

Whaling captains set quotas

by David Harding

North Slope Borough

BARROW — Whaling captains from Alaska's nine subsistence whaling communities met in Barrow last week for the annual convention of the Alaska Eskimo

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Whaling Commission and set quotas for nine villages and expressed concerns about offshore oil development.

The AEWEC represents the interests of 140 traditional whaling crews and manages the annual bowhead whale harvest.

Subsistence bowhead whaling is limited under a quota agreement established by the International Whaling Commission. The 1990 quota of 41 whales was allocated at last week's meetings. An additional six strikes were reserved for possible allocation during the year.

AEWEC members agreed to the following distribution of strikes for 1990:

- Kaktovik — 2.
- Nuiqsut — 2.
- Barrow — 15.
- Wainwright — 5.
- Point Hope — 6.
- Kivalina — 2.
- Wales — 1.
- Gambell — 4.
- Savoonga — 4.

Whalers at the convention expressed concern over the effects of offshore oil development on the bowhead migration. Offshore activity in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas has increased dramatically in recent years. Eskimo whalers fear the vessel traffic and noise associated with offshore drilling may alter the path of whales in migration.



"I understand that they need to find oil," said AEWEC Chairman Edward Hopson, "but we need the whales. And during migration, they are going to have icebreakers, support ships, aircraft and helicopters crossing the whale path while the whales are in migration."

Eskimo leaders have always favored seasonal drilling restrictions to limit disturbance of the migration. But government regulations have been gradually weakened as offshore activity increased.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has proposed to abandon all restrictions on industry disruption of the bowhead migration. AEWEC and a number of environmental groups have filed objections to that proposal. A ruling is expected as early as this summer.

In other convention activity, the AEWEC responded to the desire of Canadian Inuit to revive their traditional bowhead hunt. The convention produced a letter of support for a Canadian request to take one bowhead from any previous year's unused quota, provided that the Canadian and U.S. governments and the IWC approve the request.

The convention also included sessions on weapons improvement and on the duties of whaling captains.

A group of Soviet dancers had been invited to the event, but were unable to obtain U.S. State Department clearance.

The AEWEC was formed 13 years ago when traditional whaling was suddenly banned by the International Whaling Commission. Since then, most of the commission's efforts have focused on proving that traditional whaling does not endanger the bowhead population.

At the time of the whaling ban in 1977, scientists believed the bowhead herd had dwindled to as few as 600. The AEWEC disputed the estimates, and conducted years of scientific research to establish a more exact count.

Those efforts led the International Whaling Commission to accept the current estimate of 7,800 bowheads.