

Editorial —

As we went to press this week, reports reached the office that the first whale of the season was taken off Pt. Hope, one of the two bowheads that recent regulations announced by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) say can be landed there.

The whales now are on the way to Barrow where, under the same regulations, five bowheads can be taken, or seven struck, whichever comes first. Overall, the regulations allow a total of 18 bowhead whales to be taken or 27 struck along the entire northwest and north coast of Alaska.

These new quotas, NOAA says, are an increase from the total allocation of 12 landed or 18 struck established last year. The reason for the increase is that, based on NOAA research, new bowhead population estimates have almost doubled to 2,250 in contrast to last year's estimate of 1,300 bowheads. That's a fairly significant jump in the estimates in a one-year period.

Alaska's Eskimo whalers say they are not going to abide by the NOAA regulations, which are based on quotas established by the International Whaling Commission. Last year they did so, at considerable sacrifice and hardship to themselves.

Instead, this year, they say they will abide by a self-imposed limit of a total of 45 whales, which they say represents two percent of the known whale population, the most accurate measure of which is 2,264 whales, they claim. The two percent figure would permit population growth and prevent any further reduction in the size of the stock.

It's hard to say just who's right and who's wrong in this argument. But, for the time being, we are placing our bets on the people who have been harvesting the whales for subsistence purposes for centuries. Eskimo subsistence whaling should be distinguished from the commercial whaling that, in the past, was the main reason for the depletion of the whale stocks.

The continuous occupation of the Arctic environment by the Eskimo has been based on the harvest of renewable resources. Their cultural survival and integrity is based on the aboriginal whaling complex. Their insistence on exceeding the NOAA quotas is not merely a reckless or blindly defiant act.

Rather, it is the product of the reasoned judgement of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, a nine member group made up of whaling captains from various affected villages. If one reads their reports and their studies, one sees an exemplary attempt to meld traditional customary hunting laws and biological principles of scientific wildlife management.

Their management plan seems to protect both the bowhead whale stocks and also to provide the Eskimos an adequate harvest level to meet their nutritional and cultural needs. It is hoped it will be a successful experiment in self-regulation, while protecting the Eskimo way of life and preserving the integrity of their ecosystem.

With so much at stake, it is hard to believe that they would destroy a resource upon which so much depends.