

AEWC

The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission - 2007



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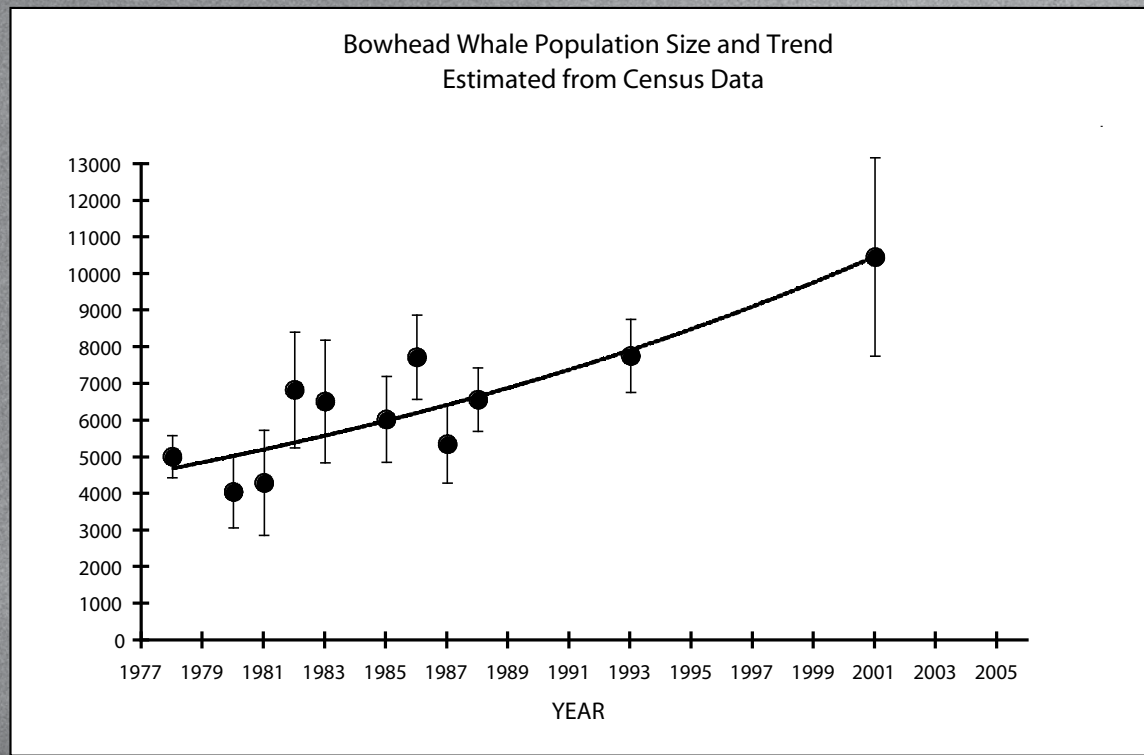
Our ancestors protected our bowhead whale hunt and passed it on to us. We will now protect the hunt and pass it on to our children and grandchildren.

“When people talk to us about the bowhead whale, we often hear the words, ‘endangered species.’ They use these words concerning whales. Our people have hunted bowhead whales for thousands of years without once endangering the species. When I use the words, ‘endangered species,’ I am talking about us, the Eskimo people whose diet and culture has long centered around the bowhead whale. Our unique and treasured culture would die without the bowhead hunt.”

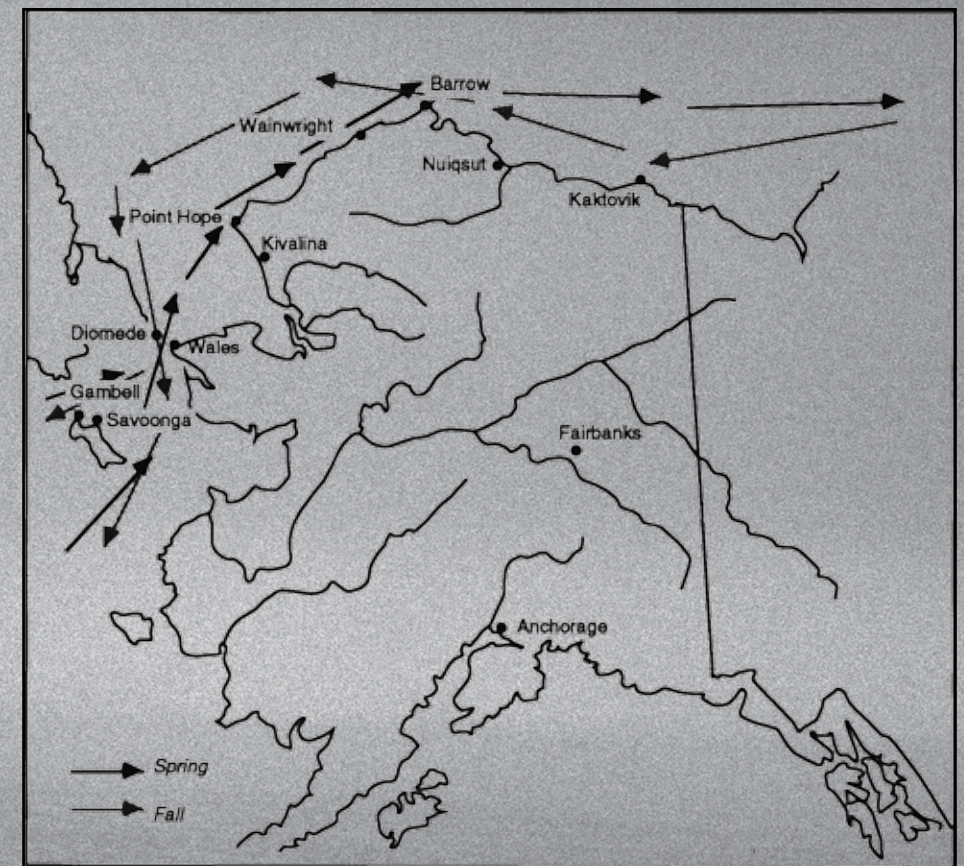
Arnold Brower, Jr., Whaling Captain



On the ice offshore from the village of Wainwright, whaling captain Fred Ahmaogak calls to his son, Asiagan, to join him atop the whale his whaling crew has just landed.



Estimated bowhead whale population size and trend from surveys at Point Barrow from 1978 to 2001 conducted by the North Slope Borough and the National Marine Fisheries Service. The estimated rate of increase is about 3.4% per year.



Map showing the 10 AEWC whaling villages and approximate migration route of bowhead whales.



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Science has proven that traditional Eskimo hunt does not threaten bowhead population



Science has proven what we already knew: the bowhead whale population is strong and growing. It is not threatened by the ancient hunt that has made the Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik the strong, resourceful and thriving people that we are. Thirty years ago the International Whaling Commission, relying upon incomplete science that was conducted by researchers who were new to the Arctic, tried to shut our bowhead hunt down by placing a moratorium on it.

Had that moratorium stood, our people would have been devastated - nutritionally, culturally, and spiritually - so we fought back. With financial support from the North Slope Borough and the legal backing of our aboriginal tribal governments, we formed our own Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission. Through a long, tough, yet ultimately rewarding process, we convinced the United States government and then the IWC to support us as we spearheaded an in-depth, decades long, scientific bowhead population count. We have continued to support additional research and the bowhead is now one of the most thoroughly studied whale species in the world. We also entered into a cooperative agreement with the U.S. government that recognized our right to continue our

hunt and to manage it. All along, we have cooperated fully with IWC. For the first two decades of this 30-year period, we had to hunt within the constraints of low IWC quotas that subjected our communities and whaling crews to hardship.

Yet, even though we knew those quota constraints were unnecessary, we honored them in managing our hunt. At the same time, we created a supportive environment that enabled the best marine biologists in the world to join us in conducting an accurate census and numerous biological studies of the bowhead whale.

As a result, where there was once animosity and suspicion, there are now strong bonds between our hunters and the scientific community, and between our people and the government and IWC officials who work with AEWC to protect both the whale and our hunt.

The scientific facts are well known: whereas in 1977 when many scientists believed the bowhead population could number as few as 600 animals, we now know the 1977 population was closer to 4,000 and today's best estimate is 10,500 whales.

Our strike quota has increased from 12 landed whales or 18 strikes in 1978 to 56 landed or 67 strikes today. Even with this hunt, the bowhead population continues to grow at a healthy net recruitment rate of over three percent.

2,000 years ago, our people proved themselves to be responsible managers of the bowhead hunt and now we have proven it to the entire world. It would seem that the threats we first faced 30 years ago should no longer trouble us.

However, in 2007, the AEWC finds itself once again wondering if it will come away from the IWC with a quota for bowhead whales. Our governments and organizations have invested much to maintain our way of life. We have invested large amounts of money and time to ensure our people are able to continue the bowhead hunt. We are hopeful that 2007 will bring success to our request for another quota. Maintaining cultural diversity, including the Inupiat and Yupik cultures, while conserving whale stocks should be a goal for not only the NSB and AEWC, but for IWC and its member nations.

In the following few pages, we hope to give readers at



In 1982, the late Simon Koonook (above) joined researchers in the census effort that would prove the bowhead population is strong and growing. Wainwright whaling captain Kenneth Tagarook holds a flint harpoon head that was embedded in a whale landed by his crew. The whale was probably more than 100 years old. The ancient stone harpoon heads were all found in whales harvested in recent years

least a glimpse of how important this ancient and contemporary hunt is to our people. It is not a hunt that is carried out for money. When a bowhead gives itself to a whaling captain and his crew, that captain in turn gives the whale to his community. In payment, captain and crew receive not one penny in cash, but they are richly rewarded with the respect and thanks of the community. In our culture, this respect is a greater treasure than money.

The bowhead hunt provides our people with the kind of food our bodies depend on to sustain us in the cold and darkness of the harshest inhabited environment in the world. We need that food. It cannot be replaced with store-bought food imported from warmer climates. When deprived of our traditional foods for extended periods of time, many of our people have become ill.

Furthermore, in our native language and culture there is knowledge of the bowhead whale and the Arctic that exists

among no other people on this earth -- knowledge that is of benefit to the entire world. This practical wisdom was accumulated over thousands of years of experience and observation. It should be allowed to survive.

To summarize:

- The international community agrees that the Alaskan Eskimo bowhead whale subsistence hunt is sustainable and that the bowhead population is growing;
- this subsistence hunt is vital for the nutritional and cultural survival of the Native people in 10 arctic bowhead subsistence villages; and
- the AEWC has gone above and beyond the call of duty in meeting the IWC's requirements for research, proof of need, weapons improvement, and for the development of sound management practices.
- Today, Alaskan Eskimo people take their whales in a non-commercial hunt for food and for sharing, just as our ancestors did.
- The ocean provides some of our most important resources. The people in our coastal communities are heavily dependent on the ocean for their food.
- We practice and cooperate with sustainable management of all our natural resources.



*“Organizing the AEWG was probably one of the smartest things the Iñupiat ever did. It brought to focus throughout the world the fact that we were not going to lie back and let someone else run our lives. The AEWG needs to continue to work hard to ensure that other outside forces don’t trample over our whaling, our way of life.” - **Jacob Adams**, captain*

Winter has been long and dark and through it all an umiak frame has sat unused in the cold. Now the sun has returned and all across the Alaskan Arctic, umiaks will be repaired (right) and these skin boats will be restored to seaworthiness, so that they can carry our hunters out to meet the bow-head whale.



even caribou is needed...

To make the umiak ready

Depending on the location of the community and the ice and sea conditions that it faces, the bowhead hunt takes place either in the spring or fall, or, in Barrow, during both of those seasons. Even so, bowhead whale hunting is a year-round activity. All year, people are hunting and are gathering together what they will need to carry on the hunt. As for that bare umiak frame on the previous two pages, before it can be made seaworthy, somebody needs to catch some caribou. Thread is not strong enough to bind together the skins that will cover the umiak, but sinew taken from the back strap of the caribou is.

The caribou will be used to support the hunt in other ways, too. Its hide will line the floor of the hunting tent, giving the whalers comfortable, warm bedding to lie upon when they must rest; caribou hide and fur will also wind up in mukluks - the light, traditional, boots that warm feet like no other footwear - and in other garments as well. Caribou flesh, right down to the marrow of the bone, will help feed the hunters as they wait for the whales that are coming to them.

A bull caribou runs along a bank of the Meade River. Caribou are hunted (below) not only for meat, but for materials such as the sinew used to sew umiak skins.



“I’ve been out whaling with my father every time they go whaling since I was ten years old. The feeling I get in whaling, it’s something I’m very proud of. I hope a lot of people will be involved from year to year. I don’t want it to be stopped. Whaling has been our way for centuries, for thousands and thousands of years. I hope it goes on like that, without stopping, because something is going to happen if it stops. I would like people to help out whaling, so that the next generation, even the people 100 years from now, they will know how to whale. They will whale every spring in the Arctic.” **Ben Itta**, whaling captain



Hunting ugruk: skins will cover umiak

In the villages of the Arctic Slope, it is the skins of the bearded seal, or *ugruk*, that the caribou sinew binds together to cover the umiak. Most ugruks are caught in the summer time, after the ice that has crowded the shore for the past nine months breaks up and the east wind carries it out to sea. There, seals, walrus, and polar bears gather on the ice bergs. When the wind shifts to west, it blows the icebergs back towards the communities and the animals come with it. It is then that our hunters go out and catch the ugruk. The flesh is eaten and preserved, and the oil is stored and will serve many purposes, including as a highly nutritious dip for frozen bowhead meat, and frozen and dried fish and caribou.

The skins are rolled up and stored away until late winter.



Harry Brower Jr. of Barrow (upper left) has just shot the ugruk, or bearded seal, pictured above. Other hunters help load it into his boat.

On a separate hunt, Charlie Brower, Harry's uncle, shoots an ugruk, then quickly harpoons it before it can sink.

In addition to being a nutritious and tasty source of food and oil, the skins of the ugruk are used to cover the umiak frames.

“When I was a young boy, I was in my grandfather’s boat when we spotted a whale, acting strangely. We came closer. We could see the bowhead rubbing its body against the ice. There, in front of us, the whale gave birth to an infant, which came out on the ice. The mother reached a fluke over her infant, pulled it into the water and swam off with it. We’ve been living on the ice and seeing things like this for thousands of years. We have developed a kindred relationship with this great animal. We have a familiarity with the whale that no other people has.” **George Ahmaogak**, whaling captain



Women gather to sew ugruk skins

Come late February and early March, it is time to retrieve the rolled up skins, remove the hair, and sew them together into a cover for the umiak. Women from the village, including the Elders who know just what to do and the young women who learn from them, gather together in the homes of the whaling captains, where seal oil keeps the caribou sinew moist and flexible.

All day long they sew and while they are doing valuable work, they are also visiting and socializing - doing the things that unite a village and give its people a sense of community, of family.



“There is lots of work to do this time of year. We have to get the skin boat ready. The skins have to be sewn by the women, by us. The skins have to be prepared, and put on the skin boat, so they will be dry by whaling time... the ice cellar has to be kept clean because you know those big whales, they need a clean house where they can be brought to, and clean people. We have to make sure of that.” - Cora Leavitt (the late)

Women in Barrow (opposite, top) and Point Hope (lower left) sew ugruk skins. Typically, it takes five to seven skins to cover an umiak. Once they have been sewn together, crew members gather together in locations ranging from the village fire stations to a workshop and, using strong rope, attach the skins to the frame. Now it is put on a rack, to dry in the sun and the wind.

Time to hunt

When the skins dry, they will be stronger and more flexible than fiberglass. For paddle hunting, no modern boat is as efficient, quiet and stealthy as the umiak and the knowledge that makes it work is ancient. Even before the skins dry, hunters move out onto the ice and using pick and other chopping tools, they cut trails, sometimes as long 15 or twenty miles, through the rugged pressures of the shore-fast ice to the lead system where the returning bowheads will soon swim.

Finally, it is time to take the boats to the sea. All the community is invited to the captain's house, where candy is passed out. A prayer is said over the boat and then the crew heads to the lead, which might be as far as seven to nine miles offshore, or as close as one, depending on ice conditions.



*“A whale is coming.
I can feel it!”*

William Sielak - crewman

“This is the best place in the world, that’s how I feel about it.”

Claybo Solomon, Barrow whaler, upon spotting whales as he cuts trail

Bowheads surface and blow as hunters bring their trail system nearer to the lead and to the site where they will establish their camp. For now, they can do nothing but to occasionally lift their heads from their work and take a glance.

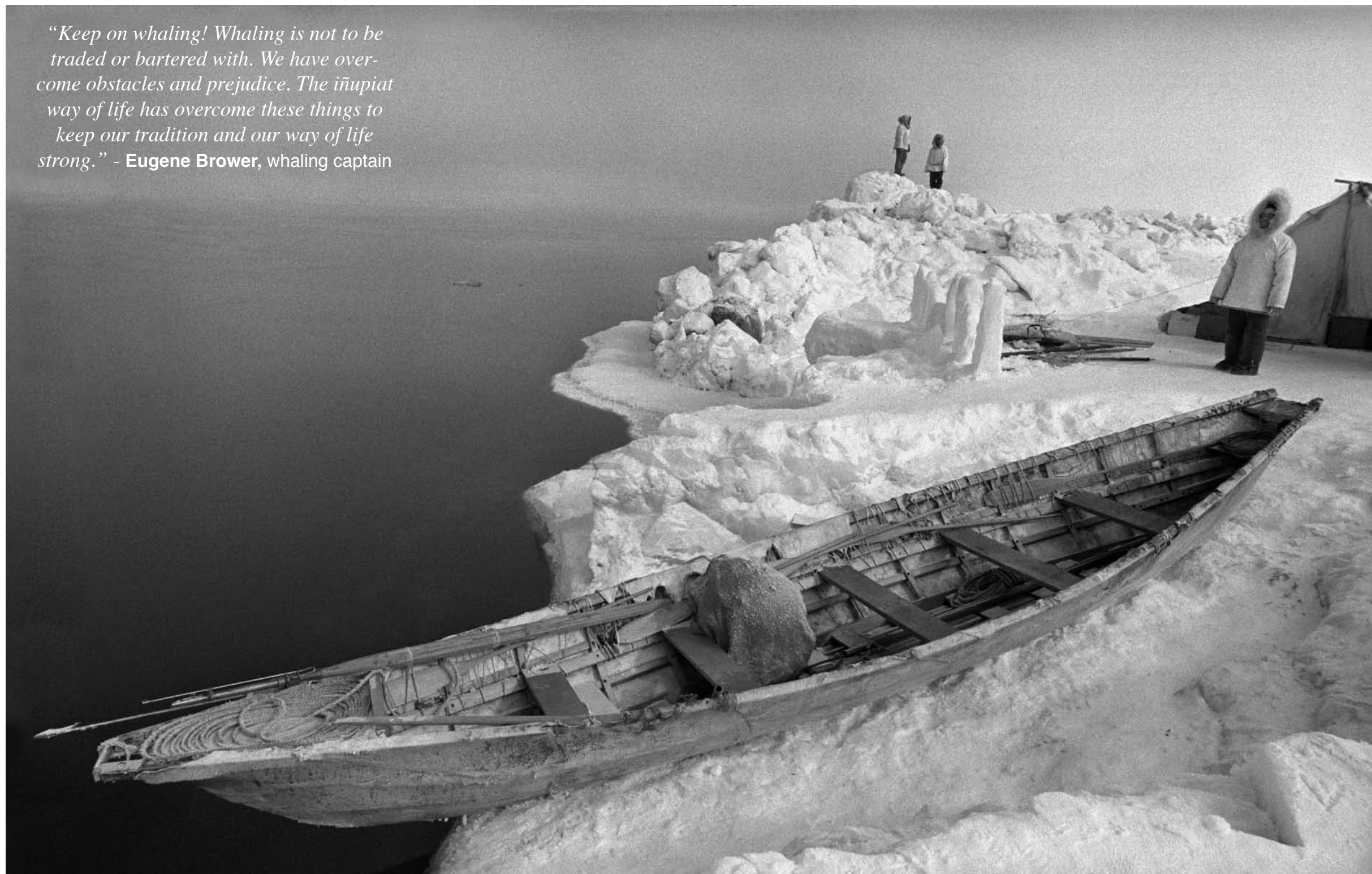




Much to be done before hunt can begin

As part of his training, the apprentice hunter at left must learn how to distinguish patches of freshwater ice from the salt ice that surrounds him. Having so learned, he uses his pick to break that ice up into small pieces which he will then haul into the tent, where he will melt them and use the water to brew coffee and tea for his crew. Once the coffee is brewed, he carries it outside in a thermos. Whalers usually begin their apprenticeship at about ten years of age, although some start even younger. It will be years before they have sufficient knowledge to arm the shoulder and darting guns, such as the captain and crew member do in the photo to the immediate left. Below, the fully armed umiak is ready and the whalers wait for the bowhead that they hope will soon come to them and through them, to their community. Furthermore, there is knowledge of the whale and of the arctic in our culture and language that exists among no other people on this earth, yet is of benefit to all the world. That knowledge did not come to us overnight, but was accumulated over thousands of years.

“Keep on whaling! Whaling is not to be traded or bartered with. We have overcome obstacles and prejudice. The inupiat way of life has overcome these things to keep our tradition and our way of life strong.” - Eugene Brower, whaling captain



Hunters face many challenges

“One thing for sure, I hope our whaling culture goes on, even after us. We have followed our fathers for decades on, that’s the way I feel. If we lose our whaling, then we lose our culture. We lose our festivals, our Nalukataq, Thanksgiving, Christmas. When all that is gone, what do we have to look forward to?”

Tom Brower III
whaling captain



Many challenges face the crews as they wait for the whales. If the wind blows from the west, it can close the lead and grind to pieces the campsite that they have worked so hard to establish. The east wind is the right wind to keep the lead open, but if it blows too hard - and it often does - it can cause the ice edge to break up and drift away, and force the hunters to pack up and move to safe ice closer to shore. Polar bears roam the ice and frequently come to camp. The two above dine on a piece of bowhead that they took from an earlier landing site.

Hunters scare bears away by firing rifles into the air and revving up snowmachines but sometimes, to protect human life, they must shoot them.



"I am happy. We will feed the community tonight." – Jonathon Aiken, Sr.



Whale gives itself

Finally, the bowheads present themselves. In these pictures, spring crews from Point Hope (top) Wainwright (right) and Kaktovik in the fall (left) stalk bowheads. In Barrow, whaling captain Jonathon Aiken, Sr., strikes a bowhead with his harpoon and darting gun as Eli Solomon follows up with the shoulder gun. It is an instant kill.



Thanks,
joy and
more
hard work

After the Point Hope Crew of Elijah Rock successfully strike and kill and bowhead, a prayer is said for that whale. All crews in the village then join together to tow the bowhead back to the ice, where all gather around as the Reverend Elijah Attungana offers another prayer of thanks (left).

Using small ropes, hunters pull the flukes up onto the ice, where they will be attached to a block and tackle system anchored in the ice. Then, working in cooperation, hunters will be joined by the women and children of the village and will spend hours - sometimes a full day - pulling the whale out of the water.



“I am so happy. We have worked hard all year long; we have worked hard all spring and now a whale has given itself to us. Tonight, we will feed all of Point Hope. We will feed the people throughout the whole year. Everyone is happy.”

Dorcas Rock
captain's wife

Next two pages:
Villagers in Barrow and Wainwright (inset) haul bowheads onto the ice.

“Whaling to me is a family occasion. Most of my crew is family, so when we go whaling, it is like a family gathering. We try to get together to catch a whale. Even crew members who are not family, it is like they become part of our family. We are one big family unit.” - **Charlie Hopson**, whaling captain



“Another thing I like about these whaling captains, when they get their whale, they send maktak to the villages that have no whaling season, like Point Lay. When they have a feast, everybody eats. Every mouth is fed. Nalukataq, Thanksgiving and Christmas. They share it with somebody. The maktak is good. The meat is good.”

the Reverend **Greg Tagarook**, Wainwright



The sharing begins even as the whale is being hauled up (left). Strips of blubber and skin are cut off (above) and boiled into “uunnaalik,” which is passed out by young girls (top) and eaten by them as well (top left).

All will share

While the methods vary from village to village, in every community the butchered whale is divided into shares which are given to every crew and everybody that helps. In Wainwright (below) share portions are hauled back to the village as an ice-bow glows in the background. There, shares will also be distributed to the Elders, to the sick and infirm. Everyone will get their share of the bowhead, and no money will change hands. So it is in all ten of Alaska's whaling villages.

Following two pages: Successful captains store community shares in their ice cellars, and then once again freely distribute this hard earned food with everyone. At the beginning of the June feast of Nalukataq, the flags of four successful crews fly as their members encircle the prepared bowhead and a prayer is offered.



“Wainwright whaling is special. I’m glad we got guidelines to hunt with, like not to shoot without a harpoon attached to the whale. I’m proud of that, that we don’t have many wounded animals that get away from us. I’m proud of Wainwright whaling captains. They really work together as a team. Whenever they strike a whale, every whaling boat goes to that whale. Each captain listens to their Elders, even today.”

Rossman Peetook
whaling captain

“For me, whaling brings the community together. Everybody is united as they have been in centuries past. When I catch a whale, firstly, I feel very thankful, then an overwhelming sense of humility. It puts a perspective on your role in the whole scheme of things. Whaling is joyous. It’s just great!” - Edward Itta, whaling captain, North Slope Borough Mayor





In the village of Point Hope, successful whaling captain Elijah Rock hands out strips of flipper, a delicacy. Pikok Tuzroyluk is pleased to receive what is only a small part of the food that she will take home to her family this day.

“When a captain and his crew catch a whale, they do not say to the rest of the community, ‘here is our whale, come and give us money and we will give you a small piece of it.’ No. The captain shares his whale with everyone.” - Arnold Brower, Jr.



The Nalukataq feast begins with duck, goose, and caribou soup (top right) and then various portions of the whale are distributed throughout the day (above). The joy of the day is also celebrated through the blanket toss (see back page) and finally, through a joyous round of traditional dancing. At midnight, as his flag joins that of other successful crews, whaling captain George Ahmaogak shows the great joy that he feels. Similar feasts will be held during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Then there is Kivgiq (next two pages) a midwinter feast held to celebrate successful years. Again, the whale is generously shared, but none of it is sold. It is given freely.





Kivgiq: Through the beauty of dance, Wainwright women and girls express the joy brought by the whale to their Iñupiat people.

In 1991, when he was 65 years of age, successful whaling captain Luke Koonook was tossed 15 feet into the air during the blanket toss at the June whale feast, called Qaqrugvik in his community of Point Hope.

