

# A Short Story About the Siisuak Animal

By Emily Ivanoff Brown

As the snow falls more deeply and the ice forms along the Arctic coast, Eskimos begin eating the food they stored for winter. One of the delicacies of my people is the cooked muktuk (outer covering of the beluga white whale).

Especially well supplied are the people of Shaktoolik, on the coast of Norton Sound. This year, they killed 23 belugas.

Many small and large whales migrate to the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean every spring. They ply through an area of 15,335 square miles of shallows and deeps of the oceans searching for food.

The beluga or white whale is one of the smaller whales which gives birth to its young in the northern coastal waters of the arctic region.

Since few stories have been written about the beluga for popular consumption, this writer would like to relate some of her experiences and knowledge of how the primitive Eskimo kill and utilize the beluga, and also compare the mammal's economic value in the past to the present time.

The beluga is a member of the sub-order of Odontocet, toothed, whales under a family name of monodonidae (with no dorsal fin). Its scientific name is *Delphinapterus leucas*. The largest beluga is usually 16 feet long.

The adult whale is pure, glossy white, the juvenile is dark gray. They have eight to ten teeth located on each side of the jaws. The surface layer of the mammal's skin is one-half inch thick, and is a spongy formation of comb-like projections in vertical positions, but matted closely together.

This outer skin is high in protein value. The two layers of skin are cushioned with four to six inches of blubber; a middle layer of skin is called "porpoise hide" by manufacturers who use it commercially.

The beluga survive on fish and crustaceans and are gregarious creatures. They travel in the Arctic, circumpolar regions and enter the St. Lawrence and Yukon rivers, and even occasionally are seen off the British coast.

Why the beluga chose to inhabit Alaskan waters, we do not know. It may be that they prefer a less hostile environment. Many years ago, the beluga was plentiful and more friendly. Now one rarely sees them, while traveling on the ocean.

The Eskimos named the whale "siisuak" (singular), "siisuiat" because of its vulnerable characteristics. It means "white whale." The Russians named it beluga (byeli) meaning "white color."

The beluga's enemy is the killer whale. Eskimos frequently heard the announcement, "Siisuiat are coming," fleeing from their enemy, the killer whale. Every member of the community would squat down to watch the chase on the ocean.

To them, the chase would mean "let the killers annihilate the whale, so that the poor widows will reap the harvest of the slabs of muktuk, which the tide will drift ashore."

No daring hunter will intervene in this particular whales' hunting scene. In fact, it is a taboo for any Eskimo to either give alarm or interrupt the killer whales' chase for fear of being killed themselves. The hunters are not allowed to kill a killer whale, because of the pieces of the beluga the killer whale have killed soon float to shore as food for the poor and handicapped

people.

The killer whales hunt in packs and travel like torpedos skidding on the surface of the sea. So, too, the Eskimo hunter paddles his kayak swiftly using a double-bladed paddle until he rides abreast of a whale as it surfaces.

When the mammal comes up for air, the Eskimo maneuvers his craft to a right angle from the whale, then throws his spear into the ribs where the spearhead will lodge immovably. The thong attached to the spear unwinds immediately after the catch; the seal poke balloon, also attached to the thong, flings itself into its place as a marker to guide the hunter as he rides the high seas until the whale is exhausted and can be easily reached for the last thrust of another spear.

This method of whale hunting is very dangerous, therefore, no amateurs take the role, but they frequently are on hand to observe the hunter's action. There is another taboo, "Do not overdo your expertise." In other words, do not kill the animals only for a means of showing your skill, or for pleasure.

For example, my mother's uncle was a skilled whale chaser. Everyone at Koyak, Alaska, made predictions that Kuqunagak would be the one to kill a whale first. One morning the watchmen announced to the hunters, "whales are coming." A leader of the group warned the hunters not to chase and kill this pack of whales.

Kunqunagak said, "I would like to kill a whale just once this fall. This will be the last time." He disobeyed the leader to chase the whale alone.

After spearing the largest whale, the rope entwined around his hand so securely that he could not escape. He was hurled instantly out of his kayak by the whale's pull, which caused him to be dragged through the sea until he drowned. At the next high tide, both the whale and the hunter were beached ashore. To the young hunters this was one occurrence which was never forgotten.

The expert kayakers hunt whale by chasing them in their kayaks toward the shallow water, preferably into the estuaries. The hunters wait until the whales enter the mouth of the river. If a school of whales are not alarmed by an enemy, they will continue to pursue the fish, sometimes until it is too late for them to reach to safety.

Last fall at Shaktoolik, Alaska, on the coast of Norton Sound, the hunters caught 23 beluga whales.

The older Eskimos there have heard many stories about whales. Once two women caught many whales at Shaktoolik, where the water now has receded and left a high formation of tundra.

When my mother and I were berry picking at this place she showed me many skulls of whales which were once killed by the two women. I counted over 50 of them. Some had been covered over with vegetation and were not visible until I dug one up.

In an Eskimo community when lots of whales are killed each family is given an equal amount of meat for preservation which will be sufficient for the entire winter supply of food. The Eskimos butcher the meat in slabs like bacon. The women square this big slab into two by four inch pieces and boil the muktuk until it is moderately done.

Then after these are cooled, they are packed tightly into the whale's cured and inflated stom-



TWO WOMEN KILLED MANY BELUGA—The author, Emily Ivanoff Brown, drew this sketch to illustrate the story of two Eskimo women from Shaktoolik who caught many of the white

whales in an area which is now tundra. Mrs. Brown writes that she and her mother once visited the site and counted over 50 skulls of beluga killed by the women.

ach lining. Then the rendered oil is ladled into these containers so that the oil will act as a preservative agent. These pokes of muktuk must be thoroughly cooked before they are stored in the underground cellars.

The meat is dried for food for human consumption as well as for the dogs. The teeth and bones are saved for arts and crafts work. The ivory teeth are made into handles, beads and many useful articles. The bones are made into net sinkers. The jaw oil is also rendered; it is used as an abrasive agent such as of rancid seal pokes.

It is a very strong cleansing agent for wooden implements, and is used also during our present generation to clean the rusty traps and seal runners. Natives use the jaw oil to clean the guns with absorbant cloth and rod.

The Eskimos do not render the whale oil for eating purposes. Except, the Aleuts prefer whale oil over seal oil. The primitive Eskimo is not permitted to use it as a dip. They feel it is too strong to digest and that it may cause a tubercular person to shorten his life.

They also believe that the whale's body and its behavior as an animal is somewhat like a human being. They think the blood of the whale resembles human blood color and content properties.

The Eskimos consider the homecoming of the whole pack at Shaktoolik as a rare phenomenon at the present time. Since the white whales are not plentiful anymore, none of the Eskimos will sell muktuk to even

their neighbors. Some people preserve cooked muktuk in a mixture of one-half water, and one-half vinegar solution with spices and onions to flavor it.

To prepare the muktuk the cooked pieces are sliced into one-eighth inch thick pieces. These are packed into a quart jar, filled with the vinegar water, sealed tightly, and stored. We eat it as an appetizer. It tastes good and tender.

The cured whale skin is usually used as a boot sole, especially during the coldest part of the winter. Since the skin is much more pliable and softer than the hard ugruk skin, the old-time Eskimos prefer its usage as such.

So, as the snow starts falling and the ice forms along the Arctic Coast, my people start fully utilizing the siisuak, in the hope more will return in the spring.