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ABORIGINAL SUBSISTENCE WHALING IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION DURING 2022

Lev K. Sidorov, Dennis I. Litovka, Egor V. Vereshagin



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Lev K. Sidorov¹, Dennis I. Litovka², Egor V. Vereshagin^{3,4}

¹ – Russian Federal Research Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography (VNIRO), Moscow, RUSSIA

² – ANO Chukotka Arctic Scientific Center, Str. Rul'tytegina 17, Anadyr, RUSSIA

³ – Chukotka Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Str. Otke 26, Anadyr, RUSSIA

⁴ – Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka, Str. Mira 9, Anadyr, RUSSIA

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.

The Borderguards Division of Federal Security Service in Eastern-Arctic Region (Anadyr) supervised subsistence harvest; the North-Eastern Office of Rosprirodnadzor (Magadan) controlled the permits to hunt. 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). ANO Chukotka Arctic Scientific Center and Chukotka Scientific Fisheries Institute (Anadyr) had performed scientific supervision of aboriginal whaling.

In 2022, sixteen local communities were involved in whaling. During the 2022 season, 124 tries (strikes) for gray whales were used; only five gray whales were struck and lost with harpoons due to the outbreaks in a storm and 119 whales were landed. Totally 57 males and 66 females identified. Two “stinky” gray whales also harvested; their meat, mantak, intestines and carcasses annihilated. The indigenous hunters of the Lorino village took the majority of whales (40%).

No tries (strikes) for bowhead whales were used and no bowhead whales were harvested.

During hunt harpoons, darting guns and rifles (mostly 7.62 mm caliber) mostly used. 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 2016-2021 seasons: 10 harpoons, 1 darting gun and 70 bullets. “Time to death” varied between 10 to 90 min with a median value of 38 min (in 2016-2021 about 36 min). The furthest whale towing distance to coast was 50 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 2022 stayed within average multiannual level. The minimal amount of ice was observed in August, ice density varied within 2~46% 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 10.6 m with mean body weight 13.6 tons (in 2021 – 10.4 m and 13.4 tons). The largest whale (female 14.5 m and 32.4 tons) harvested in Inchoun village. The smallest length (7.2 m and 5.4 tons) had female, taken near Neshkan village, large whale did not accompany it, and there were no signs of milk in its stomach. Neither of taken females was lactating or having fetus; about 20 of landed whales had various injuries and traumas mainly caused by killer whale attacks. Mean thickness was 127 mm in gray whales’ blubber. 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 used for local subsistence purposes only.

Summarizing results of 2022 whaling season, a total biomass of 1686 tons acquired. Therefore, about 842 tons of Gray whales’ products were available for consumption to Chukotka Natives, while they have a total demand estimated at about 1400 tons of marine mammal products at least. Average outcome from walrus and seals hunt gives about 600-800 tons, so 2022 outcome covered (100-117%) 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.