

TESTIMONY
of
HARRY BROWER
MAYOR, NORTH SLOPE BOROUGH OF ALASKA
before the
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
Russell Senate Office Building, Room 253
October 31, 2017
2:30 pm

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2017 marks 40 years since the International Whaling Commission (IWC) imposed a moratorium on our bowhead whale subsistence harvest, based on faulty scientific research. Since then, the AEWC and North Slope Borough have proven the health of our bowhead whale stock, proven that our communities need the bowhead whale for nutritional and cultural survival, and have modernized our hand-held whaling equipment.

The AEWC now is a leader among subsistence hunting groups at the IWC. Our scientists are leaders at the IWC Scientific Committee and in the development, testing, and application of the computer algorithm used to determine sustainability in ours and other subsistence harvests.

We are committed to working with the IWC and we are not here to ask for relief from our IWC responsibilities. We ask only to clarify the language of the Whaling Convention Act, to ensure that we can feed our families legally until the U.S. and the AEWC can convince the IWC members to reinstate our subsistence quota, should the IWC fail to act on a quota request.

Setting our subsistence quota requires a 75 percent majority of IWC members. The IWC Convention requires quotas to be based on scientific proof of sustainability, yet quota decisions at the IWC are driven by politics, not science. IWC members are fragmented into political blocs, some comprising countries that strongly oppose any whaling, even for subsistence. In the past, our subsistence quota has been taken hostage in efforts to influence the U.S. on other issues.

This spring one of our young hunters took his first whale. He was brutally attacked on Facebook, including threats on his life, by anti-whaling groups who have influence at the IWC.

In 2002, without justification, the IWC ended its meeting with no decision on our bowhead quota. The U.S. had to organize an intersessional meeting to have our quota reinstated before our 2003 harvests. In 2012, the IWC allowed Greenland's subsistence quotas to expire; new quotas weren't set until 2014. Greenland hunters were branded as international outlaws for continuing to feed their families. We fear that this could happen to us.

The 2018 IWC meeting is in September. If the IWC fails to set our quota, the U.S. will have only 3½ months before our southern villages must begin hunting.

TESTIMONY

Good afternoon, my name is Harry Brower. I was born and have lived all my life in Barrow, Alaska. I am the Mayor of Alaska's North Slope Borough and a former Chairman of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC).

I am a husband, father, whaling captain, and belong to a family with a long history of feeding the people of my community through our whaling practices. My grandfather, Charles Brower, was a Yankee whaler. My other ancestors go back to ancient times in the Arctic and ancient subsistence whalers. I have trained sons, grandsons, and nephews in our subsistence practices, and they will train the next generations.

Among our people, whaling captains are responsible for feeding the people of our community from the subsistence harvest of the bowhead whale. With this honor and responsibility also comes the responsibility for leadership within the community and the preservation of the health of our bowhead whale population.

We never harvest more animals, of any kind, than we need. We rely on traditional knowledge, our own observations, and on modern research methods to help us ensure that our subsistence harvests remain sustainable. For our bowhead whale harvest, we work very closely with our North Slope Borough scientists and rely on the state-of-the art analytical tools that they have helped to develop and that are now used by the IWC.

The North Slope Borough is home to almost 10,000 people and about 70 percent of us are Alaska Native *Inupiat*, who have called northern Alaska home for thousands of years. We have harvested the bowhead whale for as long as we have lived in the north. The seat of North Slope Borough government is *Utqiaġvik*, or Barrow. When I look south from my office, I see miles of tundra, rivers, lakes, lagoons, and marsh. Looking north, I am separated from the North Pole by nothing but miles of ocean and sea ice. It is true that our temperatures are warming, but our environment is no less harsh.

Aside from tundra, very little vegetation grows in the Arctic. To feed our families, we must hunt year-round. We harvest some terrestrial animals and birds. But the ocean is our garden. Our most important harvest times are the spring and fall, when our greatest resource, the bowhead whale, migrates past our villages. From a successful harvest, we feed our entire community and share with our families and neighbors throughout our region. The whale is central to our diet and culture, both within the North Slope Borough and in our neighboring communities.

Sharing is also central to our culture. It is what has enabled our people to survive the extreme conditions of the Arctic for these many centuries. Those who have, share with those who do not. We trade resources among families, villages, and regions. We are self-sufficient and resilient people. We take care of each other, and we take care of our resources. We also are patriots who respect our government and the rule of law. Many of our young men and women serve in the military.

When we were told of the IWC moratorium in 1977, I was still a boy, but I remember that time well. Because of the IWC ban, we were prohibited from taking the whales that we needed to feed our families. There simply wasn't enough to eat. There was terrible fear about what would happen to us. We couldn't understand how people from foreign countries, who had never been to the Arctic, could be allowed to take our food from us.

Today, the AEW and North Slope Borough are leaders in research and cooperative management at the IWC. But in 1977, the researchers who came to look for the whales didn't know the whales' behavior and reported that they could find only 600 – 2000 whales. As hunters, we spend our lives observing the ecosystem and the animals in it. Our whaling captains knew that there were 6,000 – 8,000 whales and that the population was growing rapidly.

The North Slope Borough hired our own scientists. My father, Harry Brower Sr., was a senior whaling captain at that time taught the scientists how to count the whales, by looking for them above and listening for them below the spring ice. Once they learned to do this, the scientists started to realize that our whaling captains' estimates of the population size were right and that they were correct in reporting that there were large numbers of calves being born each year. There still are.

That was the beginning of our bowhead whale research program. We have our elder whaling captains and the North Slope Borough to thank for making this program possible.

Today the North Slope Borough's Department of Wildlife Management runs an internationally acclaimed research program, monitoring our wildlife throughout the Arctic. Our scientists lead the United States' bowhead whale research effort, and work closely with scientists from NOAA to present research results at the annual meetings of the IWC Scientific Committee.

As Mayor of the North Slope Borough, I am proud of our modern science facilities and research and analysis capabilities; researchers from universities and other facilities around the world travel to Barrow to work with our scientists and our hunters, and to conduct other arctic research. My father worked with the scientists throughout his life, helping them learn how to observe wildlife in the Arctic. I began working in the Department as a young man and grew up there, serving as Deputy Director before being elected North Slope Borough Mayor.

I also have attended IWC meetings for more than 20 years. I watched our North Slope Borough scientists grow into leadership at the Scientific Committee. As you heard from Mr. Hopson's testimony, one of our North Slope Borough scientists has already served as the Chair of the IWC's Scientific Committee. Dr. Suydam is now the Vice Chair of that Committee and will become the Chair next May. This is a great honor for all of us. It is a testament to the quality of the people who work with us. Even more, it is a testament to the dedication the AEW and the North Slope Borough have to delivering sound research that promotes international understanding of our bowhead whale.

I also have had the honor of participating in the AEWC's rise in leadership at the IWC. Working with our U.S. Delegation, the AEWC helped to found the Aboriginal Subsistence Hunters' Caucus at the IWC, and chairs its meetings. We supported the U.S. in its efforts to form a caucus of the Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Countries – United States, Russia, Denmark/Greenland, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines – and actively participate in those meetings. We supported the formation of and actively participate in the IWC's Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Working Group, chaired by Dr. Mike Tillman, of the U.S.

The AEWC continues to work tirelessly to improve understanding of Aboriginal subsistence whaling at the IWC, always pushing the IWC toward science and away from politics in its decision processes. Our current IWC project, in addition to the renewal of our bowhead whale subsistence quota, is working with the U.S. Delegation to encourage the IWC to establish a Joint Committee, of the Commission and the Scientific Committee, to oversee and advise on Aboriginal Subsistence issues. Such a committee already exists to oversee and advise on conservation issues, including habitat conservation.

We believe that a joint Aboriginal subsistence oversight committee, including scientists and hunters, will provide an important opportunity to further facilitate the application of modern research and management technologies within the context of local observations and subsistence uses. All of this is aimed at continuing to improve our understanding of our bowhead whales and to ensure that our harvest remains sustainable for our future generations, even as the Arctic changes. We are excited by this idea and look forward to working with the U.S. and others on it at future meetings of the IWC.

Throughout our northern Alaskan communities, and especially among our whaling captains, we realize how fortunate we are to have the resources of the North Slope Borough to provide scientists and the means necessary to make this research possible. The North Slope Borough also is the largest financial backer of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission.

We also are fortunate to have the wonderful working relationship that the AEWC and North Slope Borough have with NOAA, and we are very grateful for the annual grants the AEWC receives from NOAA to help support our research and the AEWC's management work. The AEWC works closely with the North Slope Borough and with NOAA to keep our research and management efforts well-coordinated.

In addition to demonstrating that our harvest is sustainable, the IWC insists that we must prove that we "need" the whale. The AEWC and North Slope Borough have worked with Stephen Braund, a very highly respected anthropologist in Alaska, for more than 30 years, helping him document and regularly update his report on our need for the bowhead whale.

Our resources, and especially the whale, also provide our identity. Throughout our communities, everyone participates together in the bowhead whale subsistence harvest. They either participate directly by working on a crew, or they participate indirectly by providing food,

clothing, or cash for equipment and supplies to support a crew. And everyone receives the gift of the whale.

This is what the whale is to us, a gift from the maker of all things and it must be treated with the greatest respect. When a whale gives itself to a crew, before securing it for towing, the captain offers a prayer of thanks for the whale. This prayer goes out on the VHF radio; everyone who is on the water or in town stops what they are doing to give thanks for the whale.

When a whale is landed, residents throughout the community and even people from other villages come to help with dividing the whale. This is done very quickly and all shares are taken home to be stored immediately. The whaling captain and his wife take the largest share because we are responsible for feeding everyone in the community shortly after the hunt. The elders are fed first and anyone who happens to be in town is welcome to receive a meal at the whaling captain's house. It doesn't matter how long we have been out on the ice or the water hunting, we don't stop to sleep or even rest until everyone is fed and the whale that remains has been put away.

This is a joyful time and no one complains or can feel annoyed or angry. Whatever disagreements we might have with each other, whaling brings us together and makes us one.

Following a successful spring harvest, each whaling captain also hosts a *Nalukataq*, a community feast where we celebrate the harvest by sharing the whale with the community and all our out-of-town guests who come to join in the celebration. Children and the young join in, helping to distribute the food, and they are taught always to feed their elders first. We value the knowledge and wisdom of our elders who have been in this world longer than those of us who are younger, and we teach our children this respect from a very young age. For the *Nalukataq*, the captain takes the seal skins that covered his *umiaq* so that they can be used like a trampoline in our blanket toss. This is a very big celebration and a time of great joy in our villages.

As whaling captains, we also hold feasts at Thanksgiving and Christmas and continue to share our portion of the whale throughout the year. We are honored to be able to do this for our community.

Finally, it requires great skill to safely take a whale. As John indicated, we hunt from 6 to 8 man vessels, either *umiaqs* or motorized skiffs, and use hand-held weapons. The whales we bring in can be 40 to 50 feet in length, and the ocean is unforgiving. While we are hunting, or towing a whale, seas can change quickly, ice can move, and wind and weather can deteriorate very rapidly.

The whaling captain's greatest responsibility is the safety of his crew. Our goal, always, is to stay as close to shore as possible and to take the whale as quickly as we can.

Through our work at the IWC, we met and now work with an internationally recognized Norwegian expert in the humane killing of large animals. With Dr. Egil Oen's help, in the 1980s, we began developing a projectile that fits our hand-held darting gun and is armed with a high-powered explosive capable of killing a 50-foot whale instantaneously. During the research and development phase of this new weapon, our Barrow whaling captains volunteered for the field trials needed to refine and finalize the design. Today, this new projectile is used throughout our villages to improve the efficiency of our harvest and to allow us to take the whale in the shortest possible time.

I serve as the Chair of the AEW's Weapons Improvement Committee. In addition to the improvement in our hand-held weapons, our Weapons Improvement Committee conducts regular training sessions so that we regularly improve the skills of our hunters. The more efficient and effective our hunters are, the safer we all can be when we are on the water.

As whaling captains and leaders in our community, we take great pride in our accomplishments at the IWC. That work and our consultations with the IWC Scientific Committee and with our Norwegian colleague are now integral to our local harvest management practices. We anticipate these types of collaborations, through the IWC, continuing for generations to come.

It is very sad to us that there are individuals and organizations so focused on their own political agendas that they would thoughtlessly take away our food, the foundation of our culture, and the legal right to our subsistence harvest, to pursue their own ends.

As unfortunate as this is, we know that it is a reality we must face. That is why we are here today. As long as the whales are healthy, our bowhead whale subsistence harvest is not optional for us. Like everyone, we must eat. We must feed our children, our elders, and our communities.

If politics causes the IWC to end a meeting without renewing our subsistence quota, like Greenland we may be forced to hunt without IWC sanction. Our harvest level will be limited by IWC Scientific Committee recommendations and we will continue working with the U.S. and the IWC until the IWC resets the quota.

We ask only that our hunters not be forced into a situation where they could be subjected to threats or accusations that they are outlaws for feeding their families. For this, we need your help. We hope you will support our proposed amendments to the Whaling Convention Act.

Thank you for hearing us today, and I am happy to try to answer any questions you might have about my testimony, our work at the IWC, or our bowhead whale subsistence harvest.

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