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“SUBSISTENCE AND THE CO-MANAGEMENT OF MARINE RESOURCES”

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To Alaska Natives, SUBSISTENCE is the most important issue after SELF-DETERMINATION. Subsistence is more than just the gathering or harvesting of food. Subsistence is not sport. Subsistence is what provides for our cultural, spiritual and nutritional health. It is the sustenance of our cultures. It gives you a perspective that you are part and parcel of the ecosystem, that you are participating in the events of nature.

Last spring, before Easter, my cousin’s six year old grandson came to Nome from Gambell for the first time. The city of Nome puts on an Easter egg hunt at the town square. When my cousin told her grandson that he was going on an Easter egg hunt he got really excited, thinking he was going to collect muire and seagull eggs. When his cousin told him about the Easter bunny, he got even more excited. He told his grandpa that he needed a gun, since he was also going to shoot rabbits. As you can tell, Gambell does not have Easter egg hunts. Sometimes it is strange to try to fit dominant culture events into a subsistence framework.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA) recognizes Alaska Native’s dependence on marine mammals for subsistence purposes. Section 101(b) grants Alaska Natives an exemption from the prohibition on taking marine mammals for subsistence purposes. Section 101(b) allows for unregulated harvest as long as the species is not depleted or endangered. It is the only legislation that protects our subsistence needs.

The 1994 reauthorization of MMPA added Section 119 which allows the Secretaries of Commerce and Interior to enter into “Cooperative Agreements” with Alaska Native Organizations for the purposes of managing the subsistence harvest of marine mammals. Polar bear, sea otter and pacific walrus are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is in the Department of Interior. National Marine Fisheries Service of the Department of Commerce manages all other marine mammal species.

Co-management started in Alaska in 1977 when NOAA signed a co-management agreement with the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC). The 1970 Endangered Species Act had classified the bowhead whale as endangered with as few as 700 animals. The classification meant the subsistence harvest had to be regulated. The whaling captains, who formed the AEWC claimed that there were more than 10 times that number. They stated that most of the whales, which were only counted in open leads and poleneyas , were being missed and were passing under the ice. NOAA listened and agreed to consider the traditional knowledge held by the whaling captains and launched a program to get a better count. In 1998 the bowhead population was estimated to be 8,200 animals.

The agreement between the AEWG and NOAA has been a tremendous success because:

- The whaling captains were willing to share their knowledge.
- NOAA was willing to consider this traditional knowledge.
- The whaling captains were willing to accept quotas and had the resolve to strictly enforce these quotas on themselves.
- NOAA was willing to allow AEWG to participate and manage the subsistence harvest.

Following the lead of the AEWG other Alaska Native marine mammal commissions were formed. In 1978 the Eskimo Walrus Commission was organized. In 1994 the Alaska Nanuuq Commission was formed to participate in the negotiation of a polar bear treaty between the U. S. and Russia. There are now Alaska Native Marine Mammal Commissions for most species of marine mammals that are used for subsistence.

The treaty between the US and Russia is unique in that it allows representative of Alaska Natives and the Natives of Chukotka to sit with their respective federal government agencies on a Joint Commission which will set harvest limits on the shared polar bear population in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. The Alaska Nanuuq Commission is also developing a Native to Native Agreement with the Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunters of Chukotka to manage the subsistence harvest of polar bear and to assign quotas.

In 1994 the Alaska Native Marine Mammal Commissions formed the Indigenous Peoples Council on Marine Mammals (IPCoMM) to advocate for co-management in the reauthorization of MMPA. As a result the afore mentioned Section 119 was added. IPCoMM is now advocating a new Section 119A which will allow Alaska Native Tribes to place marine mammal hunting restrictions on their own members and on other Alaska Native hunting in their waters and lands before that population is classified under the Endangered Species Act. This “management before depletion” will prevent situations like the Cook Inlet beluga problem where tribes were unable to stop over-hunting. IPCoMM is also asking that federal agencies be allowed to enforce tribal regulations which are intended to manage the subsistence hunts when requested.

Co-management has proven to be very beneficial, not only for the species, but also to the management agencies because it:

- Spreads the responsibility for the conservation of a species to the users.
- Allows for better harvest monitoring by including the users.
- Makes traditional knowledge available to the management agencies
- Provides better distribution and support for regulations.

In short Co-management is a win-win situation for all involved.