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Aboriginal subsistence whaling in the
Russian Federation during 2018

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INTERNATIONAL
WHALING COMMISSION

ABORIGINAL SUBSISTENCE WHALING IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION DURING 2018

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In 2013-2018 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) allocated a block-quota for the traditional aboriginal whaling, exclusively to meet traditional needs and ensure food security of the indigenous people of Chukotka. A total of 720 Gray and 30 Greenland whales supposed to be taken in Russian waters in a 6-year period with a limit of 135 gray and 7 bowhead whales' strikes annually.

The Administration of Chukotka Autonomous Region distributed the Russian part of blocked quota among local whaling communities. In 2018 fourteen local communities were involved in whaling. Subsistence harvest was supervised by the Chukotka Special Marine Inspection, the Chukotka Office of Rosprirodnadzor, the Chukotka Department of Industrial and Agricultural Policy and the Association of Indigenous People of Chukotka (AIPC).

During the 2018 hunting season 106 gray whales were harvested. The majority of whales (42%) were taken by the indigenous hunters of the Lorino village. All gray whales (58 males and 48 females) were landed, only one gray whale was lost with harpoons due to the outbreak in a storm. One "stinky" gray whale was also harvested, but due to the large shortage of meat and the "cut down" of quota it was used for food and other needs.

Not a single bowhead whale was harpooned and landed from the allocated and distributed from 5 individuals' quota.

Harpoons, darting guns and rifles (mostly 7.62 mm caliber) were used during hunt. About 1/3 of whales demonstrated aggressive behavior. Mean numbers of harpoons and darting guns spent for each whale hunt were the same as in 2016-2017 seasons: 9 harpoons, 2 darting guns and 63 bullets. TTD varied between 10 to 70 min with a median value of 31 min (in 2016-2017 about 20 min). The furthest whale towing distance to coast was 32 km, and the closest was 0.5 km.

Ice coverage of Chukchi Sea and adjacent waters in summer 2018 stayed within average multiannual level. The minimal amount of ice was observed in August, ice density varied between 4 to 6% with vast areas of ice density lower than 1% or free of ice. Intensive freezing in pelagic areas of Chukchi Sea started in mid-October, final ice coverage started to establish in middle December.

Mean body length of harvested in Chukotka gray whales was 9.7 m with mean body weight 10.3 tons (in 2017 - 9.4 m and 9.3 tons). The largest whale (female 14.1 m and 29.7 tons) had been taken in Neshkan vilage. The smallest length (7.0 m and 5.2 tons) had female, taken near Novoye Chaplino village and it was not accompanied by large whale and there were no signs of milk in its stomach. None of taken females was lactating; 12 of landed whales had various injuries and traumas mainly caused by killer whale attacks. Mean blubber thickness was 115 mm in gray whales. In general the parameters of sightings of gray whales in Chukotka waters, as well as the body index and the stomach fullness of harvested gray whales were within average levels.

All whaling products were registered in appropriate logbooks and used for local subsistence purposes only.

Scientific supervision of aboriginal whaling had been performed by ChukotNIO from Anadyr and Chukotka Governor Office scientists. All aboriginal whaling data were presented to AIPC and Chukotka Department of Industrial and Agricultural policy.

Summarizing results of 2018 whaling season, a total biomass of 1093 tons had been acquired. Therefore, about 546 tons of whale products were available for consumption for Chukotka Natives, while total demand is estimated at about 1400 tons of marine mammal products at least. Average outcome from walrus and seals hunt gives about 600-800 tons. The population of coastal settlements tends to increase constantly.

Average rate of traditional products includes up to 50% of whale meat and blubber and is overall 60-80% while “western” food takes only 20-40% in diet. Besides, not only coastal communities consume whale products, but 5-40% of meat and blubber exchanged to reindeer meat and other inland traditional food with reindeer herders. Sledge, hunting and cargo dogs are also fed with whale remains, which in average take more than 10% of total whaling production.

A total of 716 gray whales have been landed in 2013-2018, three of them were “stinky”. The take of the remaining quota of 106 whales in 2018 showed an extremely high need in whale products, especially during very hungry winter and a difficult spring for the survival of the indigenous people of Chukotka and meeting traditional needs and ensuring their food security. The SLA trials performed in 2017 confirmed that a take up to 140 whales per year by Chukotka whalers will not harm the population. These calculations made it possible to justify an increase in the gray whale block-quota to 140 individuals from the population per year. Accordingly, the quota was approved for the period 2019-2025 by the Commission last autumn in Brazil, the annual extraction of 135 gray whales with a 50% unused quota transfer will allow the indigenous people of Chukotka not to feel the extreme need to provide themselves and their relatives with whaling products for subsistence needs and to preserve their and our heritage.