

"Now everybody cares"

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SAN DIEGO, CALIF.--Nearly 500 persons attended the Second Conference of the Biology of the Marine Mammal in San Diego early in December, twice the number expected.

"If you'd held a meeting like this 15 years ago, you wouldn't have gotten 20 people," noted Richard Gard, University of Alaska, Juneau. "Nobody cared. Now everybody does."

The subject that attracted the majority of the non-scientific participants turned out to be whales. Clubs have sprung up for the preservation of these mammals. There are whale cults which honor the creatures in theater productions and song. And, in the heat of this enthusiasm, the popularity of and understanding for the Alaskan Eskimo seems to have reached an all time low.

"They blame the Eskimos directly because the Japanese and Russians are allowed to kill more whales as a trade-off for Eskimo whaling," explained one young observer. "And we understand that the Eskimos have no real need to whale. That they are thoroughly modern; they hunt in tin motor boats and have plenty of money because of the Land Claims Settlement."

When Bruce Krogman, Northwest and Alaska Fisheries Center bowhead census man, projected a slide of a whaling tent on the edge of the ice at Barrow the audience roared with laughter, apparently at the primitiveness of the scene, but there still seemed to be little awareness of the basic nature of or traditional importance of aboriginal whaling.

John J. Burns, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, labored to explain it in a talk

titled "Contemporary Conflicts."

"The Marine Mammal is the focal point of Circumpolar People. It is not just an abstract symbol of a cult," he insisted. "It still very much exists."

Allotted the usual 20 minutes to talk and field questions, Burns briefly explained the Claims settlement and the importance of the recent Circumpolar Conference of Eskimo people.

The Arctic is involved in a tremendous push for sovereignty including home rule and control over local resources, he told them.

"To state the Eskimos are a minority group is a misnomer. They are small in number and a minority in total population yet they are the majority of people occupying a vast area and thereby feel they have a significant role to play in decisions that are made..."

"Sociological factors must be given great weight," he insisted. If decisions in Japan had been made purely on biological considerations, they would have been very different, he added.

In questions that followed one puzzled observer said he understood Eskimos had a natural love and respect for animals and wondered why they insisted on hunting whales to extinction.

"They do not believe that the resource is endangered by their activity," Burns replied.

But then his time was up, and not being familiar with the unsolved problems of getting an accurate bowhead census, most of the audience seemed as mystified as before.

Whale census taker Krogman reported funding to make an accurate count had been increased considerably this year but Dr. George Harry, director of the Marine Mammal Division (NMFS) admitted space age technology for the task is still a long way off.