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Anchorage Daily News

comments on Whaling

The International Whaling Commission gave short shrift to Eskimos attending its meeting in Tokyo this week when the whaling nations decided that only a dozen bowhead whales could be hunted for subsistence by Alaska Natives next year. The commission ordered that "hunting shall stop when 18 whales have been struck (by harpoons) or 12 landed."

The immediate response, and understandably so, was anger from the Eskimo leaders at the conference. They called upon the U.S. government to intervene with some future action. That is not likely to happen, though, since the U.S. delegation voted in favor of the bowhead limit, and that is unfortunate indeed.

The Eskimos even said they were willing to accept a minimum bowhead quota of 18, although the number would be substantially lower than last year's landing of 29 whales and the previous year's catch of 48.

The Eskimos, who argue the nutrition of the whale is a necessary part of their life and whaling is a tradition of their culture, have inhabited the arctic shores for 6,000 years. They have proven their ways to be a vital and enduring link [in] the Far North's delicate ecological system. Now suddenly, their culture is as much in danger as the bowhead whale.

Perhaps most outrageous about the whaling commission's action was its vote earlier in the week to raise the quota of sperm whale in the North Pacific. Last June, the commission, because of conservation reasons, had voted to reduce the sperm whaling quota from 7,000 in 1977 to 763 in 1978.

But pressure from Japan and the Soviet Union, two major whaling nations, apparently was too intense. The commission dashed the 763 sperm whale limit and expanded the quota to a whopping 6,444 whales that may be killed next year.

A small group of Eskimo hunters who kill whales for subsistence—something that can't be measured in commercial terms or political clout—apparently didn't impress the International Whaling Commission membership. Instead, their request for aboriginal whaling rights to protect their people and traditional ways received a stark and cheerless reply.

The commission termed the bowhead limit for the Eskimos a "compromise," but in reality, it was an insult to an ancient, proud people.