

In Defense of the Native Subsistence Walrus Hunter:

Photograph By ROBERT KOWELUK

Editor's Note — The following commentary, published in the current issue of the ABE Newsletter from Kawerak, Inc., was provided in response to an article in a major Alaskan newspaper. The article suggested widespread wonton waste of walrus animals by Eskimo hunters. The name of the newspaper is omitted here, as many press accounts have recently suggested abuse of wildlife resources, alcohol, cocaine, etc. by Natives without much sensitivity for the Native population.

By DONALD STAND

Q. What do you get when you mix lies, misrepresentations and sensationalism together in a newspaper feature?

A. [the newspaper's] treatment of the State's walrus situation is what you get.

If the uninformed reader were to accept as true all the statements and "facts" presented in the [newspaper's] articles on subsistence walrus hunting, one would believe that every Alaskan Native who hunts in the State's western coastal waters is a wasteful, headhunting profiteer. Not only is such an assertion false, it slanders the entire Native population of our state.

One need not look very hard to find overgeneralized and distorted facts in the articles, telltale signs of irresponsible, unprofessional and biased newspaper reporting.

Item: "There is no real subsistence dependency on walrus," says John Burns, Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game mammal biologist.

Item: Natives shoot the animals by the thousands, taking only the heads for their valuable teeth.

Items: Ivory for the legal and illegal American market comes from walrus heads like these on the dock at Savoonga.


Item: Smaller tusks, sold as raw ivory, may bring \$150 per pound.

These and other false statements only serve to paint an inaccurate and negative picture of Native subsistence activities.

Let's pause for a moment and consider the intent of the [newspaper's] handling of the issue. Obviously, the purpose of the articles could not have been to inform the public about walrus, since so many of the "facts" in the article were false. Inactuality, what has been presented are series of misconceptions about the Eskimo people and their hunting practices. It appears from the tone of the articles that [newspaper is] using their newspaper as a forum from which they can attempt to gain support for their owned misinformed and erroneous views of the walrus hunting issue. Their real purpose seems to be to intentionally slur Alaska's Native people, perhaps as part of a divide and conquer scheme. When one considers that subsistence hunting rights, Native land selections, Eskimo whaling and other controversial issues are being heatedly debated in the Legislature, in the media, in Alaskan homes, and businesses today, one cannot help but feel that the intent of the [newspaper's] inflammatory articles is to foster a spirit of ill-will

and anti-Native sentiment among the public.

Perhaps I'm being too critical of the [newspaper]. Perhaps [the newspaper] was simply providing the public a service by informing us about one of the current issues that affects our lives. However, I don't feel that is the case, and even if it were, the [newspaper] would be guilty of gross incompetence and unprofessionalism.

The entire "in- look at the walrus situation" by the [newspaper] starts off on the wrong foot and proceeds to mislead and fall throughout the entire series of articles. The page one color picture of walrus tusks on the dock at Savoonga is a classic. There's one nagging problem. Savoonga has never had a dock. Since there never was a dock, maybe there were never 150 sets of walrus tusks on it? Maybe someone's guilty of shoddy and irresponsible newspaper reporting? Biologist John Burns states that "there is no real subsistence dependency on walrus." The walrus have been and remain a vital part of many people's diets and the occasional availability of beef and chicken in the village stores has not diminished the need for walrus meat. Frequently, Natives need to hunt walrus if they want any meat to eat at all!

Hunting for walrus, or most marine mammals for that matter, is no simple task. Weather and ice conditions can change with deadly swiftness, meaning it is not a job for the faint-hearted. Any one wanting to turn a quick buck could certainly find easier and safer ways of doing so, than by hunting walrus for their ivory alone.

The articles claim, walrus hunting by Natives is unregulated. This is not true, since self-regulation has always been a facet of the Eskimo subsistence tradition. Individuals could only be boat captains after having proved their skills and abilities on the hunt, and captains, advisory councils and elders have always discussed each hunt, searching for ways to make each hunting effort more successful and more efficient. Only by such a dynamic process have the Eskimos been able to subsist in their home environment.

I have yet to see all the material comforts one would expect to find as a result of all the ivory marketing that is said to be occurring. What I have seen is most likely the most needy group of American people paying what are probably America's highest prices for basic necessities such as heating oil, food, electricity and so on. For example, in Savoonga, heating oil is \$75 a barrel, electricity costs \$.37 per kw/hr, gasoline is \$2.06 a gallon, hamburger costs \$3.03 a pound, eggs are \$2 a dozen, flour is \$4 for 10 pounds and sugar is \$6.26 for 10 pounds. With prices like these, I wish (so do the Eskimos) ivory could sell for \$150 a pound.

No, Eskimos are not getting rich at the expense of the walrus herds. They are just attempting to preserve their traditional lifestyle in the face of increasing opposition and assimilation. A newspaper that unjustly slurs people who intend to maintain their own lifestyle, [as newspaper did], does not deserve the patronage of all people concerned with fair and honest reporting, when it comes to articles about Alaska's Native people.