

## *Overview of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission*

(The following information was provided by the AEWC)

The Inupiat and Siberian Yupik Eskimos living in the coastal villages in northern and western Alaska have been hunting the bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*) for thousands of years. As the [International Whaling Commission \(IWC\)](#) itself has acknowledged, “whaling, more than any other activity, fundamentally underlies the total lifeway of these communities.” The entire community participated in the activities surrounding the subsistence bowhead whale hunt, ensuring that the traditions and skills of the past associated with their culture will be carried on by future generations. Each whale provides thousands of pounds of meat and “muktuk” (blubber and skin), which is shared by all the people in the community. Portions of each whale are saved for celebrations at Nalukataq (the blanket toss or whaling feast), Thanksgiving, Christmas, and potlucks held throughout the year.

The IWC was established by the [International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling of 1946](#). For many years, the IWC focused only on the regulation of commercial whaling activities. During this time, there was no commercial exploitation of the bowhead whale, because the Yankee and British whaling operations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had substantially reduced the size of the stock. However, in the early 1970's, as opposition to commercial whaling operations started to grow, some countries raised concerns about the status of the Bering Sea stock of bowhead whales and the Eskimos' subsistence harvest of this stock. The Eskimos were not made aware of this by United States Government scientists who estimated that the population of the Bering Sea stock of bowhead whales was between 600 and 1,800 animals and who suggested that the Eskimos had harvested more bowhead whales than in any other previous year. For the first time, the IWC extended its regulation to an aboriginal whaling activity and voted to ban the Alaskan Eskimos subsistence harvest of bowhead whales. The Eskimos learned of this action after the fact. Had they been asked, the Eskimos would have informed the IWC that there were at least 4,000 bowhead whales in the population. Since 1977, representatives of the AEWC have attended every annual meeting of the IWC and every year scientific research on the bowhead whale conducted through the efforts of the AEWC, the [North Slope Borough](#) and [NOAA](#) is provided to the IWC Scientific Committee. The information gathered and the positions agreed upon form the basis of the presentations made to the IWC at its annual meeting.

In August 1977, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) was formed to represent the whaling communities in an effort to convince the United States Government to take action to preserve the Eskimos subsistence hunt of bowhead whales. The United States Government did not object to the ban but did agree to raise the issue at a special meeting of the IWC that was held in December 1977. At the meeting, the United States Government promised to undertake a major research effort to provide a better estimate of both the size of the stock and how many animals were added to the stock each year, known as the “gross annual recruitment rate.” The United States scientific research efforts developed a management plan to be followed by all the whalers to help improve the efficiency of the subsistence hunt. The AEWC also decided to undertake efforts to educate the outside world about the importance of the bowhead whale to their way of life. The complete [Bylaws of the AEWC](#) are available in PDF format.

The AEWC exists today as a tax-exempt non-profit corporation whose purpose is to:

- preserve and enhance a vital marine resource, the bowhead whale, including the protection of its habitat

- to protect Eskimo subsistence bowhead whaling
- to protect and enhance the Eskimo culture, traditions, and activities associated with bowhead whales and subsistence bowhead whaling
- to undertake research and educational activities related to bowhead whales

The commission carries out those purposes outlined above through the establishment of the following goals:

- ensure that the hunt of the bowhead whale is conducted according to the [AEWC Management Plan](#) in a traditional, non-wasteful manner; the [AEWC Management Plan](#) is available in PDF format
- promote extensive scientific research on the bowhead whale so as to ensure the continued health of the bowhead stock
- communicate to the outside world the facts pertaining to the subsistence bowhead whale hunt, the manner in which it is conducted, the Eskimo's knowledge of the bowhead whale, and the centrality of the hunt to the cultural and nutritional needs of the Eskimo

The members of the AEWC are the registered whaling captains and their crew members of the ten whaling communities: [Gambell](#), [Savoonga](#), [Wales](#), [Little Diomed](#), [Kivalina](#), [Point Hope](#), [Wainwright](#), [Barrow](#), [Nuiqsut](#), and [Kaktovik](#). There are two classes of members: voting members and non-voting members. Voting members are the registered whaling captains in each community and a nonvoting member is a member of a whaling crew. The AEWC is directed by a board of ten [Commissioners](#), one from each whaling village. This Board has complete authority over all of the Commission's affairs. The board elects four officers: a Chairman, a Vice-Chairman, a Secretary and a Treasurer. Staff is hired to oversee the AEWC's administrative and day-to-day activities.

The AEWC's authority to regulate subsistence bowhead whaling comes from the power of its members, and the AEWC exercises those powers over the Eskimos harvest of the bowhead whale hunt. That power is exercised by the ten AEWC Commissioners who are elected by the whaling captains association in each village. It is important to understand where the power and authority comes from. The state of Alaska has no authority to regulate Eskimo subsistence bowhead whaling. This regulatory authority is vested in the federal government under the [Whaling Act of 1949](#), the [Marine Mammal Protection Act \(MMPA\)](#), and [Endangered Species Act \(ESA\)](#). Federal authority for local management of the Eskimo subsistence bowhead whale hunt and for enforcement of regulations imposed on that hunt is substantially delegated to the AEWC through a cooperative agreement with the United States Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The purpose of the NOAA-AEWC Cooperative Agreement is to protect the bowhead whale and Eskimo culture, to promote scientific research of the bowhead whale, and to effectuate the other purposes of the MMPA, the Whaling Convention Act, and the ESA, as these acts relate to aboriginal subsistence whaling. In order to achieve these purposes, the agreement provides for:

- (a) cooperation between members of the AEWC and NOAA in management of the subsistence bowhead whale hunt, and

**(b) an exclusive enforcement mechanism carried out by the AEWc and applied to any violation of the subsistence whaling provisions of the MMPA, the ESA, the Whaling Convention Act, or their regulations by whaling captains (or their crews) who are registered members of the AEWc.**

The members of the AEWc are afforded a public forum to speak on issues that affect them and to set quotas at the Whaling Captains Convention held in mid-winter since 1978. At this meeting, all of the 150 whaling captains are given the opportunity to speak on priority issues affecting their subsistence whaling. Invited participants include the United States Commissioner to the IWC, NOAA personnel, AEWc Commissioners, staff, and legal counsel, the mayor of the North Slope Borough, the staff of the [NSB Department of Wildlife Management](#) and cooperating scientists. Now, every three years, a bowhead whale quota for our aboriginal subsistence whaling is set. The whaling captains, at the convention, set a quota for each whaling community, and based on subsistence need. Select [AEWC commissioners](#) to view a list of the current AEWc commissioners. For more information on the AEWc, please [click here](#) to see the section of the site that was written by Maggie Ahmaogak, AEWc Executive Director.

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