

# Stone spearpoint returns home

by Mike Hinman

*Tundra Times Staff*

A museum-quality stone spearpoint heads home to Wainwright soon.

The spearpoint was found embedded in the thick blubber of a bowhead whale landed by Ben Ahmaogak Sr.

The spearpoint is 10 cm long, six cm at its widest spot and weighs 62 grams, about 2.2 ounces. The spearpoint has been studied by archeologists at the Arctic Studies Center at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

"It's an absolutely amazing piece of stonework," said Tom Albert, deputy director of Wildlife Management for the North Slope Borough.

The spearpoint is helping age the bowhead in the eyes of the scientific community.

Spearpoints occasionally turn up, but not of this quality.

"This is by far-and-away the best (spearpoint) we've ever seen," said Albert.

No one knows how long bowheads live due to lack of growth indicators in the bones and a lack of teeth, which are used as an age indicator in most mammals.

Bowhead whales have baleen plates which continue to grow but abrade against each other. The record on baleen fades after about 17 years due to the wear, according to Ron Morris, a biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The artifact was one of three found in the bowhead. The whale also contained a shattered whalebone harpoon-head and a ground-slate spearpoint, according to Steve Loring, the archaeologist who has studied the artifact at the Smithsonian.

The whale was struck and landed in 1993 spring hunt and measured 54 feet, 8 inches. Bowheads can grow to 60 feet

and weigh 75 tons.

The whale had two wounds about a foot across on the right side of the back above where the artifacts were found.

Loring suspects that the whale was originally struck in a spring hunt. He thinks the whale may have dove beneath the ice and either the line got caught in the ice or the whale broke off the lance and dislodged the floats.

He also thinks the odds of escape are much thinner in the fall when there is less ice and pursuit is easier.

According to Loring and Igor Krupnik, also with the Arctic Studies Center but specializing in Chukchi and Russian archaeology, the use of stone spearpoints by the Inupiat ended around the turn of the century.

The chipped-stone spearpoint is made of a type of rock called chert. Chert is distinctive from area to area, while the ground slate, which is easier to sharpen and holds a better edge, can't be narrowed to a specific region.

"I'm not positive, but I'm confident that this was a Barrow or Wainwright spearpoint," said Loring, adding that he's 95 percent confident that the chert comes from the Kobuk River drainage in the Brooks Range.

With this information, the whale is at least 100 years-old, but may have been much older. Previously, scientists put the life-span of bowheads at 50 to 60 years.

"I doubt a very young whale would have survived those wounds," said Loring.

Another whale expert agrees.

"I think that's too short of a life for a healthy whale," said Florence Ahmaogak, wife of Ben Sr.

She says a whale shows its age at the base of the fluke, if it is mostly light, it is old.