

Alaska Eskimos wrongly accused

To the editor:

I just recently watched Canadian Broadcasting Co.'s "Focus North" about the worldwide ban on elephant ivory. I was greatly upset about a section that accused Alaska Eskimos of brutality in killing walruses just for their ivory.

I had heard of a few people doing this, especially rich white men who used Eskimo friends for guides. No

one had asked the Alaska Eskimos about the real truth.

The truth that I know is:

Walruses summer on rocky islands. Whenever they rush out to the sea, they trample over anything, even members of their own kind. Some of the trampled walruses suffocate and die. Eskimo hunters scrounge through these islands and collect the heads and male organs.

Also in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Alaska Department of Fish and Game made a ruling which restricted or limited the hunt of walruses by Alaska Eskimos. For many centuries the Inupiaq helped control the walrus population, for the walrus can multiply very fast.

One bull walrus has a large harem of female walruses who bear many

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calves. Before the white men came, elders tell stories of how one community would hunt about 700 walrus per year. Female walrus skins were used for homes, rope and (even now) for boats.

Meat was dried or cooked. Sections of the skin with blubber and meat attached are stored underground and aged (yum!). Ivory, which was used for tools, is today carved into different ornaments. With the new ruling, Inupiaq were allowed to hunt one to two walrus per year per family.

The summer of 1983 was a very bad year for the walrus. My children and I were camping at the beach about 30 miles out of Nome. About every quarter mile along the beach there was a carcass of a dead walrus. Inupiaq men opened up the stomachs and found them filled with rocks.

The walrus overpopulated. There were not enough clams to feed the overpopulation, and hundreds ate rocks instead and starved to death. If the Inupiaq were allowed to hunt and help control the walrus population, this would have never happened. The walrus and clams would have been kept at a healthy population level.

Men went into their boats or walked along the beaches and collected heads from swollen, inedible walrus carcasses and took off their heads for ivory from the late 1970s.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game never admitted they made a mistake and allowed the media to make false claims against the Alaska Eskimos.

Sincerely,
Mary Jane Litchard
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