

Warming climate leaves Alaskans with fewer walrus to hunt

August 6 2015, by Rachel D'oro



This April 13, 2004 photo provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows a large Pacific bull walrus on ice in the Bering Sea off the west coast of Alaska. Hunters and scientists say a warming climate is causing walrus migration patterns to veer from historical hunting grounds as the ocean ice used by the animals to dive and rest recedes farther north. Remote communities at the edge of the Bering Sea are seeing a steep decline in walrus harvested the past several years. (Joel Garlich-Miller/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via AP) MANDATORY CREDIT

Anna Oxereok grew up eating walrus in the western Alaska village of Wales. Today it's such a rare treat she can't bring herself to part with the plastic gallon bag of meat in her freezer.

"I have to save it for something special," she says.

Her brother caught two animals this spring and shared the meat and fat, but it didn't go very far in the village of 150. She's thankful for what she got, though. It's become increasingly difficult to land a [walrus](#).

Other remote [communities](#) at the edge of the Bering Sea also are seeing a steep decline in walrus harvested the past several years. Walrus, described by some as having a taste between veal and beef, is highly prized by Alaska Natives as a subsistence food to store for winter, with the adult male animals averaging 2,700 pounds. The sale of carved ivory from the tusks, legal only for Alaska Natives, also brings in supplemental income to communities with high unemployment rates.

Hunters and scientists say walrus migration patterns are veering from historical hunting grounds as temperatures warm and the ocean ice used by the animals to dive and rest recedes farther north. Village elders also tell biologists the wind is blowing in new directions. In 2013, a late-season icepack clustered around St. Lawrence Island, blocking hunters from the sea.

"I think one of the biggest issues is that things have gotten so variable. It's hard to really predict what's going to happen," said Jim MacCracken, Alaska walrus program supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Iver Campbell and other Yup'ik Eskimo hunters from two St. Lawrence Island communities harvested more than 1,100 walrus in 2003. But a decade later, hunters managed to take only 555—a fraction of the ideal

of one walrus per resident, per year. Things still aren't looking any better for the 1,430 residents of the villages of Gambell and Savoonga. The recent spring take was 233 walrus, according to preliminary Fish and Wildlife figures.

The shore ice once served to block the wind for hunters but that's no longer the case, said Campbell, who's lived all 64 years in Gambell, population 713.



This April 17, 2004, photo provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows two walrus cows on ice off the west coast of Alaska. Hunters and scientists say a warming climate is causing walrus migration patterns to veer from historical hunting grounds as the ocean ice used by the animals to dive and rest recedes farther north. Remote communities at the edge of the Bering Sea are seeing a steep decline in walrus harvested the past several years. (Joel Garlich-Miller/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via AP)

"The ice goes out real fast, melts real fast," he said. "We don't have anything to counter the wind and the rough water."

Science backs that observation. According to the Office of Naval Research, the past eight years have had the eight lowest amounts of summer sea ice on record.

Far from the state's limited road system, costly store-bought food is not an affordable solution. At village stores, pantry staples quickly add up—nearly \$7 for a dozen eggs, \$15 for a gallon of milk and \$6.25 for a loaf of basic white bread. People rely on the region's resources for up to 80 percent of their diets.

Their hunting practices are closely monitored by federal authorities to ensure the animals that are killed are not going to waste. Generally, such hunts don't cause a public outcry in Alaska.

In these communities, a subsistence lifestyle is a necessity. In fact, the low harvest this year recently prompted a donation of 10,000 pounds of frozen halibut to four affected villages.

"A decline in the subsistence harvest really creates an economic disaster that threatens the health and welfare of the people in the communities," said Vera Metcalf, director of the Eskimo Walrus Commission. "So we are concerned about the impacts of climate change and the ability for our hunters to [harvest](#) marine mammals."

Some Native communities can search for other animals, like domestic reindeer or caribou. But opportunities aren't as bountiful for Diomedes on the western coast of Little Diomedes Island, only a few miles from Russia. The community of 120 harvested one walrus in 2014, prompting city and Native leaders to seek assistance from the state.

This year, 10 walrus were harvested, according to Diomedea hunter Robert Soolook. There's no shortage of walrus, he said, but they're migrating sooner. No one has initiated any long-range planning to address the shift, but Soolook believes hunters eventually will need to change their practices, even going out earlier.

"Now that we've seen this, we have to start adapting," he said.

No federal assistance is available, and state aid is minimal, at best. State Sen. Sen. Donny Olson, D-Golovin, said he might introduce legislation to allow failed subsistence hunts to qualify for state disaster funds.

Moving from her ancestral lands is not an option, according to Oxereok, an Inupiat Eskimo. Relocating would mean displacing everything she knows.

"It's not that simple because your roots are here," she said.

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