

Whale quota hits Eskimo food supply

By BRENDA ITTA

BARROW, ALASKA — The quota on 1978 bowhead whaling — imposed by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) over the protests of Eskimo leaders — has curtailed both the winter supply of food and the sharing of it within the community, according to officials here.

The shortage of food, particularly whale meat, was first apparent at the annual feast at Thanksgiving. Last week the Christmas celebration confirmed it. Both feasts are traditional times for sharing — the community's system for distributing food to those in need.

Without sufficient whale meat, the central item in the diet of the coastal Eskimo, the officials fear an impact on the nutrition of North Slope residents this winter. And, without the ability to share food, they also fear that no alternative will be available to alleviate the nutritional harm that can result.

According to North Slope Borough Mayor Eben Hopson, only small amounts of whale meat were available at the two feasts, which are held annually. "The people went all out to provide other food items at the Thanksgiving feast, and again at Christmas," he said. "For the first time in my memory, they distributed apples and oranges. There was some fish and caribou and a great deal of chicken soup and chicken stew. It is unusual for Barrow people to use fruit and chicken, and not plenty of whale meat, to celebrate these feasts," he added.

Whaling captain Jacob Adams, head of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AE-

WC), said that his own ice cellar no longer held whale meat at the Christmas season. "As a captain, I usually have enough whale to last through the winter to the next whaling season. This year it is gone, and the hardest months of winter are still ahead. Because I am a captain, the people of the community come to me when they need food and I have an obligation to share with them. This year I cannot, because I have nothing left," Adams said.

It is this inability to share food that has officials most concerned about the effects of the 1978 whale quota on the communities during the winter. "The law of survival in the Arctic is to take care of the next guy," Hopson said. "If we don't have enough to take care of each other by sharing our food some will go hungry. For the Eskimo, there is a big difference between sharing and charity. We won't take charity, but we do share. Sharing is very much a part of our way of life."

The Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts in Barrow are held in the community's churches. Deacons of the Presbyterian Church noted that the supply of food at the feasts was significantly lower than the year before. Usually, church representatives distribute the leftovers to the poor and needy. This year there was nothing left. An official of the Assembly of God Church reported that there was much less "muktuk" — a whale delicacy — distributed than in years past.

The Presbyterian spokesman also noted that the church, which normally serves as a conduit through which those who have food can share it with those

who do not, has had more requests for food from Barrow residents than before.

The shortage of whale meat is compounded this winter by a shortage of caribou in the area. Hopson noted that there were more caribou dishes served at the Thanksgiving feast than at Christmas, indicating that the available stores of this meat are diminishing quickly, before the Winter is half over.

Mayor Hopson emphasized, however, that there can be no substitute for whale meat in the Eskimo diet. "From my personal experience, I know that nothing else can take the place of whale. Without it, we become ill and cannot tolerate other foods, until whale meat becomes available. Fish and caribou can be additional items of food, especially in time of hardship, but they cannot take the place of whale," he added.

This damage to the basic food supply, as well as to the sharing system is seen as a direct result of the IWC quota imposed a year ago. Despite the protests of the Eskimo leaders, the IWC ruled that only 12 whales could be taken during the year 1978. This was later revised to 14. The Eskimos decided then that in order to abide voluntarily with the quota they would limit the Spring hunt to 10 whales. Since it was a good season, these were quickly taken and the hunt stopped — three weeks earlier than usual. The Fall hunting season was extremely poor. Not enough whales were taken in the fall to even meet the quota. In 1977, before a quota was imposed, almost twice the number of whales were taken.

According to Adams, if the

Eskimos had not been bound by the unrealistically low quota in 1978, they would have been able to take enough whales to supply food for this winter. "Normally, the hunts in the Spring and Fall together provide enough whale meat to last until the hunting season in the next spring. The natural forces that determine whether a hunt is good or bad do not follow the regulations set by men," he said. "We had no way of knowing that the Spring hunt would be good and the Fall hunt bad. Yet to stay within the quota we had to limit the Spring hunt. We are paying the price for that this Winter."

Instead of a fixed numerical quota, the Eskimos seek to take only what they need for subsistence and had proposed they would not take more than two per cent of the estimated whale population based on current, actual counts of those passing the Arctic coast. This will allow an adequate harvest to meet the food requirements of the Eskimos and assure that the whale population will not be depleted.

The U.S. in cooperation with the AEWC presented this alternative to the IWC in its meeting in London last summer but it was rejected. As a result, the Es-

kimos stated that they would no longer voluntarily abide by the IWC regulations which they claim do not apply to them. Instead they will regulate themselves during 1979 staying within the two per cent framework.

The issue of IWC jurisdiction over subsistence whaling is presently the subject of a lawsuit brought by the Eskimos in federal court in Anchorage. Oral arguments on this matter are being heard this week. The suit contends that the IWC charter gives it jurisdiction only over commercial whaling activities and expressly denies its authority over aboriginal hunting for subsistence purposes. In addition, the suit notes that U.S. Law, in the Marine Mammal Protection Act, specifically exempts subsistence hunting from its provisions.

"The experience in 1978 confirms that IWC regulation is not only unworkable, but also unenforceable," declared Mayor Hopson. "A whaling captain is not an individual seeking his own gain in the hunt. He is a representative of the village, obtaining food for the entire community. If he violates a quota, then he cannot be punished alone. The whole community shares the blame with him."