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John Oktollik

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

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Series: Potlatch series

Jeff Kennedy said John Oktollik heads the whaling commission in Pt. Hope. He represents that village in the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC). Oktollik is interviewed by Moe Wassillie and talks about how the AEWc was started. Oktollik said the AEWc was formed last fall. There was a calling for all of the captains from all over the coast of Alaska that have whaling. It was the beginning of the AEWc. It was set up because of the total ban of subsistence hunt in the Eskimo whaling nations. At the time the ban the Eskimos were not warned about the plan of a total ban. They found this out at a late time. This was something that the Eskimos can't do without as far as a food source is concerned so that is why they established the AEWc. The quota of twelve takes and eighteen strikes was established by the International Whaling Commission. Their next question for the commission members was how to allocate the village quota. Some of the captains and commission members were called to have a meeting at Barrow. They allocated the best way they knew how. Some of the villages like Gambell and Kivalina got one whale each. Pt. Hope and Wainwright got allocated two whales each. Barrow was allocated three whales. Nuiqsut and Barter Island got one whale each. This was based on the village population.

Moe Wassillie asked Oktollik if the Eskimos participated in the decisions of the International Whaling Commission. Oktollik said there was no participation on their part. In one meeting the commission members adopted twelve whales. There was nothing the whalers could do until the next meeting of the International Whaling Commission. Everyone knew that twelve was a very small number to meet the needs of the villages. They did what they could with the quota.

Song by Buffy Sainte-Marie

Kennedy said Barrow whalers caught one more whale than they were allocated. Barrow whalers argued that two of the whales they caught were not bowheads. As a result of the dispute the AEWc met with an official of the federal government. Oktollik said he attended the meeting with an administrator from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Richard Frank. At the meeting they learned that the position of the enforcers was the two whales were considered the same as the bowheads. Oktollik was concerned about the methods the enforcers used to count whales. He said no input as far as the counting was concerned from the past three years before 1978. The enforcers never asked for support from the villages. It is hurting that as far as the count is concerned if they had asked for help from the whaling crews then the figure would have been higher.

Kennedy said that Oktollik believes that the method for counting used by the International Whaling Commission is inadequate. Oktollik said the count was based on observation and that is limited by weather. Some days there were no observers out observing. There was a limitation of setting up their count in certain positions. He explained that the observers should have set up in front, center and in back of the whaling crews. From past experience at an open lead the camps are set up from three or five miles apart depending on the open lead. Some crews at the front will observe whales coming by and the camps in the middle and the end will not observe any whales. This tells them that some whales come into the middle sections and people up front may not observe these. Some whales may migrate where there is a big body of water directly in the southeast and miss the front and middle sections.

Kennedy said Wassillie asked Oktollik how many whales a year the people of Pt. Hope need. Oktollik said at one of the meetings they were asked to go to the village committee meetings and try to establish the lowest number of needs. Pt. Hope recommended a minimum number of six.

Kennedy said Oktollik explained how Pt. Hope got an extra whale that had been allocated to Kivalina. Oktollik said there were negotiations during the meetings at Barrow in the case that one village does not fill their quota. He was able to get a release established. Kivalina sent them a message that they released their quotas. They also got the extra strike, too.

Apache church song (Folkways records)

Oktollik said that some of the captains said they would just keep on hunting. After the meetings with the enforcers in Barrow he sent a message to the Pt. Hope whalers to stop whaling immediately. When the message from Kivalina came releasing their one quota there was a crew out within an hour. Oktollik said this tells us that the spirit is there but they were trying to go by the regulations. He said all of the whaling stations are commendable for their behavior. They were living up to their quotas. The temptation was there because of the favorable hunting conditions. After the second whale he made a trip down to Anchorage. There were two captains from Pt. Hope going down to Anchorage because they didn't have to be in Pt. Hope for whaling.

Moses Wassillie asked Oktollik what the whaling limits would have on the Pt. Hope food supply. Oktollik said there was a definite impact. They store meat for the fall and the winter. He doesn't think there will be much of an impact on the other game. The Pt. Hope hunters hunt whatever they can store. He didn't see them a difference in the numbers of other game. As far as subsistence hunt they need any kind of meat for their diet. He said you have to change your diet every once in a while. You can't eat one species all the time.

Jeff Kennedy said John Oktollik explains the ancient tradition of sharing the whale catch. Oktollik said this was carried on from their ancestors. It was a very good established way of sharing. When a whale is caught there are nine shares. The head part of the whale is divided among the other crew members not part of the nine shares. There is the captain share which is from the midsection to the rear. The second share is the front portion of the whale which goes to the crew members of the successful captain. The lower part of the captain crew's share is divided by the two other crews that come in first. It is cut in half and divided among the crews. The fourth and fifth share is the tongue which is divided by crew members. The lips are divided and

the midsection about a foot wide is cut in two and divided by the crews. The head is divided and shared. In the mid-50s the city council of the village of Pt. Hope adopted the old way through resolution. Shares were written down on a paper. He was secretary of the Native council at that time. After it was adopted and before the spring hunt the regulations were distributed to all the captains and from then on there were hardly any conflicts on shares. This tells them that Natives on a local level can regulate as far as the whale hunting is concerned. They live by the regulation.

Song by Chet Atkins

Kennedy said the AEWC regulations are more evidence that the Eskimos can regulate their own whaling according to John Oktollik. Oktollik said before the 1978 problem they used to have losses by some of the crew members not using a line attachment. The whale would get away and sink. This regulation is good and should be used from here on end. It is a saving factor. When the attachment is made the float indicates where the whale is located.

Moses Wassillie asked John Oktollik about the future of whaling in Pt. Hope. Oktollik said the enforcers are planning to go all out to get the approximate estimations of the whale populations. This will be with visual counting, the use of sonar systems, boat observations, plane observations, and the winter and spring harborings. He said he knows the counters are making an effort in Barrow. He hopes they come out with a larger number than they had before. He said the estimation had been 1300 and this was used for the recommendations to the International Whaling Commission. He said from what he has learned the present count at Barrow has now exceeded 1300 and the whales are still migrating north and been observed at Pt. Hope. He knows a better population will come from this count.