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Erich Follmann, interviewee

Steve Lay, host

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Steven Lay said whale hunting is in the electronic age. Whaling is difficult and dangerous work. Even after harpooning a whale the hunters are not always guaranteed success. They don't always manage to land a stuck whale. Erich Follmann with the UAF Institute of Arctic Biology has introduced radio transmitters to the hunt. Follmann said several years ago he proposed to the North Slope Borough to come up with a way to increase the recovery of the struck whales that are harpooned during the whaling season while heading south along the western and northern coast of Alaska. They know from past history that the whales that approximately 50 percent of the whales that are struck are eventually lost. The losses are due to several reasons. Sometimes the harpoons pull out of the whale, sometimes the floats attached to the harpoons come off, and sometimes the whales are cut loose when there is a danger of capsizing the boat. In the past the only way to recover the whale was to go out and look for the light colored float which is about two feet in diameter.

Lay said in an attempt to find these whales Follmann is placing transmitters in the floats. Follmann said they proposed putting the transmitter inside the float so they could electronically recover a whale by either keeping contact with the whale after it had been harpooned or if it had been cut loose they could go out later to recover it. The transmitters they are using are very powerful. An aircraft at 7500 feet and 85 miles would be able to hear the transmitter. A small aircraft with an antennae attached to the wing could quickly locate the float. Follmann said the program at this point is still a test. They have given an instrument to all of the whaling captains at Kaktovik and Barter Island. It is a technique best used in open water conditions. Once the float is under the water the signal is lost. They chose a village where most of the whaling is in open water conditions. In the spring leads form and the whales migrate up the leads. If the float were to get under the ice it could not be heard. They aren't sure how widespread this technique should be used.

Lay said while no whales have actually been recovered because of the transmitters the findings are promising. Follmann said they have done this for two falls. During this time Kaktovik had two strikes allotted to them in 1983 and three strikes in 1984. All of the whales that were struck were either recovered or they were lost. In all cases the float was located either by aircraft or boat. Using these transmitters could increase the recovery rate for stuck whales. Follmann said the recovery won't be 100 percent, but they hope to increase the recovery to make it worthwhile. Presently the loss at 50 percent is quite high. Not all of the harpooned whales die. There have been instances when whales have been

harvested and there are old scars. One study interpreted a lost whale as one that is going to die, but because of the political situation everything that can be done to try to recover struck whales is beneficial to everyone including the whale populations.