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David Brower discusses subsistence whale hunting

Jeff Kennedy, interviewer

Series: Potlatch series

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Recording of whale songs recorded by Dr. Roger Payne.

Jeff Kennedy said in June at the Inuit Circumpolar Conference it was resolved that the United States defend subsistence hunting by Eskimos in an International Whaling Conference. Conservationists in the lower forty-eight states are worried that Eskimos are killing more whales each year. Some of the whales are lost. Some of the whales are bowhead whales, an endangered species. Worries of conservationists conflict with worries of some Eskimos. The Eskimos worry that if they stop subsistence hunting of whales they will lose their culture and identity. Etok (Charles Edwardsen, Jr.) said it is the issue of the survival of the whale as a species or the survival of the Eskimo as a species.

David Brower said he has been hunting whales since he was fourteen years old. He went out with different whalers. Kennedy asked if whaling has changed over the years. Brower said in some ways whaling has changed very little since he started. They have the same type of equipment as the old whalers. Most of the whales caught here are caught with the same type of equipment that were used in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. There are hardly any new guns used around Barrow. Kennedy asked how long it took to cut a whale. Brower said depending on the size of the whale. A smaller whale may take four or five hours. The larger whale is harder to get up on the ice. They are very heavy. The bigger they are the longer it takes to cut them up on the ice in the spring. In the fall whaling it is not so hard because they can pull the whale right onto the beach. Kennedy asked what they do with the various pieces of the whale and how do they store it. Brower said there is very little waste. Most of the muktuk meat and the bones are put away in ice cellars. It is kept frozen and preserved. Most of the ice cellars are made in permafrost. Three feet down the ground is frozen solid. Kennedy asked if they keep all the whale for his family. Brower said the Eskimo people are noted for sharing what they catch. Any animal caught in the north is shared with different families. Whales taken in the spring are divided amongst the whole village. What is not shared is used during the spring whaling festival. Most of the meat from all the crews is shared with all of the village. Kennedy asked him if he knew about his namesake in the lower forty-eight states. Brower said he has heard of his namesake. He has never had the pleasure of meeting him.

Kennedy said a lot of conservationists have said that all whale hunting should be stopped. David Brower said in the last ten years of whaling in the spring and in the fall he hasn't seen endangerment to the bowhead whale. The bowhead whale is not endangered from what he can see. The whales caught by the Eskimos are not wasted. There may be one that was struck and then not caught. Most of the Eskimos think and know that the whales being caught by them

would not endanger the species. The Eskimos do not want to see the whales endangered and take precautions by regulating their hunting. This spring he has heard that whales have been struck and lost. He said people in the states should realize that the whale hunting is for food. During the winter if you have to buy meat from the stores the price is prohibitive. A thirty-ton whale will supply the village for some time. Kennedy asked if the hunting is as good as it was thirty years ago. Brower said to his knowledge there hasn't been a noticeable decrease in the number of whales passing by in the spring. What they see would indicate that there has been no decrease and very little increase for the past ten years. Last fall there were so many whales going south that each boat encountered so many whales that they had a hard time choosing a small whale. Most of the whales were larger adult whales. Kennedy asked how far they have to go out to catch a whale. Brower said it depends on the season. In the spring they have to go out three to ten miles on the ice depending on the ice conditions. In the fall they go out in open boats about 15 to 30 miles offshore. Most of the whales caught last fall were caught east of Barrow. Kennedy asked how many people are in a hunting party. Brower said an average crew has seven to ten men in a crew. There were over 30 different crews this spring. In the spring they go out in skin-covered canoes. In the fall you don't need so many people in a crew. He talked about the type of boat they use in the fall. In the spring most of the boats are spread up and down the ice and have their own camp. In the fall crews usually go together to help each other tow the whale in. Three to seven boats work together. Kennedy said some people have offered free meat if they stop hunting the whales. Brower said he doubted people would agree to that. He said the meat and blubber of the whale is their type of diet. He doesn't think many people would trade beef or pork for blubber. Blubber is needed in the winter to build up resistance and warmth. The seal oil and whale blubber is rendered and used with other food. That is the Eskimo diet. A lot of people cannot live without their whale blubber or seal oil.

Musical selection: And God created great whales with songs from humpback whales.