

# MANY DEAD WALRUS PUZZLING

## Nearly 300 Wash Up on Beaches Near Shismaref And Cape Thompson

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Last June at least 160 dead walrus washed ashore in the Cape Thompson area and 80 to 100 were counted near Shismaref. The first assumption would be that the animals had been butchered for their valuable ivory but Rep. Frank Ferguson (D-Kotzebue) saw the animals and reported many still had their tusks.

Complaints have come in from coastal villagers that non-Natives from Nome and Kotzebue area flew in to scavenge the corpses, taking the ivory and oosiks and leaving the locals with nothing but a black mark for "head hunting."

John Burns, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, was sent three walrus carcass for autopsy but found nothing unusual. Noting they were headless, his first assumption was that the animals were shot and, to date, there's been little evidence to prove him wrong.

Burns said his animals came from the south side of the Seward Peninsula and had washed in about June 15 with a very strong southwest wind. Such an occurrence is not unusual, he added.

"Even if there is not head hunting going on, there is a high loss hunting the animals; about one lost for each one taken because if a hunter isn't careful, the carcass can slip through the ice."

Dr. F. H. Fay, researcher of

animal born diseases at the Arctic Research Lab and a walrus watcher of 20 years, agreed.

While 260 walrus is quite a large number of animals to wash in, it is not unheard of, he said.

"It differs from year to year, depending on the weather and the ice. This was apparently a pretty good year for walrus hunting."

He recalled that some time in the 1950s a great mass of walrus washed up, heads intact, on St. Lawrence Island and that their deaths were never satisfactorily explained.

"A great many rumors and theories ran rampant. Some thought the animals had been crushed somehow. And it was at a time when there were strained relations between U.S. and the U.S.S.R. There was some talk of Russian Atomic testing."

Fay said there is a possibility that some walrus which wash up here could have been shot by Siberian Eskimos.

"I don't suppose they're any more efficient at getting them than we are. The loss is about 50%.

"There was a time when Russians hunted them commercially but that's stopped now."

As for the possibility of unnatural death, other than "lead poisoning", "There isn't much of anything that bothers walrus. They have few predators other than man and the Polar Bear. They have some diseases that we don't know much about yet but these don't usually kill

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them.

"Probably one per cent have trichinosis. There was one epidemic in Greenland years ago but as far as I know we've never had any in Alaska. Anyway, trichinosis doesn't seem to bother the walrus. Just people who eat them.

"And the few samples we've taken are not high in mercury. Only fur seals and sea lions are high in mercury."

This would leave the main cause of death, hunting fatalities and the head hunter theory presists. John Burns notes that in years past, Gambel and Savoonga hunters have always had a self-imposed limit of four walrus to a skin boat. There are reports this year that the limit is being ignored.

Witnesses in Nome say a boatload of ivory hunters slaughtered a number of animals and took only their heads no more than 60 yards from where a Japanese boat was anchored.

If this is true, Burns warns, we may soon have repercussions at the treaty conference table.

At the turn of the century the walrus was almost extinct. Whale hunters about 1868 began slaughtering the animals for their ivory when their regular prey got scarce.

A ban on commercial hunting proved successful, perhaps because by the time it came into effect there were too few animals left to make commercial hunting profitable.

Since the early '60s, the population has been increasing at a rate of two to three per cent a year and current herds look pretty healthy.

To encourage ivory carving, the state requires a permit to buy and sell raw ivory. It goes for \$2.50 to \$4.00 per pound and cannot be sold retail. A set of tusks uncarved can bring an estimated \$300 in the black market but dealers say they are closely watched and there is little traffic.

"A lot of it goes, a piece at a time, to individuals. . . Coast Guard, Fish and Game boys, the crew of the North Star," one trader said. "But there's no big traffic. You simply can't get away with it."

One of the major reasons for increased head hunting, as most authorities see it, is that the Natives are no longer utilizing the meat. Hungry dog teams have been replaced by snow-

mobiles and foodstamps fill the larder.

About three years ago a proposal to use walrus meat for commercial dog food was considered by RurAL CAP but it wasn't followed up. It's probably just as well. Walrus hides will fetch \$78 each but a buyer in Nome complains the Natives just aren't interested in taking them.

"They can take them if they want the meat," a trader explained. "But lady, did you ever heft a walrus? By the time you've pumped it full of air to keep it afloat or skinned it, the rest of the herd are miles away and there's no more hunting."

So it's simpler to take the heads and oosiks, which are the ticket to the cash economy. And people who know the area predict we'll see more of this.

"The problem has been with us for 20 years," Dr. Fay observes. "It's not the walrus hunters problem."

Some observers believe the hunting regulations should be reexamined. Others say we don't know enough about the animals and worry for fear we'll be beset by protesting hords of Sierra Club members before we can research.

According to Dr. Fay, walrus live about 40 years and produce one offspring every couple of years. They drift by our coasts with the ice every spring and fall; summer in the Chukchi Sea and winter in the Bering.

Dr. Fay is currently doing a report on their dining habits for this week's Science Conference at the University of Alaska.

"Everyone believes walrus use their tusks to dig clams but no one has ever seen them eat under natural conditions," he said. "They just assume they use their tusks to dig clams because it looks like that's what they'd be good for. I don't think it's true. I think they drag them behind them and scoop clams with their mouths. But nobody's going to believe me."

Which, better than anything else, points up the problem. Nobody really knows that much about the beasts. This year's fatalities that kept their heads, could have keeled over from sheer melancholia for all we know.

As Dr. Fay puts it, "It's not easy to be a walrus watcher unless you own your own ice breaker."