

# Walrus Restrictions Anger Bristol Bay Natives

## State Management wants Sport Walrus Hunting

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Although it was never officially admitted, a source close to outgoing Fish and Game Commissioner Jim Brooks indicated that Brooks was weary of the strain of the political side of managing game. He was apparently tired of all the sniping and bickering that results from trying to divide fish and game resources among traditional rural subsistence hunters and swelling ranks of urban gunners who now patrol the perimeters of the wilderness. With their snowmachine brigades and a fleet of all-weather aircraft.

When a new commissioner takes the helm, he will inherit several custom-made puzzles which are going to require more than speech-making and rhetoric to solve.

One of the most interesting is the taking of walrus in Bristol Bay.

Although originally managed by the State of Alaska, the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 directed that all marine mammals be managed by the federal government and that for a period of five years, no marine mammals be taken except for subsistence purposes by Alaska Natives.

Beginning in 1973, the state lobbied for the return of management control over nine species, including walrus. After public hearings and an environmental impact statement were prepared, the state won. The resumed management in the spring of 1976.

As might be expected, but not everyone has been happy with this change. Especially villagers in Bristol Bay, who would like to take walrus like their cousins to the north.

Although most walrus in the Bering Sea migrate north in the spring as ice pack recedes, about 10,000 males stay behind, hauling out on rocks in the Gulf of Anadyr, and the walrus Islands in Bristol Bay.

The walrus islands are in State game sanctuary created by the legislature in 1961. They are off limits to everyone but, Natives would like to hunt there.

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ALASKA'S WALRUS POPULATION—now estimated to contain 150-200,000 animals has become a major concern for Alaska Natives in the Bristol Bay area. They believe that their subsistence rights to hunt animals should have priority over the taking of walrus for sports hunting. The State of Alaska has managed the herds since the spring of 1976.

National Park Service Photo By ROBERT BELOUS

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According to John Vania of the Department of Fish and Game, the islands are "one of the very few places where walrus even haul out on land in any numbers. It's an extremely unusual wild life area."

In game management unit no. 17 only fifty walrus may be taken for food by Natives and non-Natives by permit. Permits for sports and subsistence hunting beginning this year will be issued in the village of Togiak, Manokotok, Twin Hills, and Clark Point on a first come first serve basis. The seasons are October 20 to December 1 and March 1 thru April 30 and the walrus must be taken in the water.

However, fish and game officials insist that any human disturbance will drive the walrus away.

## Sport hunting of walrus

What makes the situation worse is that the state wants to allow sport hunting of walrus. Although sport hunting would not take place on the Walrus Islands, Natives resent the idea of a sport take because they feel a subsistence take should have priority.

"The state sort of put subsistence on the bottom line," Frank Woods told the Tundra Times. Woods is president of New Stuyahok, Ltd. village corporation and chairman of the Subsistence Resource Council. He complained that the subsistence needs of Bristol Bay has been ignored since at least 1960 when a report was published stating that people in Togiak did not subsist on walrus. An erroneous statement, Woods said.

Likemost other marine animals off Alaskan waters, walrus herds seem to be in excellent shape and Woods is fearful that overpopulation may cause the health of the walrus to decline. Estimates by the Department of Fish and Game indicate that walrus have increased to nearly the levels they enjoyed before large-scale hunting began in 1868. These estimates range between 150-200,000 animals.

This would certainly indicate that there is room for a sport take of walrus, especially since the state proposes that only 50 animals be taken for this purpose. With approximately 1,500 walrus taken by Natives out of a statewide limit of 3,000 animals, there would seem to be ample room to allow Bristol Bay Natives to expand their harvest.

Which brings us back to the Walrus Island problem. Why are they closed?

There is nothing in the federal environmental impact statement that would lead anyone to believe that the Walrus Islands are critical in the breeding or calving of the walrus. Breeding apparently takes place far from the islands southwest of Saint Lawrence Island, during February and March. Cows give birth mostly in May after 15 months of pregnancy, during the spring migration to northern waters.

Native hunting of walrus on the islands would occur in April or May before the start of commercial fishing

or during the fall among an all male population of walrus.

Before, and since federal management, the State of Alaska made the islands off-limits to Native hunters. During the three and a half years that walrus were controlled by the feds, the islands were open to Native subsistence hunters. And the Natives want the islands open again.

Woods further argues that hunting walrus on the island rather than in the water is less wasteful:

Fish and Game wants to let them hunt in the water, and you do that and you're going to lose a good 75% of them. You get them on an iceberg or land, you just need one shell," he said.

Although this estimate may seem high, scientists say that the loss of walrus hunted at sea runs 40-50%. Some people may argue that the Bristol Bay people of Togiak, Twin Hills, Goodnews and other communities have not historically hunted enough walrus to claim a subsistence use priority. Togiak's David Nanaluk angrily puts that argument to rest. He estimates a take of 15-18 walrus by Bristol Bay Natives during the period of federal management suggested:

"It's just like going to a bureaucrat's family and saying you don't eat pork or steaks or hamburger and saying to them, 'You don't need pork.' This is our diet. The Native people need that." He added that the nutrient value of wild food is far greater than the processed food consumed by urbanites.

## Clam fishery

Nanaluk and Woods are also fearful of a proposed clam fishery that may develop in the Bering Sea in the next several years. Clams and other mollusks are the main source of food of the walrus.

"You get the clams out, where are the walrus going to go next?" Woods asked.

Nanaluk pointed out that natural competition for clams with other animals, such as the bearded seal, and increased human pressure to alter foraging pattern because of the commercial clam fisher, would inevitably make the walrus more sensitive and vulnerable to sport and subsistence hunting.

The North Pacific Management Council, which has jurisdiction over fisheries in Alaskan waters outside of three miles, seem to have a sympathetic ear for subsistence needs and is closely watching an experimental clamming expedition taking place in the Bering Sea this summer. One council member has warned that the east coast clam fishery has been very destructive to other resources.

The response of a new fish and game commissioner to these and other subsistence problems will be interesting to see. Whoever he is, people all over the state will be hoping he seizes the golden opportunity to rebuild the battered house of fish and game and respond more quickly to rural Alaskans who are increasingly willing to accept restrictions on their taking of fish and game if only someone would try to understand their true needs.