

Editorial Comment—

Is Bowhead Whale an Endangered Specie?

The Eskimos of the Arctic may become victims of genocide if the great bowhead whale is classified an endangered specie. This classification, if allowed, could be included in the sea mammal bill in Congress that would impose a 15-year moratorium on sea mammals. If the bill passes the Senate, and becomes law, the whaling communities of Arctic Alaska would be greatly endangered.

To the Eskimos of Point Hope, Barrow, Wainwright, St. Lawrence Island and Kivalina, the bowhead whale is the mammoth creature around which rich cultures were intricately established through the centuries in the past, especially at the two major whaling communities of Point

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Hope and Barrow.

The two communities have long histories of the whale hunt starting somewhere back 1,500 years. The struggle of learning to take the great whales must have been a major effort — trial and error period where many lives were lost. Those intrepid whalers used nothing but bone and ivory harpoon heads. They got the whales nevertheless. They got them by thoroughly studying the habits of the great mammal. They learned proper approaches for the attack. To err was to invite death. Even the proper approach didn't always work.

The grandfather of the editor of this newspaper was a victim of a freak reaction of the whale he struck. The flukes caught his umiak squarely in the middle killing him and four other crew members. Three young boys managed to come out of this tragedy because they wore thick-haired caribou parkas, leggings and mukluks that kept them afloat. One of the boys was the editor's father. He was 14 years old. His wounded and dying father shouted directions to the boys how to get to the anchored ice or shore ice.

The editor's father hunted whales throughout his life, ever haunted by the personally close tragedy. He, nevertheless, got his good share of the whales as a captain.

The whaling is continuing today with some improvements weaponwise. They are using the darting and shoulder guns introduced somewhere around 1870's. That was the period when the white whalers came up north to hunt the bowhead because their women back home wore the bowhead baleen for corsette stays.

The corsette period decimated the bowhead whale population endangering the existence of the great mammal. That would have, or should have been the time to classify the animal an endangered specie. But nothing like that was done. When someone invented plastic that worked better than baleen for corsette stays, the bowhead was reprieved. The Eskimos continued to hunt the whale. Even at the greatly reduced numbers, the whale continued to exist and even under the Eskimo hunting pressure.

Today, the pressure on the mammal is believed to be no longer critical. The bowhead numbers in the thousands. Biologists are saying the bowhead herd is increasing — that the animals taken by the Eskimos does not hurt it. In fact, they said, it might even be beneficial to the herd. Eskimos are saying there are more whales than ever before. This opinion should be respected because by necessity, the Eskimos observe the animal that gives them the most important source of sustenance.

Whaling is a way of life among the Arctic Eskimos. It is a tradition as sacred as beef. Take beef away from the world and there would be calamity. Take the bowhead whale away from Alaska Natives, and there would be more than calamity. It would be genocide. It would be the end of the rich cultures. It would end the spirit and drive of those people.

There should be reasonable approach to the Eskimo whaling. The evaluation of it should be realistic. Let reason be the foremost approach in dealing with the sea mammal bill.