

Villagers prepare for whaling

by **Bob Koweluk**

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Children are seeing and even helping in getting preparations completed for this year's subsistence bowhead whale hunts. In the nine whaling villages from the most southern village of Savoonga to the northeastern most village of Kaktovik, people in these communities are in a flurry of activity making intensive preparations for whaling.

The most visible are the whaling captains and crews repairing and refitting their skin boats, or making ready the many yards of rope and floats, or groups of whaling crews and villagers who chop pressure ridges level in order to make trails to be used by hunters traveling from the beach to the water's edge.

Less visible are the men cleaning and inspecting their whaling harpoons and shoulder guns, preparing the bombs to be used in the hunts, or sharpening meat

hooks and cutting tools.

There is excitement and hope in each of the whaling communities. And this close to the actual hunts perhaps a crewman tries on a new parka which a loved one hand-sewed during the winter. The clothing may even be a new hat, a pair of warm mittens, sealskin pants or mukluks. Men, over the winter months, have been working patiently inspecting and repairing their equipment.

The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission has done its share improving the bombs used in the hand thrown whaling harpoon and shoulder guns. These new bombs are expected to be more effective, powerful and could help decrease the number of whales struck but lost.

Families are cleaning their ice cellars getting them ready for the meat and muktuk that could be stored there for winter following

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a successful hunt. Members of the whaling communities are volunteering their time and efforts to make the hunt a successful one. Women are getting organized so that they are ready to cook food at their homes both for the crews located on the ice and for the feast held at their homes after a successful hunt.

It is a time for intensive preparations, although a lot of it has been done throughout the year. Some of the preparation may seem more visible or glamorous, but all the preparations are necessary and equally important.

And it isn't without pressure that the whalers are making their preparations. They are under a great deal of pressure to successfully conclude the spring subsistence bowhead whale hunts. Some of the pressure comes from competition between crews working for that moment when they choose to use their skills in striking the whale or from waiting for the right winds, currents, ice and open sea conditions. Additional pressure comes from the communities hunger for that much anticipated time when they can eat the fresh muktuk. Boiling muktuk when it's fresh is soft and easy to chew, but after it has been frozen the muktuk when cooked becomes hard to chew.

But with many hunters today, it is not these age old concerns

they and their ancestors have dealt with. It is a pressure of a low quota and short time with which to use it to succeed and a high chance for an unsuccessful hunt.

At Gambell the whaling crews are carefully awaiting the right conditions before putting their skin boats into the water.

"We've been seeing whales just about all year long," Merlin Koonooka, an AEWC member said. "But for the past several weeks we've been seeing bowhead whales pretty regularly. There are open leads; there is open water out there."

"We're now in the process of getting ready for the whaling season," Koonooka said, "which could be any day now. In fact if it wasn't for the quota we'd be underway. But at this time we want to be careful. We don't want to strike out before landing a whale."

"Last year or the year before, we had just a couple of good days of good weather and we struck out on our quota. On the other hand, it used to take a good several weeks, at least a month on the average, in the earlier days before the quota. But because of the quota, whaling can last only one day. So like I said, we have to be really careful to make sure that we strike and land our whales," Koonooka said.

"It's still kind of cold here. The water still freezes up to form

young ice all over yet. That makes it kind of hard to get by from one place to another by skin boats. This would give the whales a chance to get away easily just by swimming. The ice conditions right now favors the whale, you've got a good chance of losing a whale that way now."

"It's getting warmer everyday, all we need is the right conditions. And so like I say, we have to be really careful; we have only two whales - only two strikes allocated to us this year," Koonooka said.

So for now, the whaling crews at Savoonga are preparing for the hunt. If a boat needs a new skin a new one is stretched over the skin boat frame, they paint it, put a keel on complete with an ivory or a plastic slide. Getting the whaling gear ready consists of many chores such as inspecting and cleaning the weapons, loading shells, and repriming bombs. Motors are checked to make sure they survived the winter cold without damage. The masts, sails, a good many yards of harpoon line are also checked, Koonooka said.

The forces with which these whalers must deal with are enormous. Ice jams can sometimes form, stranding a whaling party miles offshore with not enough water to put a boat on to. Incidents such as this out at sea can be a dangerous situation. Whalers today use skills learned by

generations of hunters. They read the signs of the wind, weather, sea currents, ice formation and movements to make sure they have a safe hunt. But sometimes the things not expected to happen does happen. The unexpected could be a whale lashing out at a boat, capsizing it. Perhaps a visitor could form an idea of the power of the wind and currents on the sea by watching from the shore.

Sea currents, or even the wind will push icebergs or new floes of young ice easily. Once the ice is moving it is an irresistible force. And sometimes at Gambell people there stand in awe watching a floe of young ice pushed by wind or currents slowly pile up onshore to heights of over 50 feet.

"It sometimes becomes a daily chore chopping away the ice that piles up on shore near where the whaling boats will be launched," Koonooka said. Big floes of ice go by, and some of them hit the beach causing pile-ups; pressure ridges. So sometimes there's a lot of work involved, even before putting the boats in the water.

"Under ideal conditions everybody goes out," Koonooka said. "We are waiting for ideal conditions. The wind and current have to be right. The air temperature must be warm enough to keep young ice from forming. We're waiting for a large body of water to open up near the village so we can go out sailing for the bowhead whales."

Barrow is the home of the AEWC headquarters. Meetings to discuss the issues surrounding the hunting of whales are often conducted in Barrow. There leaders from different whaling communities make their concerns known. Many of the bowhead whale studies are also conducted in Barrow.

"Right now we're in a very skeptical situation," Arnold Brower, Jr. a member of the AEWC said. "Some of the crews don't feel like it's worth their time to go out for the whaling this year. They're relying on other crews to catch the whales and in that way get their share."

"We are under great deal of pressure this year. It would be better to hunt with no quota," Brower said.

Brower said some whaling captains and the communities feel betrayed by the federal government. The whale counts have shown more whales being counted each year.

"Even though the whale counts have risen quite a bit from since the first time these whales were counted," Brower said, "the whale quotas have not been raised for us."

"With the kind of education, technical support and top notch equipment we've been using in these whale counts, I think the federal government is negligent in it's trust responsibility to our people. The federal government has a commitment to another country on the whaling issue," Brower said, "and that's why the government is not living up to it's trust responsibility."

Closer to the hearts of the people is the burden a captain must carry for the awesome responsibility of losing a whale that had been struck but lost. The food denied to him and his people, with each day at the dinner table is a painful reminder of failure.

For this reason, whaling has become a controversial issue in some villages. Some communities do not want the bad press they say they receive if their quota perhaps for a moment is in reach, only to be lost the next.

Things happen during a hunt that no one can control. The loss of a whale hurts not only the whaling crew but the whole community as well. And perhaps it is this sadness they wish to keep at home in their communities without having it spread out to other people, other communities who can't understand their loss. These thoughts occasionally enter a hunter's mind, but now for many they are preparing for the subsistence hunts.

In Barrow the hunt could begin anytime within the next two weeks.

"Some crews go out by April 10," Brower said, "while some others go whaling some seasons as late as April 20. It varies. We've heard some bowheads were sighted down at Point Hope. And that's enough to get people riled up here and to get prepared by the weekend."

"There are about 28 whaling crews in Barrow. The number varies and it depends on the number of crews that are prepared and able to go hunting. Some years, it depends on the weather sometimes to see who goes."

"It's the ones that are prepared and ready to go; they're the ones that count," Brower said.

"Some folks, some crews whose boats need repairs have repaired their boats structurally. Some have even gone as far as building new ones. They are putting some new skins to cover their boats. They want to make sure their boats are durable."

"Women, of course, have done their part in sewing the skins in such a way to make them waterproof. Once the skins are sewn they are stretched on the skin boat frame. And once nature has completely dried the skin, it is painted to make it waterproof," Brower added.

Whaling boat captains in Barrow do not measure their skin covered boats in feet, but measure them according to Brower, by the number of oogruk hides used to cover them.

"So right now they're in preparation full force right now," said Brower. "A normal size whaling boat is about six oogruk skins. Several whaling crews have built boats with seven skins anticipating the need to travel farther offshore if whaling is affected by offshore drilling activities."

"There's been open leads seen in Barrow, the solid ice extends about two miles out," but Brower said, "the conditions change quickly due to the winds and currents."