

How IWC sets Alaska whaling quotas

Editor's note: Patricia Starratt, a former Sohio staff member was invited to England this summer to attend sessions of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). The IWC is of vital interest to Alaskans since that body sets quotas for Eskimo subsistence whaling, and because scientists who attend IWC sessions also concern themselves with bowhead habitat and the effects of offshore petroleum development on whales. Starratt's impressions of how the IWC functions are presented here.

by Patricia Starratt

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At the 1985 meetings of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the Soviet Union announced its decision to end commercial whaling in 1988. The Japanese confirmed that in 1988, they too would stop commercial whaling. Norway, the last commercial whaling nation to declare a formal cessation date, stated it would do so in the fall of 1985.

With the winding down of commercial whaling, the focus of whale conservationists attending the IWC meetings is increasingly on the Alaskan Eskimo hunt of the bowhead whale and on the bowhead's habitat, both the Bering and Beaufort Seas. To understand the significance of this change in focus, particularly for Alaskans, one needs to know the background of IWC, how it works and what happened in 1985.

The Thrust of the IWC

The IWC was originally formed as a group of whaling nations who got together largely to apportion the whaling catch worldwide among themselves. For the past decade, however, the thrust of the IWC has been to stop commercial whaling.

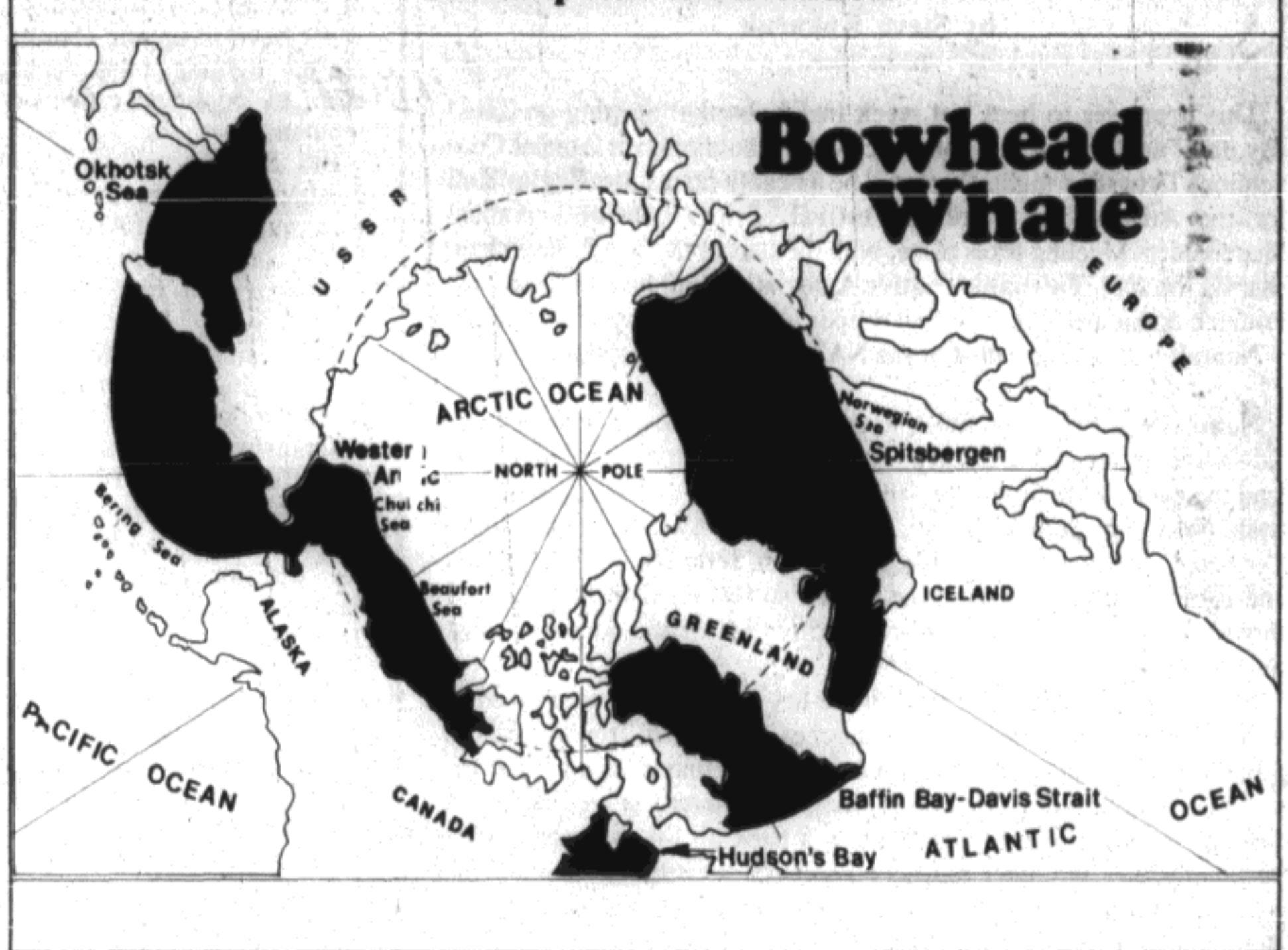
With U.S. endorsement and support, whale conservation leaders have done all they can to bring countries into the IWC membership to support the goal of ending the killing of whales for commercial use. That is why countries with no apparent background in whale

matters not only are present at the meetings but also are very vocal supporters of whale conservationist positions.

The IWC membership is thus comprised of countries like the Seychelles, St. Lucia, Switzerland and India. The representatives of these nations have coalesced to form the "Like-Minded Group," a power block on votes affecting whaling, both commercial and subsistence.

Although most countries abstain from voting on many critical issues, all except the commercial whaling nations apparently belong to the "Like-Minded Group," and the group's

Circumpolar Distribution



Commercial whaling for bowhead whales began as early as the 16th century in waters occupied by the Spitzbergen and Davis Strait stocks, which were depleted early in the 19th century. In the mid-1980's, the bowheads in the sea of Okhotsk were practically extinct and those in the Western Arctic had been greatly reduced. (The small number of bowheads in Hudson's Bay were depleted during a brief fishery during the late 19th century and first few years of the 20th). Today only the Western Arctic stock appears to contain substantial numbers of bowheads.

leaders appear to be against whaling of any kind by any one for any purpose. In its support of Alaskan Eskimo whaling, the U.S. finds itself in a difficult position indeed.

The other group of significant players are the 30-odd whale conservation leaders themselves. They are professional lobbyists, many from the U.S., and many of them have been attending the otherwise closed IWC meetings as "Non-Governmental Observers" (NGOs) for years. They also print a daily newsletter on their views as to what goes on, both inside and outside the IWC meeting rooms.

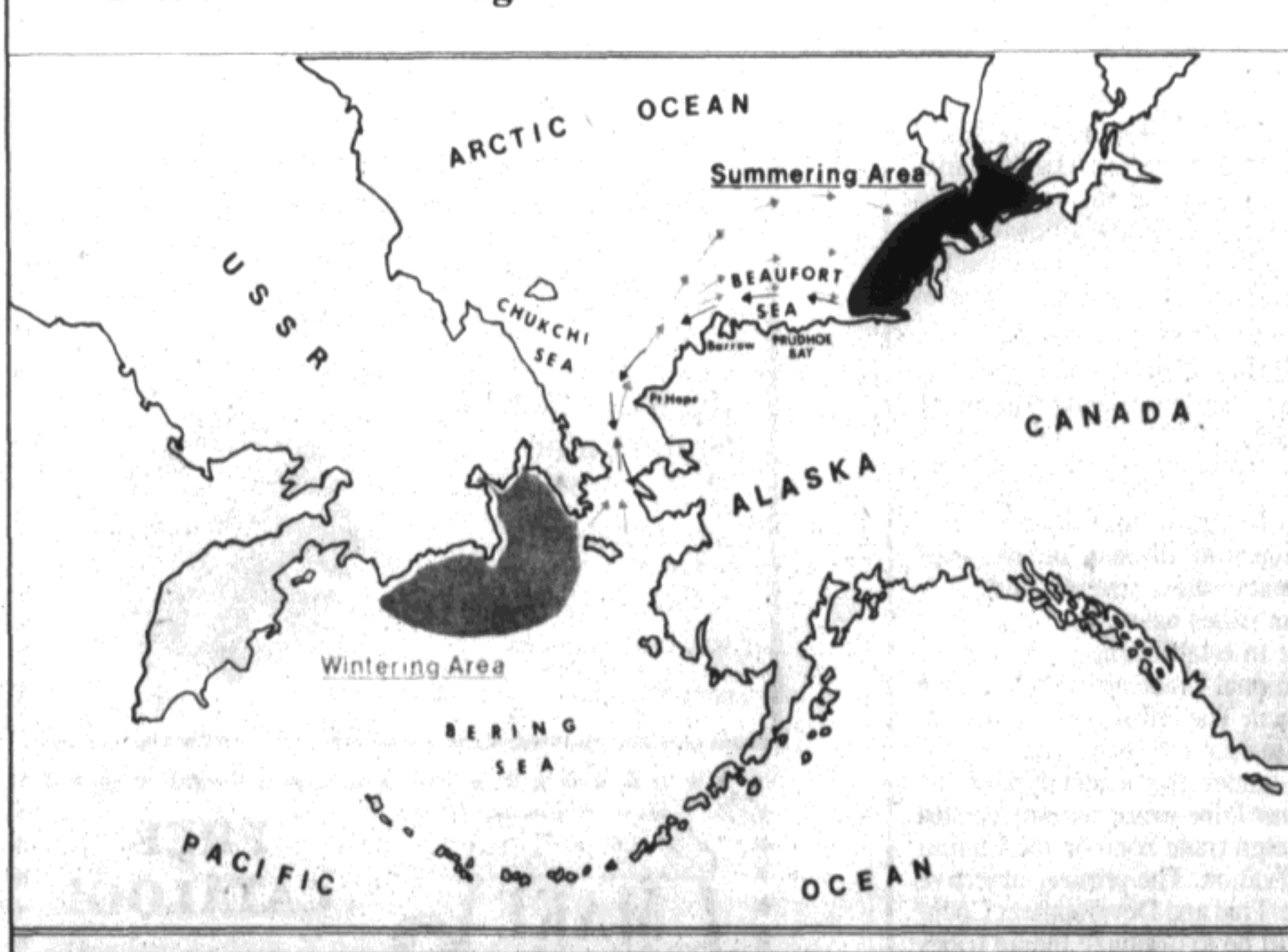
Every year before the formal IWC meetings are held, the Scientific Committee meets to review available scientific data and to make recommendations regarding whale classifications and whaling quotas. These meetings are taken very seriously by the scientists who attend, in part because decisions made at the IWC meetings are supposed to be made strictly on the basis of scientific recommendations.

The work load of the scientists has

(Continued on Page Ten)

How it works

Distribution and Migration of Western Arctic Bowheads



In late March and April, the bowheads leave their wintering grounds in the Bering Sea and move northward. After passing through the Bering Straits, the whales travel directly to Pt. Hope, and then in the nearshore lead (open-water) in the ice which lies just beyond the strip of landfast ice that is attached to the northwest Alaska coast. It is along this landfast ice that much of the whaling by Alaskan Eskimos takes place. Near Barrow, the bowheads enter the Beaufort Sea where they follow a far offshore route to their summer feeding grounds. The spring migration is complete by about mid-June. From mid-May through early October, bowheads are present on the summer feeding range where scientists believe that the majority of their annual feeding takes place. From about mid-September to mid-October, the bowheads migrate westward through the Alaskan Beaufort. Upon entering the Chukchi Sea, they strike out for the region near Wrangel Island and the coast of Siberia where they continue to feed. The return of the bowheads south to the Bering Sea is not well known, but it probably takes place mainly from November to January.

IWC

(Continued from Page Eight)

been arduous in recent years, and in 1985 several days of meetings were scheduled just to deal with the workload relating to the bowhead. So much research has been conducted on the bowhead (sponsored by the government, the oil companies and the North Slope Borough/Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission) that it is generally acknowledged that more is now known about bowhead than any other whale, except humpbacks.

Although the scientists as a group are not invited to the Commission meetings, they are represented there by the Chairman of the Scientific Committee (in recent years, Mike Tillman of the National Marine Fisheries Service) who presents summary statements of the findings of the scientists as a whole.

Once these scientific summaries are presented, the protocol does not permit further input by the scientists unless specific questions are addressed to the committee chairman. Thus, what he says in his initial presentation — and the specific wording he chooses — are key to what may happen on specific votes, and an ambiguous word choice can be hazardous indeed.

The voting process is an interesting exercise in itself. The first several days are devoted to Technical Meetings, as they are called, in which reports are given and votes — that don't count except as an indication of where countries are coming from — take place. After that, the whole process is repeated in Plenary Session, in which the votes do count.

The open meetings are conducted very formally, and procedural rules can often heavily affect an outcome as

well. As mentioned previously, no press people are allowed to attend these 'open' meetings.

Most of the real action takes place in the lengthy closed meetings where one can easily imagine that shirt sleeves replace the three-piece-suit jackets, and deals relating to non-whale matters are apparently made in order to obtain needed votes on whale matters.

'Rough waters' in 1985

From an Alaskan's perspective, 1985 was a very difficult year in IWC matters. Early on in the meetings, there were two key indicators of upcoming trouble on bowhead in addition to the fact the Scientific Committee had to work overtime on the subject — and were themselves cognizant of the heavy politics likely to be involved on bowhead issues in the Commission meetings.

The first indication of 'rough waters' was the distribution by the (American) NGOs of a bound impressive-looking 'white paper' against the U.S. position which supported raising the Eskimo whaling quota from 26 to 35 strikes per year. The second indication was the early votes on Stock Classification.

Where scientists had doubts about classification, and apparently preferred to have certain whale stocks remain in their current classification the Commission voted for "Protected" status classification anyway: Bio/politics was ruling the day, with the emphasis on politics rather than on biology.

The Scientific Committee Report relating to bowhead matters recommended setting the catch "with caution," a phrase that could, it turned out, be read with two different meanings (be careful or be very, very careful), depending on how one chose to express the word "caution."

The report also recommended a study of the effects of industrial

development on the bowhead and "possible deflection in whales' migratory path." Another issue that received increasing attention as the meetings continued was the Eskimo whaling strike/loss ratio. The discussion following the report of the Scientific Committee indicated that bowhead whaling was indeed, as one delegate put it, a 'recurrent cause of discomfort' in the context of the rest of IWC's work...

After negative voting on the U.S. proposal, both in the Technical and Plenary Session, a four-hour closed meeting on the final day that the Commission met produced, at last, a better result for the Alaskan Eskimos than one might have expected. The Alaskan Eskimos are to be allowed 26 strikes in 1985, 1986, and 1987, as they were prior to the meetings of 1985. However, strikes not used in any one year may be used the next year with up to 32 strikes allowed in any one year.

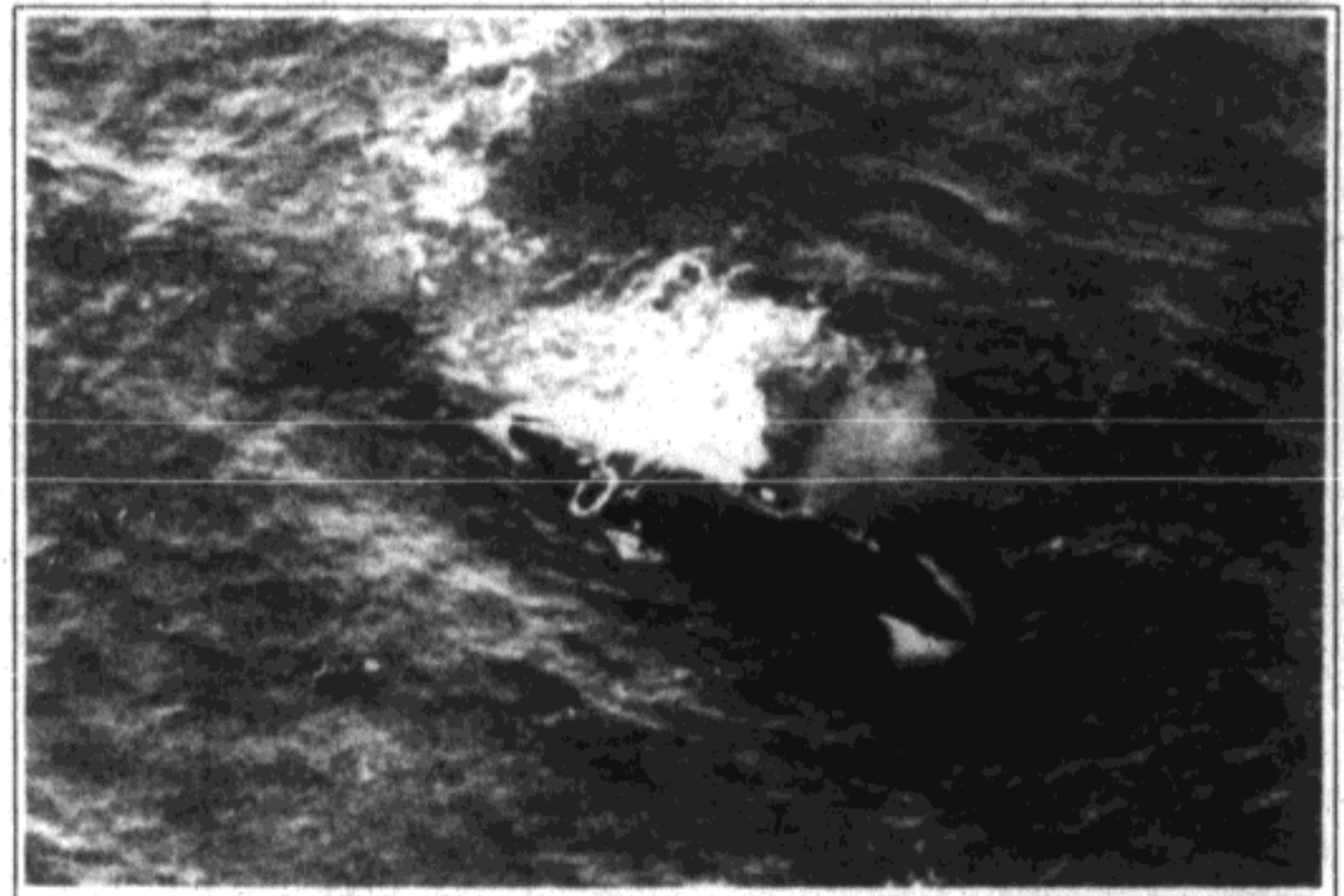
The U.S. thus lost its request for up to 35 strikes (three more whales per

year) despite NOAA Commissioner John Byrne's citing of the fact that the best estimate of the population has increased in recent years from some 560 to 4400 whales and the late Lennie Lane, then Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission Chairman, making "a plea for our people and our culture."

Other results significant for Alaskans was the recommendation made to the Scientific Committee to study the effects of "noise pollution" and the "possible deflection" in the bowheads' migratory path.

Future Outlook

This was not an easy year for Alaskans at the IWC, and the future does not promise to be any brighter, as the conservationists continue running out of whales to save, resulting in a stronger focus on 'the bowhead issue.' Science and scientific studies will continue to be important in IWC meetings, but the public education problem for both the oil industry and the Eskimos is large indeed and presents a real challenge in the years ahead.



Recent research has shown bowhead whales to be more abundant than was previously thought.

Tundra Times photo