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Makivvik Report for
NAMMCO Scientific Committee, Management Committees, and Council
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Beluga

Beluga whales have been harvested by Nunavik Inuit for millennia for subsistence purposes. Nunavik Inuit harvest from primarily two stocks; Eastern Hudson Bay (EHB) beluga and Western Hudson Bay (WHB) beluga. While the two stocks are thought to summer in discrete areas, both stocks share spring and autumn migration routes and overwinter jointly in Hudson Strait and the Labrador Sea. Commercial whaling during the 1800's severely depleted the EHB stock, for which a conservation concern has currently been identified by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). The WHB has no conservation concern. However, recent reanalysis of genetic samples has suggested a more complex stock structure than previously thought, including the possibility of the two currently identified stocks actually being composed of at least two additional stocks.

Makivvik and the Makivvik-owned Nunavik Research Centre (NRC) collaborate with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) on the monitoring of the subsistence beluga harvest by Nunavik Inuit. The NRC prepares and distributes the sampling kits to communities and coordinates payments to Nunavik hunters who return the samples. Wildlife technicians at the NRC also use the sampled teeth to age the beluga whales. DFO uses the maqtaq/skin sample for genetic analysis for stock identification, and in some years, for examining for presence of parasites or contaminants. Furthermore, the NRC toxicologist has worked with beluga samples to test for the presence of heavy metals (Pb, Hg, Cd, Se) in meat and maqtaq. In 2023, the NRC received 198 beluga samples back from local hunters.

Walrus

The NRC conducts a sampling program with Nunavik walrus harvesters to test for the presence of *Trichinella* in walrus meat. This longstanding program allows Nunavik Inuit to know that the meat is safe to eat. Hunters send in a sample of the tongue which is then analyzed by trained NRC staff. Usually, results can be returned to the communities within 24 hours of the samples being received by the NRC. Between October 2022 and September 2023, the NRC received 26 walrus tongues for *Trichinella* testing. All these tongues sent in by hunters tested negative for this harmful parasite and the meat was deemed safe for human consumption.

The NRC received funding from ArcticNet in April 2021 to start a research project on the walrus population in Nunavik. The second phase of the project started in February 2022 with interviews in 5 communities of Nunavik, located in the Hudson Strait, with local hunters and elders. Thirty five local experts were interviewed to have a better understanding on the impact of climate change on walrus distribution and migration. Fifteen walruses were tagged in the Hudson Strait region and their movements are being

analyzed. Sample kits were created and sent to communities to be able to analyse contaminants in walrus meat. Stable isotopes and contaminants in walrus meat submitted through these 13 received sample kits will be analyzed this winter.

Bowhead

Although there is an annual TAT of two bowhead whales for Nunavik Inuit there was no bowhead whale hunt conducted by Nunavimmiut this year. However, the community of Quaqtaq is preparing for a hunt to take place in the summer of 2024.

Narwhal

Nunavik Inuit seldomly harvest narwhal, although it has been noted that observations around Nunavik are increasing.

Makivvik and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. have renewed the narwhal tag transfer agreement, which allows for narwhal tags that have gone unused in Nunavik to be transferred to Nunavut communities the following year.

Ringed Seal

Concerns have been raised by Nunavik Inuit about how only a few research projects focus on this species, and Nunavimmiut have stressed the need for more work on ringed seals. Furthermore, some communities reported declines in numbers and increases in signs of illness and expressed concerns for the health of people consuming seals. Makivvik has previously pressed DFO to undertake such work, but seeing no satisfactory results, the Nunavik Marine Region Wildlife Board (NMRWB) created a practical project involving local hunters: the Natsiq [ringed seals] monitoring program. Makivvik Corporation joined the work to test for diseases at the NRC. The objective is to understand seal meat consumption in Nunavik communities and to decide which organ to test for zoonotic diseases and contaminants, such as *Toxoplasma gondii* and *Trichinella nativa*, as well as mercury. Acquisition of PCR equipment and development of PCR protocols and training to update the NRC research facilities were undertaken. To ensure that the work remained useful and practical, workshops with hunters took place. These workshops allowed hands-on experience with local hunters and scientists from NMRWB and NRC, as well as knowledge exchange between the team. This sustainable project will allow Nunavimmiut to take ownership of the Natsiq monitoring program and use it to answer their needs.

Orca

Similar to observations in other marine areas of Northern Canada, Nunavik Inuit have noted a significant increase in the numbers of Orca in the waters around Nunavik. They can now be found, regularly, in Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, and Ungava Bay. Nunavik Inuit believe that Orcas are altering beluga behaviour, with beluga increasingly moving further up estuaries and into thick ice when orca are present.

Minke Whales

Nunavik Inuit are noting an increased presence of Minke whales, primarily in the Hudson Strait and Ungava Bay area.