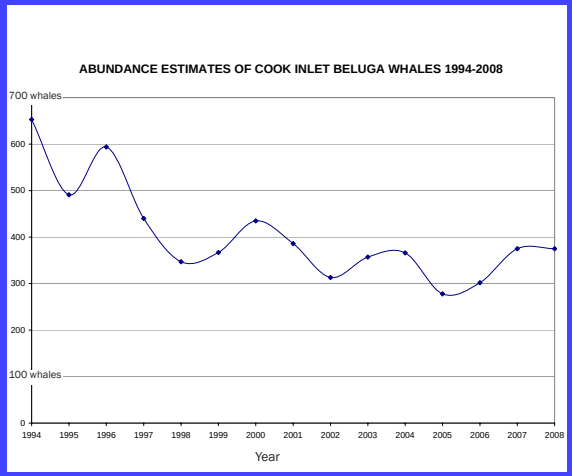

Annual estimates of abundance for Cook Inlet beluga whales as determined by aerial surveys in June and July.

A Depleted Population

The Cook Inlet beluga population is estimated to have numbered more than 1,300 belugas as recently as the 1970s. The population declined nearly 50 percent between 1994 and 1999. The 2008 beluga population estimate is 375 animals.

Federal law supports traditional subsistence harvests of marine mammals by Alaska Natives. However, the federal government may regulate these harvests when a species or stock, such as the Cook Inlet beluga, is depleted. In June 2008, NMFS published the *Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Subsistence Harvest Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement*, which laid the groundwork for the *Subsistence Harvest Management Plan*.

Although the cause or causes of the decline are not fully understood, NMFS, with the help of local Native communities, is taking steps toward beluga whale recovery by implementing the *Subsistence Harvest Management Plan*. The plan does not assess causes of the decline, nor does it outline a full recovery management plan for this stock; it deals specifically with the aspect of subsistence hunting of Cook Inlet beluga whales.

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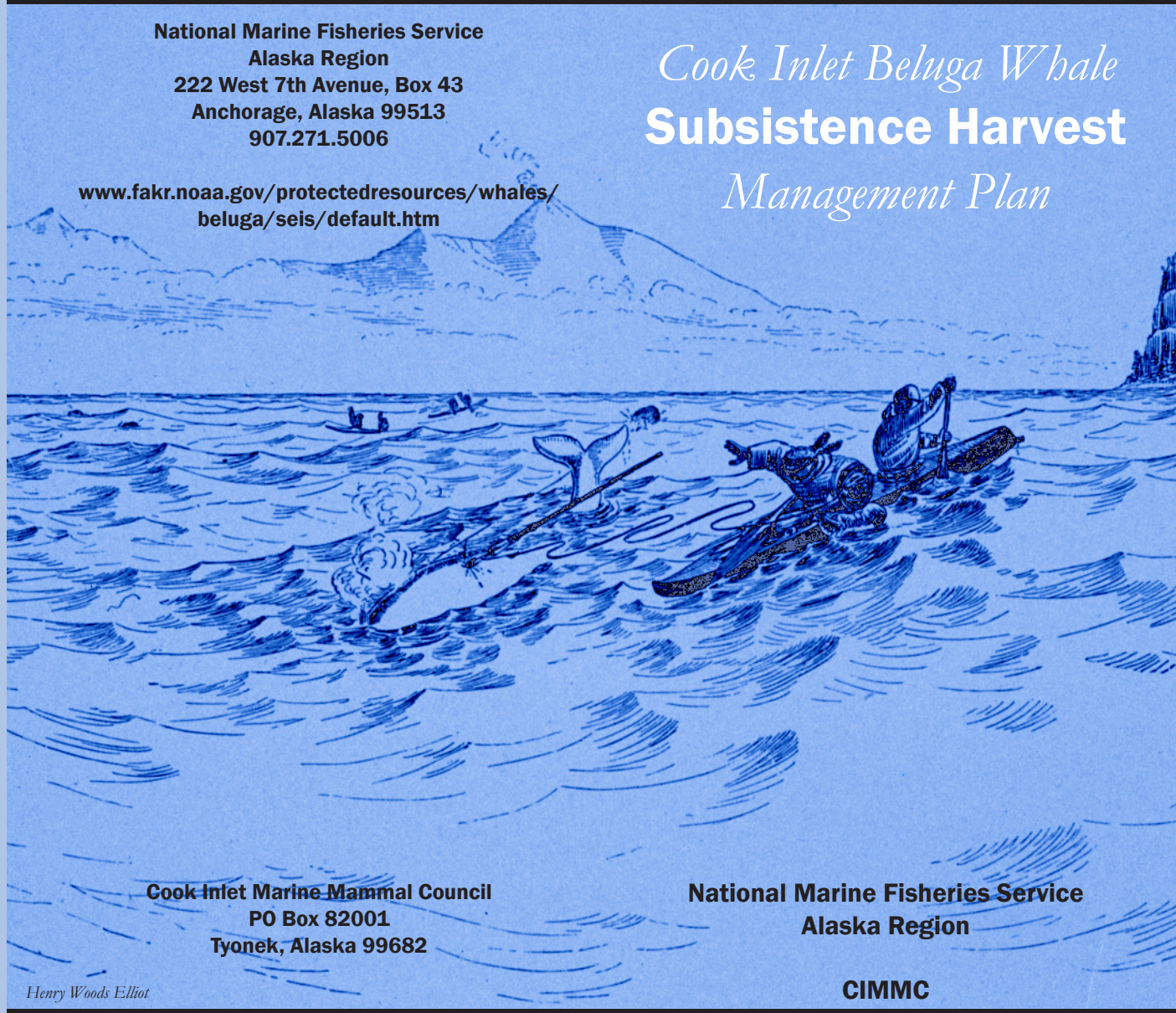
www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/whales/beluga/seis/default.htm

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale
Subsistence Harvest
Management Plan



Henry Woods Elliot

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PO Box 82001
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National Marine Fisheries Service
Alaska Region

CIMMC

Tyonek, mid-1980s
Alaska DF&G, Division of Subsistence

Co-management Agreements

For more than a decade, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has worked cooperatively with the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council (CIMMC), the Native Village of Tyonek, Cook Inlet Treaty Tribes and Alaska Native beluga hunters to establish Cook Inlet beluga co-management agreements.

Co-management agreements were signed in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2006. These agreements outlined the responsibilities of NMFS and CIMMC, described the management of Cook Inlet beluga whales for that year, set and allocated the number of strikes, and defined the harvest practices to be used.

In 2007, hunters from the Native Village of Tyonek voluntarily stepped down from a subsistence hunt in order to further support beluga recovery.

To continue these efforts in co-management, and to promote the long-term recovery of the whales, NMFS designed the *Subsistence Harvest Management Plan* for 5-year intervals in order to make the co-management process more efficient and to allow more time for the recovery of the stock.

Purpose of the *Subsistence Harvest Management Plan*

The *Plan* is a long-term subsistence harvest plan based on continuing assessment of population estimates. The goal is to allow the Cook Inlet beluga to recover to its Optimum Sustainable Population while recognizing the traditional, cultural, spiritual, and nutritional needs of Alaska Natives who harvest Cook Inlet beluga whales.

Plan Highlights

- The *Subsistence Harvest Plan* sets an annual harvest quota based on the abundance and growth of the population. Harvests are authorized only when the 5-year average abundance is more than 350 whales.
- Harvest levels will increase in proportion to the 5-year average abundance level and population growth rate. Population growth rate is calculated from the previous 10-year period.
- Once the 5-year average is determined to be more than 350 belugas, harvest levels will be adjusted to account for high, intermediate, and low growth rates.
- In accordance with the *Plan*, there will be no harvest from 2008 to 2012 because the most recent 5-year population average (2003 - 2007) was 336 belugas.

David Hoffman, Alaska Accent

Next Steps

NMFS will continue to monitor the Cook Inlet beluga population through aerial surveys, reviews and assessments of known and potential factors influencing the stock, and incorporating local traditional knowledge, with the goal of allowing the stock to recover.

Every five years, NMFS will develop a co-mangement agreement with the appropriate Alaska Native organizations, based on the above criteria.

It is the goal of agency managers and traditional managers/harvesters alike to see the full recovery of the Cook Inlet beluga population, and a fully resumed traditional subsistence harvest. Calculations based on the best historical information available place the Optimum Sustainable Population at 780 animals.

Calvin Hall, Alaska Stock