

Findings of the Alaska Board of Game
Regarding Customary and Traditional Use of Muskoxen
in Northwestern Unit 23
98-118 BOG

At its October 1997 meeting in Nome, the Board of Game took up a proposal sponsored by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to determine whether there is a customary and traditional use of muskoxen in northwestern Unit 23. The muskoxen now in Unit 23 were introduced in 1970 and have been protected from hunting by state law, since then. Muskoxen in Unit 23 represented an unusual situation for the C&T determination process because muskoxen have been absent from that area for many years. Unlike muskoxen on the Seward Peninsula no federal hunt has been established on this population of muskoxen on federal lands so there has been no reported recent use of muskoxen by residents of Unit 23.

Board deliberations on the findings of a customary and traditional use lead to the following conclusions:

Criterion 1: A long-term consistent pattern of non-commercial taking, use, and reliance on the fish stock or game population that has been established over a reasonable period of time of not less than one generation, excluding interruption by circumstances beyond the user's control, such as unavailability of the fish or game caused by migratory patterns.

While the Board of Game did not find that a consistent pattern of taking, use, and reliance on this re-established population had occurred over a period of not less than one generation (approximately 30 years), the Board did find that the reason was due to an interruption by circumstances beyond the users' control.

Muskox bones and horns have been found near Cape Thompson and Kivalina associated with other cultural materials at known archeological sites. Inupiaq oral histories include references to muskoxen and one muskox was reported to have been taken by a Point Hope resident in 1946. In addition to the direct evidence of customary and traditional use of muskoxen in Unit 23 there is a good record for use of muskoxen on the North Slope by the Inupiaq culture. The Inupiat people of northwestern Unit 23 share that culture, which includes the use of muskoxen for food and blankets.

Criterion 2: A pattern of taking or use recurring in specific seasons of each year.

Due to the long interruption of the availability of the population the board could not determine directly when muskoxen were taken in Unit 23. A pattern of taking muskoxen during the late-winter and spring has become established for muskox hunting on the newly established federal hunt on the Seward Peninsula and on the North Slope. Even though the

federal hunt was established with specific seasons, extensions have been granted to accommodate the developing pattern of taking.

Criterion 3: A pattern of taking or use consisting of methods and means of harvest that are characterized by efficiency and economy of effort and cost.

Due to the long interruption of the availability of the population the board could not determine directly the method and means of harvest in Unit 23. In neighboring areas, the primary transportation is by snowmachine and foot without the use of aircraft or other expensive commercial services. Muskoxen harvests are efficient and economical to local hunters. The grouping behavior of the animals when approached allows hunters to easily get within range and select animals to harvest.

Criterion 4: The area in which the noncommercial, long-term and consistent pattern of taking, use, and reliance upon the fish stock or game population has been established.

The current range of muskoxen is within the area that has traditionally been used for subsistence hunting of large land mammals by residents of Point Hope and Kivalina. Therefore, if hunting were allowed it would likely occur in this area.

Criterion 5: A means of handling, preparing, preserving, and storing fish or game that has been traditionally used by past generations, but not excluding recent technological advances where appropriate.

While many families now use freezers for storage, most fish is smoked or dried as is some moose and caribou. Since muskoxen have not been harvested in this area in many years the Board of Game could not address the handling and preparation of muskoxen directly. However, available information suggests that the handling and preparation, preservation and storage would occur in the same manner as that of other big game subsistence species. On the Seward Peninsula and on the North Slope, the meat is salvaged and used and hides are used for warmth as blankets or clothing. There has been no trophy use of horns or hides.

Criterion 6: A pattern of taking or use that includes the handing down of knowledge of fishing or hunting skills, values, and lore from generation to generation.

Hunting knowledge in the communities within Unit 23 are known to be passed along from parent to child. Learning commonly occurs when children accompany their parents during hunting, fishing, and gathering activities. When hunting large animals young boys are taught hunting skills by older brothers, fathers, or uncles.

Criterion 7: A pattern of taking, use, and reliance where the harvest effort or products of that harvest are distributed or shared, including customary trade, barter, and gift-giving.

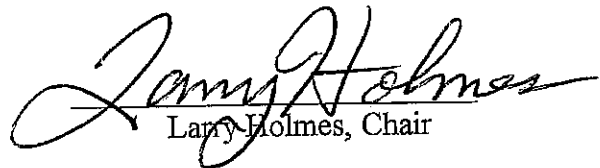
Sharing of big game and other wild resources is common in communities of Northwest Alaska as demonstrated by subsistence surveys indicating that virtually every household received such gifts.

Criterion 8: A pattern that includes taking, use, and reliance for subsistence purposes upon a wide diversity of fish and game resources and that provides substantial economic, cultural, social, and nutritional elements of the subsistence way of life.

Communities in Unit 23 take, use, and rely upon a wide diversity of game resources. Documented harvests ranged from 398 pounds per capita in Kotzebue in 1989 to 762 pounds per capita per year in Kivalina 1992 (Alaska Department of Fish and Game 1997). The typical community harvests about 50 different species of plants, fish, and wildlife each year. It is also well documented that economic opportunities for cash are few and mean household income is low, therefore wild foods are essential to many people of Unit 23.

After weighing the individual criteria, the board found that there is a customary and traditional use of muskoxen in Unit 23. The board believed that muskoxen were used, to the extent they were available, prior to extirpation from the area, and that this use would have resumed, but for legal constraints, as soon as animal were again available. The extirpation was not within the control of current users.

DATE: January 18, 1998
Bethel, Alaska


Larry Holmes, Chair

VOTE: 7-0