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ABORIGINAL SUBSISTENCE WHALING IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION DURING 2021

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In 2019-2025 the International Whaling Commission 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 Bowhead 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.

Subsistence harvest was supervised by the Anadyr Borderguards Division of Federal Security Service in Eastern-Arctic Region, the permits to hunt was controlled by the North-Eastern Office of Rosprirodnadzor (Magadan). The Chukotka Department of Agricultural and Food Supply together with the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka distributed the Russian part of blocked quota among local whaling communities. The Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka was collecting and sending all whaling data in monthly reports to the North-Eastern Office of Rosprirodnadzor (Magadan). Scientific supervision of aboriginal whaling had been performed by ANO Chukotka Arctic Scientific Center and Chukotka Scientific Fisheries Institute from Anadyr.

In 2021 seventeen local communities were involved in whaling. During the 2021 season 127 tries (strikes) for gray whales were used and 126 whales were landed. The majority of whales (39%) were taken by the indigenous hunters of the Lorino village. All gray whales (66 males and 60 females) were landed, only one gray whale was lost with harpoons due to the outbreaks in a storm. Four “stinky” gray whales were also harvested; their meat, mantak, intestines and carcasses were annihilated.

No tries (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 29% of whales demonstrated aggressive behavior. Mean numbers of harpoons and darting guns spent for each whale hunt were almost the same as in 2016-2020 seasons: 10 harpoons, 1 darting gun and 70 bullets. “Time to death” varied between 10 to 60 min with a median value of 30 min (in 2016-2020 about 36 min). The furthest whale towing distance to coast was 30 km, and the closest was 0.5 km.

In present the Chukotka Department of Agricultural and Food Supply together with ANO Chukotka Arctic Scientific Center continues the whaling “humanization” process working on the issue of production and support for Chukotka whalers by alternate to “darting-gun” supply, which will help to decrease “time to death”.

Ice coverage of Chukchi Sea and adjacent waters in summer 2021 stayed within average multiannual level. The minimal amount of ice was observed in August, ice density varied within 2~44% with vast areas of ice density lower than 1% or ice-free. Intensive freezing in pelagic areas of Chukchi Sea started from mid-November, 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 13.4 tons (in 2020 – 10.4 m and 13.1 tons). The largest whale (female 14.9 m and 35.3 tons) had been taken in Neshkan village. The smallest length (7.96 m and 5.9 tons) had female, taken near Lorino village and it was not accompanied by large whale and there were no signs of milk in its stomach. Neither of taken females was lactating or having fetus; 13 of landed whales had various injuries and traumas mainly caused by killer whale attacks. Mean blubber thickness was 109 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.

Summarizing results of 2021 whaling season, a total biomass of 1612 tons had been acquired. Therefore, about 805 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 2021 outcome covered (100-115%) the demand.

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 aboriginal subsistence whaling quota for the period 2019-2025 with the annual extraction of 135 Gray and 7 Bowhead whales fully allow to support the inhabitants of Chukotka in providing a protein-lipid diet and other subsistence and cultural traditions.