

**Native Harvest and Use of Beluga Whales
in Cook Inlet
from April throughout November 1996**

Presented to:
The National Marine Fisheries Service
Protected Resources Management Division

By:
The Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council
P.O. Box 102456
Anchorage, Alaska 99510

May 19, 1997

Abstract

Native beluga whale hunters of the Cook Inlet (CI) area reported results of their 1996 beluga hunts. This is the second year for which such data have been documented by the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council (CIMMC). Forty-nine beluga whales are known to have been caught (killed and retrieved). The number of struck and lost beluga whales is estimated to be one or two times the number caught. CI Native beluga hunting methods and use of beluga whales is discussed in this report.

Introduction

Beluga hunting in the CI is an important aspect of a traditional subsistence lifestyle for many Alaska Natives residing near CI. The purposes of this 1996 report are to document the number of beluga caught, the number of beluga struck and lost, and to provide information on hunting techniques and use of these beluga.

Methods

Four CIMMC member/researchers interviewed CI beluga captains after the 1996 hunting season. One of the problems with interviews after the hunting season, is the difficulty in remembering struck and lost beluga whales with the passage of time. Data from boat captains (rather than from each hunter) were preferred to avoid multiple counts of animals taken. However, several crew members were interviewed because a few known captains could not be interviewed directly. Three boats from other areas were observed hunting in CI.

Traditional knowledge and use of CI beluga were contributed by CIMMC member/researchers, who obtain this information through direct observation and participation.

Results

These interviews recorded forty-nine CI beluga whales caught in upper CI during the 1996 hunting season. The number of beluga struck and lost, as estimated from observed hunts, is between one and two for each whale landed. This calculation would produce an estimated range of struck and lost beluga between 49 and 98.

Twelve captains/crews caught beluga whales in CI during 1996. Five captains caught three beluga, three captains caught two beluga, and three captains caught one beluga apiece. One captain and/or his crew caught approximately 25 beluga.

Three boat crews who reside outside the CI area were observed hunting in the CI during the 1996 season, but their hunting success rate is unknown by CIMMC.

Of the twelve captains that captured whales in 1996, nine captains reside in the Municipality of Anchorage, two captains reside in the Matanuska Susitna Borough, and one captain resides in Tyonek.

Discussion

Contributors believe this report is a fairly comprehensive summary of the catch data for CI area resident hunters, who comprise CIMMC. A total of 49 beluga whales was caught in 1996, with a struck and lost rate of approximately 49-98 beluga. For the 1995 hunt, CIMMC reported 42 whales taken (killed and retrieved) and a verbal account of 26 whales struck and lost, which "are probably too good to be strictly accurate." (CIMMC, 1996, 1995). The reported takes of beluga whales from 1987-1993 ranged from nine to 17 whales (Stanek, 1994). CIMMC believes these harvest counts to be considerably underestimated, because not all beluga hunters were interviewed.

The hunting season for CI beluga is roughly determined by ice density and fish migrations, and generally extends from April through November. Some crews extend their hunting season by travel to Kachemak Bay which thaws earlier and freezes later than the upper CI. Presence of

beluga in Kachemak Bay at these times is less predictable than for the upper CI during most of the season, and no beluga were taken there in 1996.

The boat owner is generally the captain, and often the driver. In some crews, drivers may alternate as rifleman and/or harpooner. This is related to experience, ability, and personal preference. The use of two riflemen is common; more than two riflemen are considered congestion. Riflemen generally shoot from the bow of the boat. One crew has a captain that operates as rifleman/harpooner while an elder crew member drives; another crew has a woman driver, while the captain shoots and harpoons. With one crew, an owner-built wooden boat was used. This boat had a wooden cabin on top, which provided the rifleman an effective shot and viewing angle.

When a target animal is selected, it is followed closely while the driver attempts to keep the beluga in shallow water. To follow the whale, hunters watch for the "covenough" or wake which the whale leaves in shallow water. The rifleman has only a few seconds to shoot, as the whale exposes only its head to breathe when being chased. CI hunters believe the initial shots should hit the whale near the blow hole so the whale will not sink before a harpoon float can be attached. Later shots can be directed to the brain by shooting downward from behind the blowhole to dispatch the animal. Whales were generally shot in shallow water with high caliber, jacketed bullets, harpooned, then gaffed when nearing death. Most observed harpoons are of the toggle type. The whale is towed by a bow line tied through the jaw or around the tail stock.

Hunts generally occur during higher tide phases when the shallows are navigable. Skill and experience are required to discern, memorize, and navigate channels between shallows and sand bars. Inexperienced boaters are more often stranded in shallows and on sand bars. Captured whales are towed and deposited near land or a sand bar. As the tide recedes, the whale is beached and accessible to butchering.

Muktuk is the most prized product from a beluga whale. This is the skin with about an inch of blubber. Muktuk can be slowly boiled for tenderness, eaten raw or frozen. Flippers and flukes are also eaten, and favored by elders. The meat, termed black meat, is best when dried, and is considered desirable by many. CIMMC has adopted guidelines that at least 60% of the black meat should be utilized. Blubber is sometimes conserved in buckets for oil. The oil will settle out with time, but the muktuk must be turned frequently to avoid putrefaction. The vertebrae, which are carved for masks, are more likely to be stashed during fall hunts to weather clean over the winter. Two experienced hunters, with help to hold bags, etc., can butcher a 15 foot beluga, saving all the aforementioned products, in three hours.

After most hunts, each crew member received a share of the muktuk and meat, with a share for the boat. Further distribution proceeds according to the hunters' sharing and distribution networks. Two whales were shared by the Tyonek tribe for ceremonial potlatches.

Acknowledgments

The entire Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council, including hunters, their families, and the Cook Inlet Tribes are the authorities for this research and the uses to which it is put. Their time and energy made this report possible.

CIMMC thanks the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee for funding and other assistance with this research.

References

Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council. 1995. Native Harvest and Use of Beluga in the Upper Cook Inlet from January through June 1995. An unpublished document submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service, Anchorage, AK, July 10, 1995.

Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council. 1996. Native Harvest and Use of Beluga in the Upper Cook Inlet from July 1, through November 15, 1995 (with updated information for the January through June 1995 period). March 1996. An unpublished document submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service, Anchorage, AK, March 1, 1996.

Stanek, Ronald, T. 1994. The subsistence use of beluga whales in Cook Inlet by Alaska Natives, 1993. Report for USDC/NOAA. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence. July 1994.