

Groups oppose tanker journey through Arctic

The North Slope Borough, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference are opposing the journey of the tanker Gulf Beaufort, scheduled to leave a well in the Canadian Beaufort Sea loaded with 300,000 barrels of crude oil, according to officials of the borough.

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Tanker opposition

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Overtaking bowhead whales on their annual fall migration through Alaska waters to their winter home off the southeastern Siberian coast, the tanker and two accompanying ice breakers may have to smash their way through up to 4 feet of ice.

After crossing Northern Alaska, the tanker will continue following the whales through the Bering Straits and will then travel to Japan.

Borough officials said Native people fear that the tremendous noise generated by the ice-breaking activities could disrupt the normal migration patterns of the bowhead. And they say that worse yet, an oil spill from this or future tankers following the precedent of the Gulf Beaufort would devastate the bowhead population and harm other marine mammals in the region.

"Our people have depended on the bowhead for centuries," Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak explained.

"We have just heard that whalers in the village of Kaktovik have landed their first whale of the season. We hope the remainder of the hunt will pass by without interference," he said.

"Severe whaling quota limitations imposed upon us by the International Whaling Commission already make it difficult for us to meet our nutritional and cultural needs. Any accident which harms the whale, or for that matter the polar bears, seals, walrus and fish upon which we also depend, would devastate our way of life."

Last year, Kaktovik hunters lost a whale when an oil exploration ship accidentally interfered with their hunt. Bad weather prevented them from getting another chance until this season.

Even if nothing should go wrong with this first transport of crude through Arctic waters, Native residents of the Arctic fear the precedent that could be set, borough officials said.

Recent history shows that tankers pose by far the greatest danger for oil spills. A total of 807 tanker spills from 1969 through the first half of 1984 dumped 27.4 million barrels of oil into the environment, according to the borough.

A report prepared by the International Maritime Organization showed that in 1983, 1.87 of every 100 tankers suffered a serious accident.

Recently, ICC delegates from Alaska, Canada and Greenland passed a resolution opposing tanker traffic in the Arctic.

"I support fully what the Inupiat people are doing," said Mary Simon, a Canadian Inuit and president of the ICC. Simon noted that while protection of the Arctic environment is ICC's primary concern, the organization also feels development is necessary in the Arctic.

"Development must be based on sound environmental and conservation principles," Simon said. "It must take into account the critical, severe areas of the Arctic, such as the critical bowhead habitat in the Beaufort Sea."

Ahmaogak agreed, saying, "We believe in development, as long as it is done sensibly and with the needs of our people in mind. We will strongly oppose any activities which threaten our people."

"Transporting crude oil by tanker while bowhead whales are in the water constitutes such a threat. We are against it, and we call upon all people who care about the whale — and about the Inupiat — to support us in this cause."

Arnold Brower Jr., chairman of the

Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, also voiced concerns.

"The bowhead whale is much too important for us to be threatened like this. I fully endorse the statements of Mayor George Ahmaogak and Mary Simon," he said.