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Sadie Neakok, Marie Adams, Ray Dronenberg, and James Nageak

Karen McPherson, interviewer

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[sound of whale]

Sadie Neakok said in those days they didn’t have whale quotas. There was no pressure, but today that applies because of the quota. They are trying to abide by it. She said it is pressuring the poor whaler’s mind right now.

Karen McPherson said Sadie Neakok’s husband, Nate, is a whaling captain in Barrow, one of nine whaling villages that traditionally hunt the bowhead whale. He and other captains must abide by the quota system set by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in Brighton, England.

Marie Adams said going back into the history and regulation of the bowhead whale hunt since 1977 the federal government was for the first time imposing regulations that involved an international organization. Before 1977 they used the domestic laws for regulation which basically exempted the Eskimos from regulation under the Marine Mammals Section Act and the Endangered Species Act. The Eskimos were left alone until the international body decided that they should stop whaling. The Eskimo community did attempt to cooperate with the International Whaling Commission and the federal government until the Eskimos realized that the United States government and the IWC did not understand their culture. McPherson said the 1977 moratorium prompted the creation of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission as a body that would include the captains of the nine whaling villages. In 1980 some crews in Barrow refused to cooperate with externally imposed strike limits and stayed out on the ice after the quota was reached. Finally the U.S. government and the IWC agreed to permit the Alaska whaling captains to regulate themselves. Now the Eskimo Whaling Commission is involved in negotiations of the harvest of the bowhead whale. Adams said they negotiate quota each year before March 15. The agreement was signed in March of 1981. The agreement took care of some of the issues they faced in 1977. There are still unresolved issues.

Ray Dronenberg said the bowhead whale is an endangered species. The Eskimo were informed in 1976 that there were only 600 bowhead whales left in the world. The hunters knew that was not true and have gone on to prove that there are more. Last year 3857 were counted. [Ray Dronberg is the director of the whale counting station at Barrow] Beginning in 1976 the National Marine Fisheries Service came up to Barrow to count bowhead whales. The Eskimo were kind of put off because they weren’t included in this. People were coming up here that had never seen an iceberg or didn’t know what a lead was or had never seen a bowhead whale and the Eskimo felt they could do it better. If the technology came from this village and not Washington, D.C. it would be shown that there were more whales than someone on Washington, D.C. thought there were. And it came to pass. In 1983 they are working on a number of 3857. McPherson said the higher count has not led to greater cooperation from the regulatory agencies. Dronenberg said he was chastised by a member of the Friends of the Earth

association who claimed that he was biased. Dronenberg said he felt that the hunters were telling the truth and there were more whales out there. They obtained funding from the state and developed a highly scientific atmosphere. They invited the federal government to participate. He said they were going to prove that the bowhead whale was on the upswing and not declining and it is ok for the subsistence harvest to go on. McPherson asked if they are finding there is an increase in the whale population does this help commercial harvest. Dronenberg said the bowhead was decimated to the point of extinction. In 1918 it was estimated that there were less than 1000 whales left in the world and Yankee whalers had killed of the other 17,000 from the herd. It has taken a while for the whale to come back. He is concerned about the impact of oil and gas development on the whale. McPherson asked if the oil companies have been responsive to this. Dronenberg said the oil companies don't even like them to talk about it. He talked about the potential of noise bothering the whales. He said they just didn't know about the impact. They don't know how to tell what bothers the whale. McPherson said safeguarding the whale may conflict with other needs on the North Slope.

Whaling captain James Nageak said there is a conflict in the people who are responsible for the corporations and profit. He said there is always the possibility of a blow-out. The whole ecosystem is going to be affected. Whaling creates conflict in the community.

McPherson said the community was in conflict in 1982. It was the first time in Barrow that no whales were landed during the spring whaling season. There were five strikes and no whales.

Sadie Neakok said it was a hard feeling. When the last strike went through then the whalers had to come in and it wasn't a very happy thing. Someone said they were all divided and that is what caused their losses.

Marie Adams said this past year people have been very sensitive. People were not happy. Something was missing from their lives. There has always been a celebration and not having it takes away some of the joy from life up here. She said they are in a modern community, but whaling is still important. It means a lot to the community. There are a lot of whaling captains who depend on subsistence. And that is the argument presented to the IWC and the U.S. government. Regulations existing under the IWC only apply to commercial whaling. There is no management plan under the IWC for the subsistence take of whales.

McPherson said in July of 1982 the IWC voted to ban all commercial whaling effective in 1986. Opposing the ban were Peru, Brazil, the U.S.S.R., Norway, South Korea, Iceland and Japan. The following day an effort to stop all subsistence whaling failed. During the spring of 1983 bowhead hunt the villages of Wales, Pt. Lay, Savoonga and Gambell each landed a whale and Wainwright and Barrow landed two each. Eight whales landed out of sixteen strikes. It was a successful season and time for celebration and community well-being.