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## ALASKA ESKIMO WHALING COMMISSION

*“Life in our villages is a lot different from what most of you are used to experiencing. Most of you here go to the grocery store on a regular basis for your food.*

*In Savoonga, we have one general store with very little groceries. Maybe some canned milk. A pound of meat, if you can find it there, might cost \$10 to \$12. You can buy gasoline there for \$7.56 a gallon.*

*There are a few jobs in our village, working for local government or the school. But that’s pretty much it. So we don’t get much of our food from the store. We take most of our food from the ocean — our whales, walrus, seals, and fish.*

*This is how we live and raise our families, and care for our children and our elders. We’ve been living this way for at least 2,000 years.*

*We may come from places that you have never heard of. Our way of life may seem foreign to you. But we are people just as you are. We have families.*

*Our food security depends on the ocean, not the grocery store. The food we take from the ocean keeps our families alive and healthy. The hunting practices that enable us to take that food keep our communities and our cultures alive and healthy.”*

— George Noongwook, Whaling captain from Savoonga, Alaska and Chairman of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission on the 64th annual meeting of the IWC, July 2, 2012 at Panama City, Panama

# Bowhead Whale

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- 1977** As a result from ceasing bowhead whale hunting, Alaska Native whalers established the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission to represent the whaling communities in order to convince the government to preserve subsistence hunting of bowhead whales. Since 1981, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission has managed the bowhead whale subsistence hunt in accordance with the International Whaling Commission and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
- 1978** The state of Alaska passed subsistence law requiring the Department of Fish and Game to give priority to subsistence use over other uses of fish and wildlife.
- 1981** The U.S. Department of Commerce and NOAA granted the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission responsibility for local management of whale harvest under the 1981 Section 112 of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1382).
- 1985** The International Whaling Commission set commercial whaling catch limit to zero.
- 2001** The International Whaling Commission released data demonstrating population growth in the bowhead whale. The Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Seas stock numbered over 10,500 bowheads in 2001 and the population been increasing at an annual rate of 3% since 1978.
- 2008-2012** The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission sets quotas for Alaskan whaling communities. Alaskan whaling communities may land up to 280 whales or make 335 strikes (attempts to harvest) over the five-year period. Strikes may not exceed 67 attempts in any one year. This harvest quota affects 0.1-0.5% of the whale population as well as prevent communities from harvesting cows with calves.
- 2013-2018** The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission sets forward new quotas for Alaskan whaling communities in accordance with new world-wide quotas from the International Whaling Commission. Alaskan whaling communities may land up to 336 whales over this five-year period.

The bowhead whale inhabits northern waters year-round. Scientists estimate the current population to be 7,000-10,000 whales. Much of that population lives in the waters around Alaska.

## HOW TO EXPLORE:

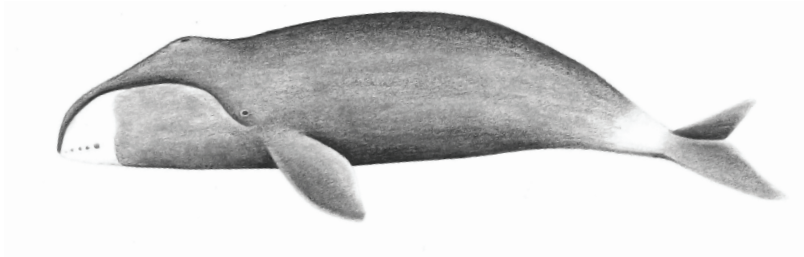
**Slow down and look closely.** Each object has a story to tell.

**Ask questions.** Be curious about details.

**Make this journal yours.** Use the pages to draw, write and note in your own way.

**Share.** Share with a friend, a family member or mentor about your experience.

## BOWHEAD WHALE



*Balaena mysticetus*

Class: Mammalia, Order: Cetacea, Suborder: Mysticeti,  
Family: Balaenidae, Genus: Balaena, Species: Mysticetus

**Length:** Up to 60 feet

**Weight:** Up to 120,000 pounds or 2,000 pounds per foot in length

**Life span:** Estimated up to 150 – 200 years

**Color:** Black body with varying amounts of white on their chin, abdomen and tail

The bowhead whale has a thick layer of fat, called blubber, which insulates the whale in cold water. This layer of fat can be 10-20 inches thick. Bowhead whales are mammals— meaning they are warm blooded, have bones and breathe oxygen—that also produce milk to feed their young. Unlike fish, bowhead whales breathe through a set of lungs rather than gills. After diving below water for 15 to 20 minutes or longer, the whale returns to the surface for several minutes to breathe. The bowhead whale breathes through two openings called blowholes on the top of its head. These blowholes are like nostrils and are used for inhaling and exhaling air. Bowhead whale may access air through small ice openings. Bowhead whales may use their large heads to bump and break ice as much as two feet thick in order to create an opening for breathing.

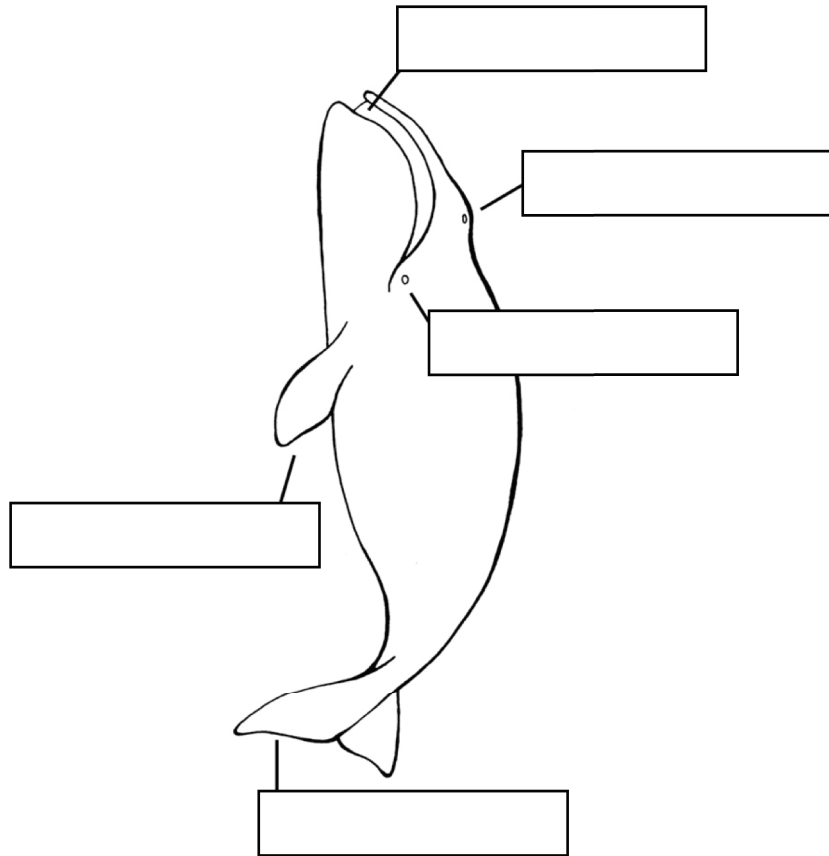
**Aġviq** North Slope Iñupiaq term for bowhead whale

**Aghvepik (aghveq)** St. Lawrence Island and Siberian Yupik term for bowhead whale

## IMPORTANT DATES IN BOWHEAD WHALING HISTORY

- 800** Archaeological evidence suggests that the Alaska Native peoples have been whaling since at least 800.
- 1712** American commercial whaling begins.
- 1848** Whaling captain Thomas Roys discovers whale in the Bering Strait. Due to the discovery of bowhead whales in the Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Seas, commercial arctic whaling increases.
- 1947** The International Whaling Commission (IWC) is formed to provide proper conservation of whale stocks and regulate commercial hunting of whales. After severe depletion of the bowhead whale population, the group has worked to regulate whaling around the world in order to prevent extinction.
- 1971** The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was signed into law on December 18, 1971 by President Richard Nixon. This act provides for the settlement of certain land claims of Alaska Natives, securing some rights for whaling communities.
- 1972** The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 was enacted on October 21, 1972. This act establishes a Marine Mammal Commission to protect marine mammals and also regulates the sale of marine mammal products.
- 1973** The bowhead whale was added to the endangered species list under the Endangered Species Act. The Eastern Arctic bowhead whale stock population diminished from over 30,000 prior to commercial whaling to less than 1,000. The Bearing Sea Stock also plummeted in the early 1900s with an estimated population to be around 5,000 in the late 1970s.
- 1977** The International Whaling Commission ceased all bowhead hunting due to an alarming population drop— significantly impacting the Indigenous whaling communities.

Label the parts of the bowhead whale using the word bank below.



**WORD BANK**

Flipper  
Fluke

Eye  
Blowhole

Baleen

**KEY TERMS**

***Alaska Natives***

Indigenous peoples of Alaska, often defined by language group

***Mammal***

a warm-blooded vertebrate with hair or fur that produces milk from female mammary glands to feed their young

***Blowhole***

the nostril(s) on top of a whale's head used for respiration

***Blubber***

the thick layer of fat between the skin and muscle in marine mammals

## HABITAT

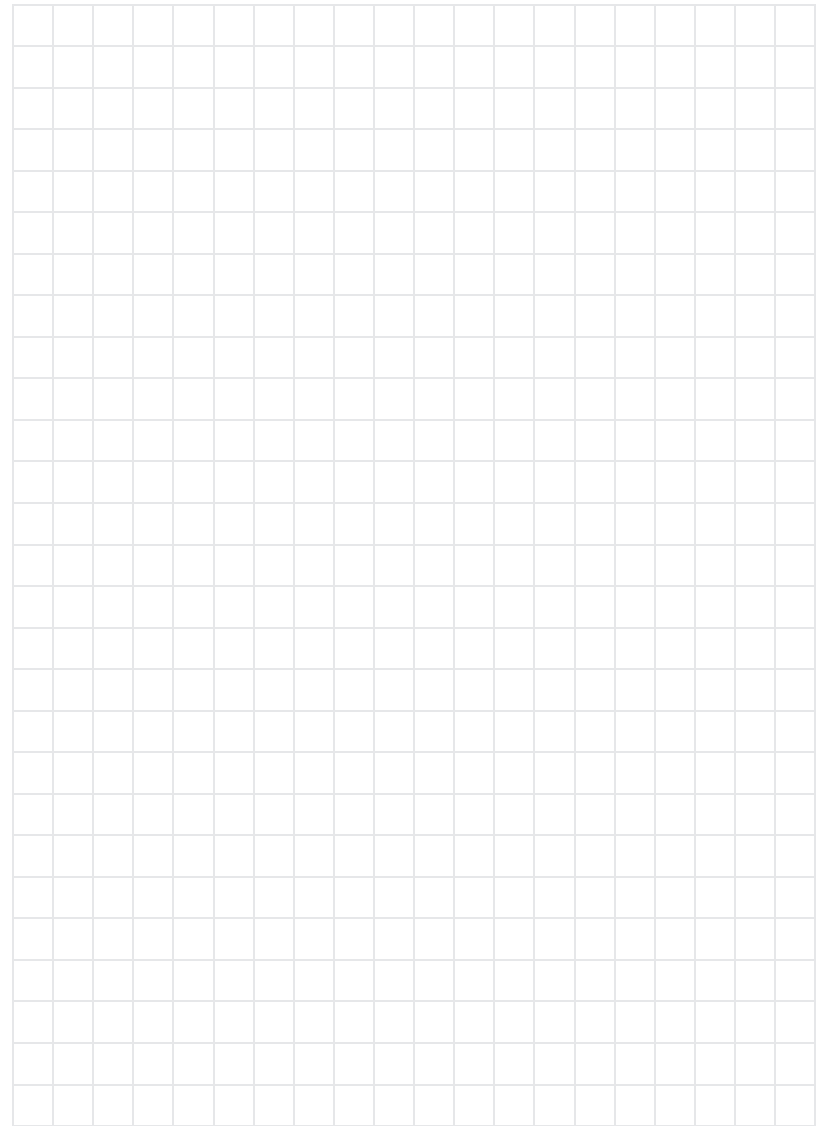


The Western Arctic bowheads usually inhabit the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. In the cold winter months, these whales stay in the Bering Sea area between Alaska and Russia. When the waters become warmer in the spring, migration begins to the Beaufort Sea for the summer. Each year the migration timing and route changes slightly, depending on sea ice conditions.

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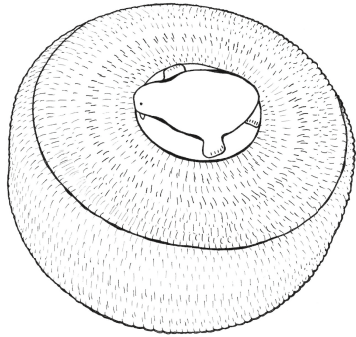
**Migration** the seasonal movement of a population from one location to another

*Look closely and examine a baleen basket.  
Sketch a detail that attracts your attention.*





## BALEEN



Sketch of Basket, Carl Hank Sr., Iñupiaq, Utqiagvik, 1972, 1972.56.1ab, Alaska exhibition

Baleen is the material found within the *mysticeti* whale mouths, in place of teeth. The baleen hangs down from the roof of the mouth in two finely packed rows of over 600 plates. These plates are typically black in color and can reach up to 14 feet long.

Baleen is used to create objects such as baskets. Baleen basketry was developed in the early 20th century, after the end of commercial whaling, to provide a market for Iñupiaq craftsman. Baleen is prepared for weaving by soaking in water to soften the material, splitting a plate longitudinally to make the wefts and removing away the inner core.

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### **Suqqaq**

North Slope Iñupiaq term for baleen

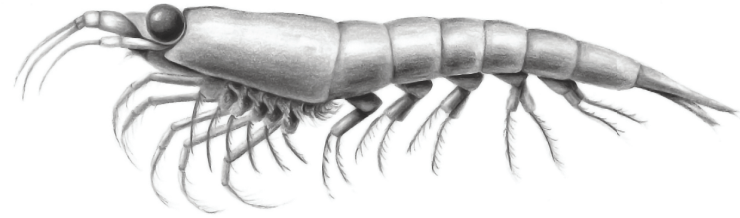
### **Suqaq\***

St. Lawrence Island and Siberian Yupik term for baleen (asterisk, is written after final q of a noun indicates that the base, or combining form, of that noun terminates in an unpredictably strong gh)

### **Mysticeti**

a suborder of Cetacea (aquatic mammals) which names whales that have baleen

## FEEDING



The scientific name for krill is Euphausiacea

The bowhead whale usually feeds on small crustaceans such as krill. When it is time to feed, the bowhead whale opens its jaws — allowing the water and prey to enter the mouth. The whale then closes its mouth and uses its tongue to force water out through the baleen. The baleen acts as a filter, capturing the prey for the whale to swallow.

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### **Crustacean**

a large class of animals that have an exoskeleton, such as crabs and krill

## ALASKA NATIVE WHALING

Alaska Native peoples have harvested whales for thousands of years. The hunting of whale is part of a sustainable, symbiotic relationship Alaska Native peoples have with the land and animals.

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**Symbiotic** a special type of interaction between two or more species living together; a relationship with mutual benefit or dependence

**Sustainable** the ability to support, maintain or continue

**Harvest** sustainable and responsible use of wild, renewable resources from the land by individuals, families and communities for food, shelter, fuel and other essential needs that are fundamental to a way of life

## WHALE OIL



Sketch of Whale Oil Lamp, American, Massachusetts, 1860-1880, metal, 1984.9.2ab, *Alaska* exhibition

This lamp belonged to Captain Edward Penniman, a whaling captain in the 1860s-1880s. This gimbal style lamp burned whale oil. A single bowhead whale could produce 250 barrels of oil.

The gimbal mechanism allows an object, such as the gimbal styled lamp above, to pivot and stay horizontal while in motion and prevent oil from spilling. For example: a compass needle points at north, even when the compass as a whole is moved.

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***Aġviñġaq*** North Slope Iñupiaq term for oil rendered from whale blubber

***Aġviñġamik misigarriruaq*** North Slope Iñupiaq expression for making oil from whale blubber

*Think about what ingredients are important to you and your community.  
Ask a family or community member to share with you a recipe for  
making a dish using one of those ingredients. Record the recipe here.*

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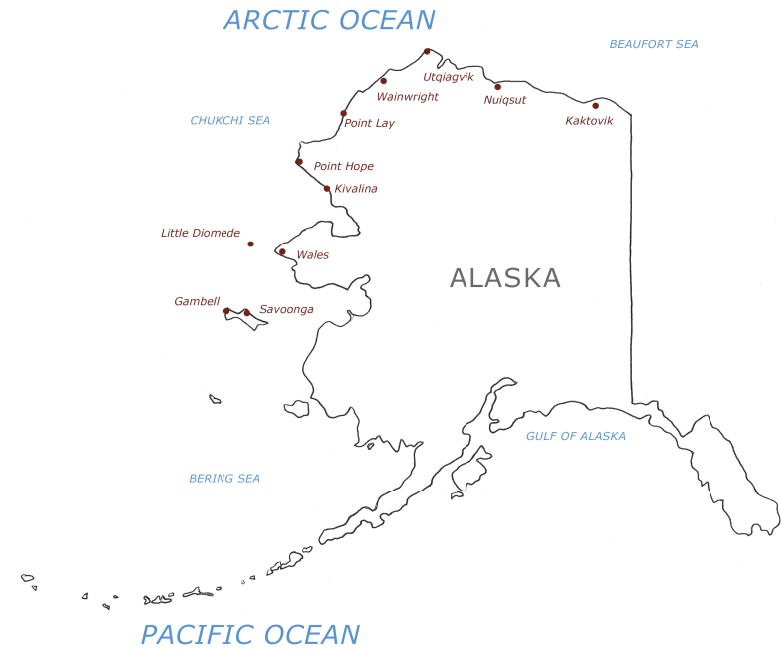
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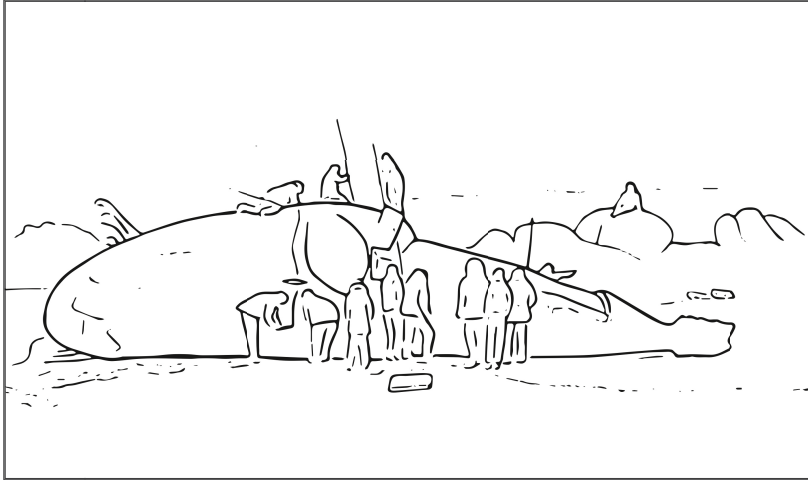
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Today, eleven Alaska Native communities along with the Makah tribe in Washington state have the right to hunt bowhead whales in North America. Bowhead whales are harvested through legal, noncommercial hunts in spring and autumn. The many products of the bowhead whale provide important nutrient-dense food for whaling villages. The harvesting of bowhead whales also provides the opportunity for Alaska Native peoples to continue cultural lifeways. Hunting and harvesting bowhead whale supports communal wellbeing through cultural activities and fosters a responsible lifestyle.

Registered whaling captains are permitted to harvest a specific number of bowhead whales each year in accordance with the International Whaling Commission (IWC). The IWC researches and monitors whale populations around the world and regulates whaling activities. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission helps to implement the rules of the IWC in Alaska and advocates for the needs of local whaling communities. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling commission supports the continuance of whale harvest while also protecting the bowhead whale population inhabiting Alaska's waters.

## ALASKA NATIVE WHALING



Sketch of Simon Koonook's *Attungruk the 3rd's Whale*, 1980, acrylic paint, canvas, 1980.25.1

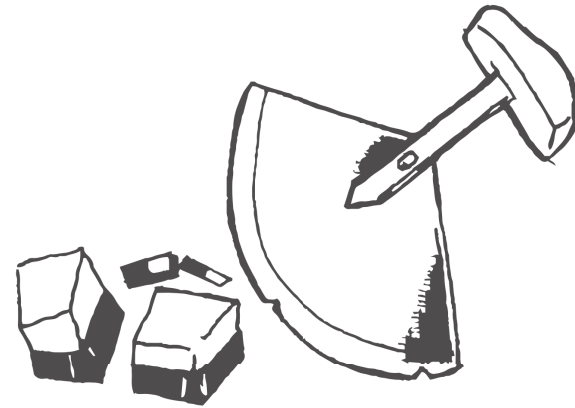
Alaska Natives have depended on marine mammals for thousands of years. Methods of harvesting have changed over time and vary between communities. Today, as in the past, every part of the whale serves a purpose.

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**Aḡvaḡniaq** North Slope Iñupiaq verb for the hunting of bowhead whales

**Aghveghniqq** St. Lawrence Island and Siberian Yupik term for whale hunting

## WHALE AS FOOD



Whale blubber and skin is consumed as a traditional food of the Inuit and Chukchi cultures. This meal provides important nutrients such as vitamins A, C, and D as well as iron and omega-3 fatty acids. Once harvested, whale meat and fat are preserved and stored to be eaten throughout the year.

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**Maktak** North Slope Iñupiaq term for traditional meal of whale skin and blubber

**Mangtak** St. Lawrence Island and Siberian Yupik term for whale skin with attached blubber