

NOAA: Bowhead Whale Research Will Continue

Dr. Robert M. White, U.S. member of the International Whaling Commission and Administrator of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said that NOAA has taken steps to ensure continuation of ongoing research on bowhead whales, recognizing the importance of these whales to Alaskan Eskimo communities.

Dr. White said a contract has been signed with the University of California, and Dr. Floyd Durham, who has worked with bowhead whales and the Eskimo people in the Alaskan Arctic for the past decade.

Dr. Durham's studies are believed to be the only U. S. research of its type being done on bowhead whales.

Personnel from NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service are working with Dr. Durham this year to assure a smooth transition when he retires from

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this phase of his work later this year.

During the past 10 years Dr. Durham has studied the biology of the bowhead whale including reproduction, food habits, and size, in addition to gathering data on the number of whales taken by the Eskimos.

The bowhead is on the Endangered Species List and is protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, but the Eskimos are permitted to take the mammals for subsistence and for handicraft work.

The Eskimos leave their villages for several weeks during the whaling season each spring and the whales they capture are shared by the entire community.

When Dr. Durham is near a whaling station at the time of a kill by the Eskimos, he may measure the whale, examine the condition of its reproductive system, estimate its age, and make other observations.

In addition, he has established an excellent rapport with Eskimos throughout the whaling area, and they send him data on whales taken by the various communities.

NMFS hopes to continue the whale reporting system, the only one in existence in the Alaskan Arctic. The work performed by Dr. Durham is in full accord with the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

Data obtained by Dr. Durham have been made available to the Federal Government and to the International Whaling Commission, and the flow of information will continue under the new arrangement, Dr. White said.

Dr. George Y. Harry, Jr., Director of the NMFS Marine Mammal Laboratory, Seattle, Washington, recently returned from a trip to the Arctic with Dr. Durham.

There they hiked over the ice to a number of whaling stations near Point Hope, where the coastal whaling season begins in Alaska, because the migratory pattern of the whales brings them past this location early in the season.

Dr. White said the adult bowhead whale averages 50 - 60 feet in length. They are confined to the Arctic regions, ranging seasonally from the western Bering and Okhotsk Seas to the East Siberian and Chukchi Seas.

Another stock occurs in the Atlantic Arctic region. The bowhead was easily captured by early commercial whalers and because of its thick layers of blubber did not easily sink.

In addition to the oil extracted from the blubber, baleen (whalebone) from the bowhead whale was valuable for use in making such articles as fishing rods, umbrella ribs, and most important in those days, women's corset stays and hoop skirts.