

East Canada Inuit taste first whale in 20 yrs.

by Brian Laghi
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TORONTO—Inuit across Canada's Eastern Arctic are sharing in a delicacy this month that many haven't tasted in more than 20 years.

A groupe of hunters banded together to land the first bowhead whale to be taken legally in the region in a generation.

The muktuk, or skin and blubber, of the 53-foot whale has been distributed across Canada's Arctic, sparking celebrations in communities from Baffin Island to the shores of Hudson Bay.

"The older people have longed for the taste again," said Tommy Owljoot of Arviat, North West Territories, a small

community on the wsest side of Hudson Bay with a long whaling history. "To our people, it's the return of our rights that were taken away."

The people of Arviat unpacked their portion of the muktuk last week, celebrating with a community square dance, games and other festivities. It was the first time many younger Inuit had ever sampled the mild-tasting blubber, said Owljoot, executive director of the Keewatin Wildlife Federation.

Bowheads, which were once a staple of Inuit diet, are and endangered species. The last licenses issued to hunt bowhead in the Eastern Arctic were given around 1976, said Redmond Clark, regional director of fisheries management for the Canadian government.

But the recently signed Nunavut land-claims agreement, which gave Inuit in the Eastern Arctic expanded hunting and fishing rights, allows a restricted hunt of the bowhead. Conservative estimates suggest the mammals number about 650 in Eastern Arctic waters.

The hunt has special significance for eastern Canada, where Inuit are preparing to create their own territory in 1999, known as Nunavut. Residents were angered in the mid-1970s when Ottawa banned the licensed hunt of bowheads, Owljoot said. The return of the hunt marks the return of their privileges, he said.

The whale was landed by hunters in Repulse Bay on Aug. 17 after a two-day struggle. The hunters, who came from all across the region, used traditional harpoons as well as rifles to take the animal.

Repulse Bay, which is north of Hudson Bay, is on a migratory path for the whale.

Owljoot said the Keewatin Wildlife Federation raised about \$42,000 to fly in and lodge hunters from across the Eastern Arctic.

"I jumped at the chance," said Joe Netser, a 42-year-old hunter from Coral Harbour, a community also north of Hudson Bay. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

The blubber is considered a delicacy among Inuit, said Time Devine, wildlife and fisheries manager in Arviat for the Northwest Territories government. He described the taste as mild and distinctive. The whale is black in color and, although

not as big as others such as the sperm or right whale, is still considered to be very large.

"A lot of people were very happy," Devine said. "It's something a lot of people have been waiting to try for a long time."

Devine is unsure how the hunt will progress in the future. "It's uncertain whether they'll be able to take one whale annually, or one every three years." He noted that the animal is considered endangered by international bodies.

Clarke said bowhead hunting was banned in an effort to conserve their numbers.

The mammal had been hunted greatly during the 17th and 18th centuries. The bowhead is considered one of the easier whales to hunt, and was therefore one of the first to be exploited.

Although whales have been valued for various products, Inuit have traditionally used all of the animal. Bones, meat and oil have been used in the past for buildings, food, heat and light.

Commercial whaling almost ceased in the Arctic in the early part of the century when extinction threatened whales. A complete ban was issued in 1972, although Inuit are still allowed to take some whales.

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