

# **"There is little doubt that the subsistence life style of these Arctic communities is being severely threatened at this time."**

by PAMELA HERMAN

"Given the size of the quota of bowhead whales for 1978, it would seem impossible for there to be anything but a drastic reduction in the amount of meat available at the household level. . . In the villages most dependent on the whale, the subsistence resources near the village do not seem to be adequate. These communities -- Barrow, Point Hope, Kivalina, Wainwright and Kaktovik -- are also extremely dependent on caribou. The caribou have been in short supply and likely cannot fill the gap caused by a reduction in the amount of meat."

So concludes a study conducted by Jack Petersen, sociologist at the University of Alaska -- Anchorage, for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. His report was issued last week on the effects of this year's quota on whale hunting upon communities on St. Lawrence Island and the arctic coast.

Petersen and his assistants conducted extensive interviews of families in the whaling villages to determine how much whale meat the villagers usually eat and what alternative sources of animal protein exist to make up the deficit which will result from the 12 whale quota. This whaling season, only 9 whales were actually taken.

## **Whaling as history**

Petersen's report provides a brief history of the development of the whaling culture among Eskimos. It emphasizes the fact that the whale hunt was economically, socially, spiritually, ceremonially and ideologically central to those villages that participated regularly. Seasonal whaling provided and still does provide a crucial organizational element in the lives of villagers, as well as an important source of protein.

Petersen cites research which tends to show that the development of a successful whaling culture represented a significant achievement in technology and social stability, and may well have been the step forward which allowed the Western Thule people -- or at least their culture -- to spread from the western arctic coast as far as Greenland. This theoretically occurred about two thousand years ago.

Petersen also points to evidence that the decline in the availability of whale meat between 1850 and 1900 contributed, along with disease and famine from other causes, to the drastic population decline among Eskimos after contact with westerners (including, among others, East Coast whalers seeking oil and baleen for corset stays).

## **Feast and famine**

Among the reasons given by the United States government for its failure to object to the proposed moratorium on Eskimo whaling by the International Whaling Commission, was the fact that in past years, the whale harvest has fluctuated and villages have had to do without any whale from time to time.

Petersen refers to studies, however, which indicate that "there also seems to be a general balancing of the highs and lows, so that rarely do lows in any two resources coincide."

His report indicates that the St. Lawrence Island villages of Gambell and Savoonga, which traditionally rely more heavily on walrus than whale meat, will suffer less than the more northerly villages. Wales, also, has been accustomed to rely on seal, oogruk, and reindeer from a local herd, than upon an occasional whale.

This spring, for the first time, however, walrus hunting was closed in the Savoonga area after a quota of 450 animals was taken. The State of Alaska assumed control of walrus management from the federal government last year.

"More than 30 percent of the households in Kivalina and Point Hope, and over 40 percent of those in Barrow, Wainwright, and Kaktovik, received more than 400 pounds of whale meat in 1977. This is an average of eight to ten pounds of meat a week over a year," reports Petersen. Furthermore, "over half of the households of Barrow, Kaktovik and Kivalina eat caribou on the average of three or more times a week the year round, and in Wainwright, 45 percent of the families have caribou this often."

Individual hunters of the western arctic caribou herd were restricted by state regulation to one caribou bull this past winter, however, and a caribou seldom provides more than 80 pounds of meat. Some hunters from the

northwest have said that is hardly worth the effort to hunt for such a small amount of meat.

## **Let them eat beef**

Even where stores in the villages have an adequate supply of meat such as beef and chicken, cash resources in most families go first to pay for stove oil and other items which can only be gotten with money. "Even in Barrow, with its relatively robust cash economy, nearly seven out of ten households get more than half their food through subsistence activity," Petersen states.

Next winter's bag limit for caribou hunters will be two bulls, as long as only one is taken in the fall season. Both the fall (August 10 --October 15) and spring (February 15 -- April 15) seasons will be long next year. Harvest for the herd will be 5000 bulls -- an increase of 2000 over this year's total.

## **Caribou vs warble flies**

However, there is new bad news on the caribou scene. It comes from Jim Davis, biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks. Aerial composition counts of the herd this spring showed an estimated calf survival rate only 60 percent as good as last winter.

Davis states that about half of the western arctic herd -- an estimated 30,000 animals -- wintered north of the Brooks Range, and the calf-cow ratio among those animal was only about 12 to 100 this spring. In contrast, the 20,000 caribou who spent the winter on the Selawik-Buckland flats showed about 47 calves to 100 cows, and the 12,000 caribou wintering in the Upper Kobuk valley showed about 28 calves to 100 cows, which was about average.

From autopsies of dead and dying calves found on the North Slope, Davis deduces that the most logical explanation for the many calf deaths was warble fly infestation. Apparently last summer's hot, dry weather was just what the doctor ordered for an overabundant warble fly population.

Even good weather can have a bad effect on an already unfortunate situation.