

Whale conference supplies needed data

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

The fifth annual Bowhead Biology Conference may not have achieved any breakthroughs, but it contributed significantly to the supply of information about the whales Inupiat need for their physical and spiritual well-being.

That's the conclusion of Marie Adams, who manages the North Slope Borough Public Information Division.

"All of it is needed information," Adams said during the conference last week in Anchorage. "Whaling captains have often been concerned about the sense of smell and visual stimuli (of the bowheads). Putting all these bits and pieces together will help us understand the whale."

Adams said people are especially concerned about the effects of oil development on how the animals feed and breed.

"The more we know about the whales, the better we know about protecting the environment," she said. "I'm here because I'm very concerned about protecting the environment," especially after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.



"We have a very deep interest in preserving the whales; it's more than just putting food on the table," she said.

Adams says the general public pays too much attention to the effects of subsistence hunters on bowheads and too little attention to the effects of oil development on the mammals.

"What good does it do to be concerned about the life of a whale if you lose it through oil development?" she asked. And she posed this question: If oil developers kill whales in the Arctic, will the International Whaling Commission lower the whalers' bowhead whale quota?

Barrow whaling captain Burton Rexford said he was more concerned than surprised about the findings of the dozens of scientists, whose findings were presented during the three-day conference.

Rexford, a whaler since 1940 and a captain since 1979, was concerned about findings of toxic substances, such as arsenic, mercury, lead and zinc in the liver, kidneys and blubber of the bowheads. He wanted to know whether the bowheads got them from the water or from their diet.

Rexford said he had no surprises about the oil industry noise.

"My theory is that bowheads migrate through a lot of noise," he said, including frequent flights over bowhead migration routes by jets and air taxis.

"Any time there's seismic activity, it changes the bowhead," he said. He said he's noticed that bowheads don't seem to be alarmed by tugboats and other vessels as long as they continue

to move.

Rexford's observations confirmed the findings of several scientists, who concluded that sudden noises or changes in direction of vessels startled bowheads more than continuous noise.

Other scientific conclusions

included:

- Researchers are 95 percent certain the bowhead population is between 6,200 and 13,700.

- Radio telemetry significantly improves whalers' chances of recovering whales that have been struck and

lost.

- Packs of bowheads use each other's songs and calls to help them navigate under water.

Scientists also presented studies about the age, weight, size and behavior of the whales.