

HEARING PINPOINTS ARTISANS

Limiting Regulations Draw Furor at Hearing

By MARGIE BAUMAN

FAIRBANKS — Native artisans charged Friday that proposed regulations restricting the nature of crafts produced from sea mammal parts would have a stifling effect on Native craftsmen.

Testimony took a sharp slap at a proposed list of articles of handicraft and clothing to be included in the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and demanded that no such list be included in the act.

In all, some 20 persons testified at the hearing, conducted for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service in council chambers for the city of Fairbanks. Similar hearings were held this week at Nome and Anchorage.

The proposed regulations would limit Native handicrafts and clothing made from marine mammals to items "which are the same or similar to articles produced by the Natives before Dec. 21, 1972.

In a resolution calling the list demeaning, restrictive and "a dangerous precedent in the regulation of art in our democratic society," the Village Art Upgrade Committee of the University of Alaska urged that no such list be included under the mammals act.

Testimony for the committee, an advisory body for an adult vocational program of the university, was presented by Eskimo artist Ron Senungetuk.

It charged that provisions of the sea mammal act allowing for revisions of the list of crafts, at the discretion of the Secretary of the Interior would not only be unacceptable but unenforceable.

The resolution made six major points:

- that many practicing Native artists have limited English skills and would be unable to follow the formal procedure for adding to or deleting from the list;
- that the provisions would have a stifling effect on the creativity of Native artists;
- that the idea of a restrictive list is demeaning to practicing artists and craftsmen in that it prohibits expression of

original thought;

— that what an artist creates within the limits of the mammals act (and the availability of raw materials) is the artists' basic right to choose;

— that the act sets a dangerous precedent in the regulation of art in this nation;

— that the provisions would be unenforceable since it would be difficult to determine whether an item was the same or similar to those manufactured on or before Dec. 21, 1972.

Tundra Times editor Howard Rock, one of five commissioners of the Department of the Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board, testified that the act would have a devastating effect on the creative abilities of Native Alaska artisans.

Taking a long-range view of the potential of the proposed

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list, Rock said that the "restrictive date of Dec. 21, 1972 . . . would tend to kill off the present creative era which had begun to enjoy a better outlook.

"Through skillfully designed products, an atmosphere of encouragement to the gifted artisans has begun to emerge.

"The date would certainly restrict the progress of this newly-developed situation which might even be called a renaissance period," Rock said in written testimony presented to the committee in his behalf.

"The artisans are enjoying and experiencing a period of creative era and easy atmosphere in which to work. The restrictive date of that December almost two years ago will certainly cool the creativity which can easily be the beginning of a devolution of a progressive period.

"As an artist who works mostly with oils and brushes, I feel a close kinship to my fellow artisans that even though they work with different media, they would feel as I would if my art were to be restricted to my certain period of my artistic endeavors," Rock said.

Rock said the list could not serve as a conservation device because those mammals from which artisans get their materials are available for very short periods of each year. At Rock's home village of Point Hope, "the hunting period for the bowhead whale . . . is scarcely a month and a half out of a year,"

"Marine mammals hunted for centuries in the Arctic and subarctic areas of Alaska seemed to be naturally conserved by lengths of seasonal migrations and adverse weather conditions, Rock said. Nor do the hunters tend to overkill, because of limited storage spaces in traditional siqloaqs (underground meat caches) and the Native tradition of not killing animals that one does not need.

The regulations were also criticized by Point Lay resident Nancy Gray, currently a student at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

"Had you people invested in travel to the "bush" in an effort to solicit opinions more representative of Alaskans most affected by the proposed regulations, you would have discovered the attitude we Eskimos have toward living off the sea — and the land, for that matter," Gray said.

"We do not 'trophy hunt' in the manner of some hunters. Ivory, bone and skins are more of a bonus to our quest for food. Clothing, implements and art work serve to enhance our life and society," she said.

"It appears that the regulatory agencies for the Marine Mammal Act feel some paranoia toward Alaskan Native peoples? Are we to become greedy headhunters overnight?" Gray asked.

"If the fear is for our wanton slaughter of our sea mammals, then why don't you set up a system that treats hunters equally? Use systems that get at the heart of the matter, like employing protection officers or individuals responsible for maintaining surveillance over sea mammal harvests and breeding areas," she said.

"Taking steps to confine Natives to production of handicrafts from a list devised by people who probably haven't seen a third of the stated items, let alone an Eskimo, is absurd.

"I feel you regulatory agencies are getting carried away with your dream of power. Don't take it out on the little guy," she said.