling boat for the first time. Many of them had not been brought up in the old ways, where you start as a whale hunter's apprentice at the age of 13. And some of them did stupid things — like shooting at the whale with a shoulder gun when there was no way to attach a float to the animal. Or killing a whale too far out, and having part of the meat spoil in the water before it could be towed back to shore. We didn't like those things either, I can assure you.

Alice: Couldn't you do something about it?

John: Well, after the I-W-C action, the whaling captains got together and formed the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission to develop our own management plan and spell out the responsibilities of whaling captains. Then the U.S. delegation was able to talk the I-W-C into lifting the ban and giving us a quota of 12 instead. That wasn't nearly enough — and we were eating canned chicken by Thanksgiving — but it was better than nothing!

Alice: But at what a cost! In exchange for that quota of 12 bowhead, the U.S. had to stand by while the I-W-C raised the North Pacific sperm whale quota to 6,500 for commercial hunters from Russia and Japan. That

(Continued on Page 6)

Hunters off Gambell close in on a struck bowhead. Note bladder floats at left which mark the whale and slow it down.

(Photo by John Burns)





At a whaling camp off Wainwright, the whole village turns out to help haul in the whale. This bowhead, about 55 feet long, was so big it took more than 10 hours to physically pull it onto the ice.

(Photo by Alice Puster)

BATTLE . . .

(Continued from Page 3)

was nearly 10 times the quota of the year before.

John: That wasn't our fault. That was the recommendation of the I-W-C Scientific Committee. And we Eskimos don't think some of those scientists know what they're doing — unless it's playing politics.

Steve: Now wait a minute! The bowhead is an endangered species — the sperm whale is not. You can't compare the two. A commercial harvest is acceptable if it doesn't endanger the population.

John: Well, we think we know the bowhead better than anyone else. And we always believed there were more than you figured. Last spring we helped set up ice camps on St. Lawrence Island and at Point Hope, Wainwright and Barrow to count the whales on their northern migration. Now scientists agree that there are probably between 1,800 and 2,800 bowhead.

Ken: Yes. That's just a small fraction of the original population, but the bowhead does seem to be in better shape than we thought.

John: Even so, we stayed within our quota. But a lot of good it did us. Last summer we went to the I-W-C meeting in London to appeal their ruling on subsistence. But we weren't allowed to address the convention. We weren't even introduced. So when the I-W-C set a quota of only 18 whales for us this year, we walked out. And by that act, we symbolically removed ourselves from the regulations of the I-W-C. As I said, we will hunt by our own rules this spring. Scientists esti-

mated the whale's reproduction rate at four percent, but to be on the safe side, we will take no more than two percent.

Mike: But John, that reproduction rate is only a guess — and that would still be around 40 whales. You are aware of how little we know about the biology of the bowhead. We don't know about their feeding habits or their natural cause of death. We don't even know for sure where they spend the winter, although we think it's in the southwestern Bering Sea. There is still so much to be learned.

Ken: And until we do know more, we feel there must be some outside regulation — even of subsistence hunting.

John (angrily): You would think we are the only human menace to the bowhead in the arctic. What about oil and gas industry in the Beaufort Sea? How will that affect the whales? Remember, the I-W-C also recommended that "all necessary measures" — and that's a quote — be taken to preserve the habitat of the bowhead. It's hard to understand how a government that seems so anxious to protect the bowhead can give the go-ahead for untested arctic oil exploration in the midst of the whale's natural habitat.

Margaret: We in the oil and gas industry are aware of that worry, John. We're concerned with the environment, too. And we certainly don't feel that our operations are untested. We believe we are capable of operating safely in the area.

John: I'm not just talking about the danger of oil spills, which is bad enough. I'm also talking about the effect of such things as noise. Eskimos have always known that the bowhead

is very sensitive to sounds. We don't use outboard motors when we're stalking the whale. We approach it silently by paddling our skinboats. If you even hit the water with your paddle, the whale will disappear.

So just think what the noise from the drilling rigs might do! It could change the whales' migration routes, disrupt their feeding and breeding activity, and further endanger the whale population.

Margaret: The industry has spent millions of dollars on research to provide safe and economical exploration and production of oil in the state.

John: Did you do any research into the effect of sounds on whales?

Margaret: Not in Alaska so far. But some work has been done on this in the Canadian Beaufort Sea . . .

John: Then perhaps you'd better put giant mufflers on your drilling rigs.

Margaret: Now just a minute, John. You also have to consider priorities here. The world needs new sources of gas and oil. The State of Alaska needs the income the industry pays in taxes, leases and royalties. That will amount to about \$790 million this year or more than 60 percent of the State's income. This money has helped build schools, hospitals, air strips, small boat harbors, and even this TV network which goes out to villages all over the state. And don't forget that industry and pipeline construction provided training and jobs for nearly 6,000 Native men and women in Alaska.

John: The whale was here long before the money.

Ken: No one here is trying to put a dollar value on the bowhead — or any

the great whales. If the largest creatures ever to live on earth were allowed to perish, it would be one of the great wrongs we have ever done.

Alice: Well, the commercial whalers in Japan and the Soviet Union are mainly putting a dollar value on the sperm whale — and for shoe polish, pet food, fertilizer . . .

Steve: You will be happy to hear that the I-W-C's sperm whale quota for 1979 has been cut to 3,800 — about 10 percent of last year's quota.

Alice: A commercial kill of 3,800 whales is still outrageous. And we don't understand how the U.S. got it into the position of having to bargain for Eskimo subsistence rights with commercial whalers who were responsible for the decline of the bowhead in the first place.

Ken: The government offered to supply the Eskimos with other red meat, free of charge, as a substitute for whale meat — or to give them more food stamps . . .

John: Just to replace the meat from the 12 whales we killed last year would cost you about \$500,000. Do you want to put us on permanent welfare? How would you like it if the Eskimos could order the rest of the nation to stop eating beef?

Moderator: I'm afraid we are running out of time. Perhaps we can sum-

marize quickly where matters stand.

Mike: We're sending a research vessel into the southwestern Bering Sea this spring to try to find out more about where the bowheads begin their migration. We hope to have data available on a full year cycle of the whale before the next Beaufort Sea oil and gas lease sale is held in December.

Margaret: And under federal law, that data will be taken into consideration before the leases are approved or drilling is allowed. And if it appears noise will be a problem, we are prepared to limit drilling activity to the winter months when the whales are gone.

Steve: The I-W-C Scientific Committee meets again this month to draw up recommendations for the full convention. We can only hope that the Eskimos stay within the quota that has been set.

Alice: After observing the hunt last summer, we sympathize with the Eskimos' problem. We were impressed with the difficulty of the hunt and the importance of the whale to their culture. We would be willing to support a limited subsistence hunt, so long as survival of the whale is assured.

Emily: We will work towards a decision that balances careful conservation of whales with sensitivity to hu-

man needs. We think it would be grossly unfair to ask the Native hunters and their families to bear the entire cost of that decision.

Ken: The U.S. delegation will continue to urge the I-W-C to set up a separate system for regulating subsistence whaling. After all, John, the Eskimos are enjoying some of the good things of the modern world. And you have to accept some of the regulations, too.

John: And we will be hunting as we said we would. We reject the idea that political nations which make up the I-W-C have any authority over our ancient aboriginal rights. And we will carry our case all the way to the United States Supreme Court and the World Court if necessary.

Meanwhile, I can assure you, the Eskimo will not kill the last whale.

READ ON:

"Alaska Whales and Whaling," Vol. 5, No. 4, ALASKA GEOGRAPHIC, Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1978.

This article was circulated for critical review of content and fairness to the Arctic Environmental Information and Data Center and the Institute of Marine Science (both University of Alaska); the Office of the Mayor, North Slope Borough; Greenpeace Alaska; Sohio Petroleum, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Some changes have been made in the original manuscript on the basis of that review, in an effort to present all sides as fully as possible.



MY TURN

right away — although we do help them up to the surface in a hurry to get their first breath. Whale mothers nurse their babies and take very good care of them. Many of our mothers died trying to protect their young from the hunters.

We have large, complicated brains, and there has been a lot of speculation about how intelligent we are. Well, that's our secret, and I'll leave that up to you humans to figure out. But I will say that our eyesight is excellent, both above and below the water. And our sense of hearing is absolutely terrific.

We can "talk" to each other, too, although you might think our language of clicks, whistles, squeaks and grunts is a little odd. But it carries over great distances in the ocean. And our porpoise cousins are experts at bouncing sound waves off of objects to aid in their navigation.

We also have a very unusual history. You probably already know that all

life on land had its beginnings in the sea. Well, we were once hairy four-legged land animals, too. No kidding! But millions and millions of years ago we decided to return to the ocean. I'm not sure why. Perhaps our ancestors were looking for food or trying to escape from some predators.

It took a long, long time, but gradually we adapted completely to the water environment. Our nostrils moved to the tops of our heads to make breathing easier while traveling through the water. (Incidentally, the whale's spout — my trademark — is really just exhaled breath with a little seawater mixed in.) Our front legs changed to flippers. Our hind legs disappeared. Our tails broadened out into wide flukes we could use like a paddle. And our hair, except for a few bristles left around our snouts, was replaced by a thick layer of oil-rich blubber just below the skin, which

(Continued on Page 8)

Let me introduce my family. It's a large one — more than 80 different species (species) in all, counting the dolphins and porpoises as well as us whales. But we all go by the family name of *Cetacean* (SEE-TA-SEE-an). You can't say there's much family resemblance, however. We range in size from the common porpoise — which is much bigger than most of you are — to the 120-foot blue whale, which is the largest animal ever to live on earth. We are all warm-blooded, air-breathing mammals. Many of us live in families and travel in groups. Our calves are born alive and are able to swim

(Continued from Page 7)

keeps us warm in the cold underwater world.

Scientists say that this amazing transformation can still be traced by watching how the tiny unborn whale grows within its mother. As with all land animals, first a gill-bearing "fish-like" form develops. This slowly changes into a recognizable creature with hair, legs, tail — as it would with a dog, cat, bear, whatever. But with the unborn whale, this process is carried one step further. The fur disappears, limbs turn into tail flukes and flippers, and the head and body reshape into a small version of the sleek streamlined form you see before you. (Ahem.)

As you noticed on pages 4 and 5, our whale branch of the *Cetacean* family is divided into two separate groups

— those with teeth and those, like me, with baleen. The toothed tribe includes all the dolphins and porpoises, so it has far more members than us baleen types. They feed, for the most part, on solid fish and squid and sometimes — I'm sorry to say — on each other.

But we baleen whales — there are about 10 species in our group — have much more delicate tastes. You wouldn't believe it by looking at us, but our favorite food is made up of tiny shrimp-like organisms called krill.

The plates of baleen that hang from our upper jaws are smooth on the outside and brushy on the inside. It is a perfect sieve for straining out krill. We swim along through rich soupy concentrations of krill with our mouths wide open. Then we close our mouths, squish the water out through the baleen with our tongues, and swallow the food trapped inside.

Unfortunately, you only get about two pounds per mouthful. And I personally like about two tons of krill a day. So scooping up krill takes a lot of time — but it's delicious!

Spout

Dear Spout,

Here is one of my favorite recipes:

WHALE BOBOTEE

Mix 4 cups of cold coarsely chopped roast whale meat with one finely chopped large onion. Add 1½ tsp. salt, 1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce, ½ tsp. savory, and pepper to taste. Put in a buttered baking dish, cover with 4 cups mashed potatoes, and bake in a moderate oven (375°) for about 30 minutes, allowing potatoes to brown slightly.

Anonymous

Dear Anonymous,
I resent that.

Spout

(Answers in April Issue)

The Whale's Tail

Starred (*) words are based on information in this issue.

ACROSS

*1. For many years, only the Native people of Alaska have been allowed to _____ the bowhead for subsistence.

*5. In 1977, the IWC ordered the (1 across) to _____.

*9. The only whaling culture left in Alaska today is that of the northern _____ (first 4 letters).

*10. One of five commercial whaling nations that still has not joined the IWC pact.

11. As good _____ gold.

12. Great American poet and scary story writer, Edgar Allan _____.

14. Short for the middle name of (12 across).

15. Not wet, but _____.

*17. Tiny shrimp-like organisms called _____ are the main food source for baleen whales.

19. Each (abbr.)

21. Most Wanted (init.).

*22. The largest creature ever to live on earth.

25. What the crow says.

28. Short laugh.

29. Estimated Time of Arrival (abbr.).

31. Fifth letter of the alphabet — twice.

32. An island in the western Aleutians, occupied by the Japanese during World War II.

*34. The Eskimos argue that international _____ should not apply to subsistence hunting.

*36. Shelter at a whaling camp is a _____ pitched on the ice.

*37. Another word for international agreement, such as that in the IWC treaty (see 10 across for a clue).

DOWN

*1. Three whales found in northern polar waters and nowhere else are the narwhal, beluga, and the bow _____.

*2. A member of the IWC, but still one of the largest commercial whaling nations.

3. North Korea (init.).

4. The part of the iceberg you see.

*5. When the IWC set a quota of 12 bowheads for Eskimo subsistence hunters, it also allowed commercial whalers to take 6,500 _____ whales.

6. Too easy (init.).

7. Not written, but spoken — as in an _____ test.

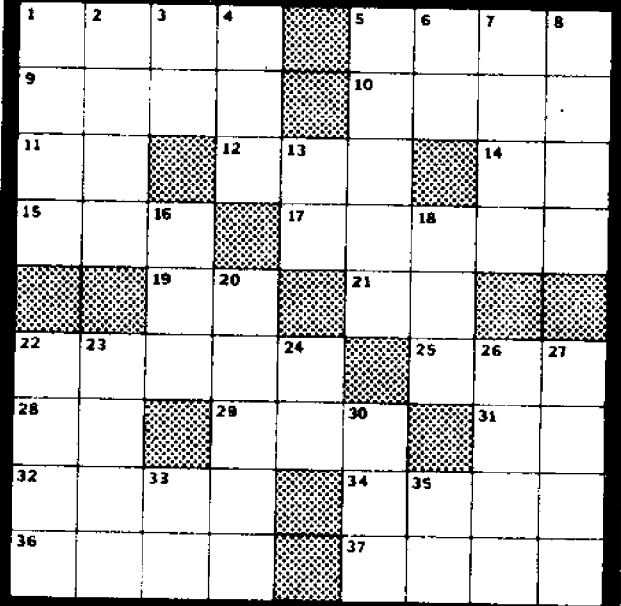
*8. It takes a lot of teamwork to _____ a whale up onto the ice.

13. Modern slang for "All right."

16. Biblical word for "All right."

*18. International group formed to conserve the whales and control commercial whaling (init.).

*20. Once a great whaling culture,



the _____ people no longer hunt for subsistence.

22. Who? _____? Where? Why?

23. Some people _____ spinach.

24. Latin for "and."

*26. Eskimo group formed to regulate their own whale hunt (init.).

*27. No one knows for sure, but the bowheads are believed to spend the winter in the south _____ Bering Sea.

30. High mountain (think of Switzerland).

*33. Bowheads weigh over a _____ (abbr.) a foot.

35. Alaska Airlines (init.)

February X-Word Answers



April Issue:
Millions and Millions of Clams

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