

Whales serve a true need in Greenland

by Helle Gras
Northern News Service

GREENLAND — Greenland's whalers exceed the quota set for them by the International Whaling Commission.

This may result in mistrust in Greenland as a whaling nation and may even pose a threat to this trade which is of tremendous importance for the nation.

The right of Greenland's hunters to whaling stems from their status as representatives of a small northern nation. For 1990, Greenland received a quota of 115 whales, including 92 lesser rorquals and 23 finwhales.

The Greenland Association of Hunters and Fishermen regards this quota as insufficient and speaks up for its expansion. It has sent its request to the International Whaling Commission which is to decide the whaling quotas for next year at its latest session in Holland this summer.

The reports that Greenland's whalers were overreaching their quotas, which started coming in late in 1989, caused certain anxiety in the country's political circles. Moreover, the local self-administration directorate received reports on the killing of whales whose hunting is prohibited.

This made it necessary to introduce tougher control over whaling.

Greenlanders would like to preserve their good reputation of a nation actively engaged in nature conservation and, notably, in the protection of endangered whale species.

The loss of confidence of the international public because of abuses in the exploitation of the ocean's resources would cost them too dearly.

Greenland already has been in such a situation once. It happened in the early '70s when the boycott of articles made of sealskin and fur, declared by international conservation organizations in the name of protection of the endangered seal, hit Greenland's sealskin export and the well-being of thousands of Greenland's hunters.

The people in North America may remember the time when the United States declared a boycott of products of the Icelandic fish industry. It was caused by Iceland's refusal to bow down to the decision of the International Whaling Commission.

Despite the commission's decision, Iceland continued hunting, alluding to "scientific data" and largely overreaching its quota.

The local self-administration directorate of Greenland would not like to end up in a similar jam, so the directorate member responsible for sea hunting and fishing, Kaj Egedes, demanded that the police immediately report all cases of violation of the hunting rules.

The police replied that the rules were too vague for them to bear responsibility for their observance. So the directorate assigned the control functions to the communes so that they could watch over the number of killed whales on sites. The communes, too, failed to cope with this task satisfactorily.

The data on killed whales came with a big delay because it was hard to determine when exactly it has hap-

pened. According to the police, this is particularly hard to do in the cases when the meat already has been cut and packed for selling.

The chief of the police station at Aasiaat asks who is responsible for the whales killed in excess of the quota: the hunter or the commune which has not been prompt enough to notify people that the local quota already had been exhausted? Or, could the responsibility lie on the local self-administration directorate of Greenland as the supreme body of power on the island?

The proposition by Egedes on the improvement of the rules boiled down to the fact that whalers themselves must establish control over rational hunting. He brought the question of Greenland's actual need for whale meat for discussion by the International Whaling Commission.

This need is quite great, which is why the Association of Hunters and Fishermen is demanding a greater quota.

In city shops, the prices of whale meat stay at the level of the prices of imported pork and beef, whereas raw whale-skin and soft parts have become expensive and rare dainties.

Whale meat is particularly valued in coastal areas where the hunters and fishermen themselves live. Even an average-sized finwhale means several tons of meat which is the main foodstuff for both humans and sled dogs.

A man from a "civilized" country cannot possibly imagine what it means to feed a team of sled dogs. For the dog to pull normally in Arctic conditions, it needs to consume two to four or more pounds of meat a day.

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—Kaj Egedes

There are about 60,000 sled dogs in Greenland, or more than the entire human population of the world's largest island.

"Preventing Greenlanders from whaling and using whale meat is equivalent to denying Europeans

gasoline for industrial purposes and services," said Egedes. "This is exactly why the question of the quotas needed by Greenland, which is to be examined by the International commission, is of primary importance for us."