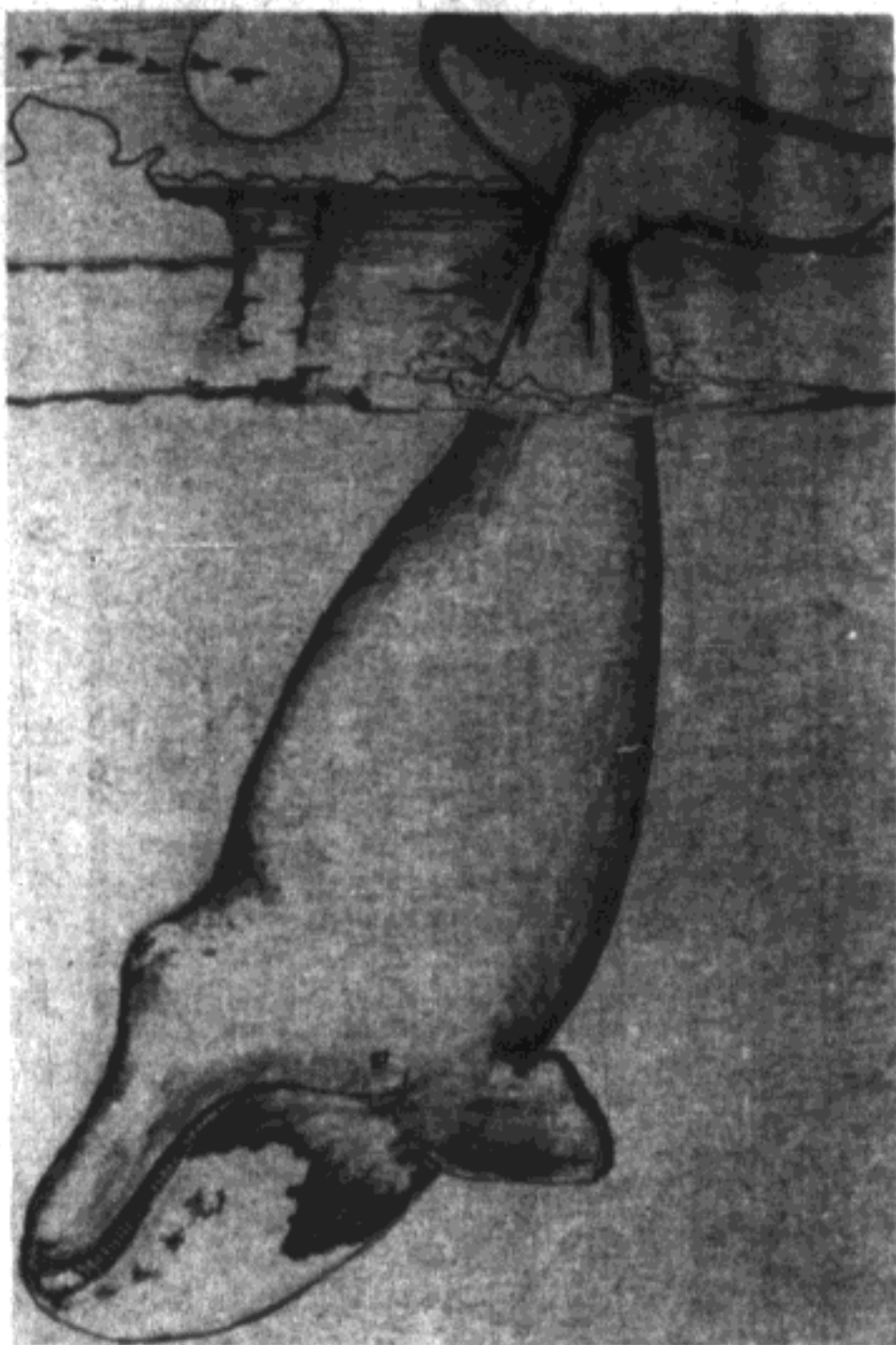


Whale counters man four ice camps this year



A bowhead whale scene drawn on a whale camp tent. By whale counter and professional artist Barbara Taylor.

Photo and Text by Bob Harper



Dave Rugh, the National Marine Fisheries Service trainer for this year's whale counters, shows how all whale count data is carefully logged.



Whale Counter Simon Koonook of Point Hope watches for bowhead whales.

Twenty-six people will be watching or listening for whales this spring as part of the North Slope Borough's Whale Census and Inupiat Marine Science Training Project.

They will be spread between four camps that, weather permitting, will be on the edge of the ice near Barrow from April through June. The first visual whale counting camp was established near Point Barrow the second week of April. By that time the counters had already undergone a week of training.

The three visual whale counting camps will be spaced about a mile apart on the edge of the shore ice. Each camp will serve as a check on the accuracy of the other two.

For example, a whale seen by the first camp will be counted and the time it appeared will be noted. As it swims north the second and third camps should see the same whale.

To be reasonably sure all three camps have counted the same whale and not different ones, the times of the sightings will be compared. Using an estimate of a whale's swimming speed, the times should

fall within a predictable range. Those that don't can be considered questionable sightings.

To make sure the counters at any one camp don't count the same whale twice, a whale's position will be recorded with a surveying instrument called a theodolite. Once its position is marked, the counted whale can be tracked even though it dives and surfaces repeatedly on its way past a camp.

Each visual counting camp will have three people on watch at all times. When a whale is spotted, one person will operate the theodolite, one will watch for more whales while the third person will record the findings.

"We work in four hour shifts and switch back and forth between watching and recording to prevent boredom," says whale counter John Rosapepe. Like many of the whale counters in this year's project, he is a veteran. He counted whales in 1979.

Off-duty whale counters find many ways to amuse themselves. Like Arctic Michelangelos, two whale counters, who are also professional artists, decorated the roofs of their canvas tents with scenes of the

Arctic during last season's count.

Both the artists, Barbara Taylor and Point Hope's Simon Koonook, are back on duty this year. Simon also spends time seal hunting between whale counting chores.

The acoustic camp will house fewer people but will have a more far-reaching monitoring range. Listening through underwater microphones, the acoustic experts will try to hear any whales traveling under the cover of ice or beyond the range of binoculars.

Inupiat whalers have claimed that many whales escape surface counts by traveling outside the lead system closest to shore. This has been greeted with doubt by some scientists and conservationists.

Through acoustical monitoring, the Borough hopes to settle the dispute. Four students will join scientists in the acoustical camps. When they are not on duty the students can study their textbooks on acoustic theory.

All the whale counting crews will be supported through the North Slope Borough's new Research Center in Browerville.



North Slope Borough whale counters will be working out of camps on the edge of ice leads near Barrow from April through June, weather permitting.