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ABORIGINAL SUBSISTENCE WHALING IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION DURING 2020

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In 2019-2025 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) allocated a block-quota for the aboriginal subsistence whaling, exclusively to meet traditional needs and ensure food security of the indigenous people of Chukotka. A total of 945 Gray and 49 Greenland whales supposed to be taken in Russian waters in a 7-year period with a limit of 135 gray and 7 bowhead whales' strikes annually.

The Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka (AIPC) distributed the Russian part of blocked quota among local whaling communities. In 2020 sixteen local communities were involved in whaling. Subsistence harvest was supervised by the Chukotka Special Marine Inspection, the Chukotka Office of Rosprirodnadzor, the Chukotka Agricultural and Food Supply Department and the AIPC.

During the 2020 hunting season 133 gray whales were harvested. The majority of whales (36%) were taken by the indigenous hunters of the Lorino village. All gray whales (69 males and 64 females) were landed, only three gray whales were lost with harpoons due to the outbreaks in a storm. Two “stinky” gray whales were also harvested; their meat, mantak, intestines and carcasses were annihilated.

No strikes for bowhead whales were used and no bowhead whales were harvested.

Harpoons, darting guns and rifles (mostly 7.62 mm caliber) were used during hunt. About 1/4 of whales demonstrated aggressive behavior. Mean numbers of harpoons and darting guns spent for each whale hunt were almost the same as in 2016-2019 seasons: 9 harpoons, 1 darting gun and 72 bullets. The number of darting guns decreased from 3 to 1 due to lack of projectiles and spare parts for them, the number of bullets increased in 13% because of more thorough weather conditions and stormy days in 2020. TTD varied between 10 to 80 min with a median value of 46 min (in 2016-2019 about 26 min), which increased due to severe weather conditions in 2020 whaling season and also due to 30% increasing of whales' mean size in the harvest. The furthest whale towing distance to coast was 38 km, and the closest was 2 km.

Ice coverage of Chukchi Sea and adjacent waters in summer 2020 stayed within average multiannual level. The minimal amount of ice was observed in August, ice density varied within 2~40% with vast areas of ice density lower than 1% or ice-free.

Intensive freezing in pelagic areas of Chukchi Sea started in late-October, final ice coverage started to establish in middle December.

Mean body length of harvested in Chukotka gray whales was 10.4 m with mean body weight 13.1 tons (in 2019 – 10.0 m and 10.3 tons). The largest whale (female 14.7 m and 33.9 tons) had been taken in Enurmino village. The smallest length (7.5 m and 5.6 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; three females had fetus; 16 of landed whales had various injuries and traumas mainly caused by killer whale attacks. Mean blubber thickness was 167 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 the Chukotka Agricultural and Food Supply Department and the AIPC.

Summarizing results of 2020 whaling season, a total biomass of 1715 tons had been acquired. Therefore, about 856 tons of Gray whales' products were available for consumption to 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, so 2020 outcome was very close to cover the demand, especially knowing that the Native population of coastal villages is constantly increasing.

In Chukotka an 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.

The existing ASW quota for the period 2019-2025 with the annual extraction of 135 Gray and 7 Bowhead whales is very close to estimated volume or “ideal” support level, which will allow the indigenous people of Chukotka not to feel the extreme need to provide themselves and their relatives with traditional food and for other subsistence and cultural needs preserving their and our heritage.