

Walrus migration patterns shift with the climate, leaving Alaskans hungry

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Two walrus get some sun on the ice off the west coast of Alaska in this 2004 file photo provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Photo: Joel Garlich-Miller/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via AP

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Walrus traditionally shows up on the dinner tables of Native Alaskans but these days, its appearances are rare. Walrus meat has become harder to get in Alaska as the mammals have become more scarce. As global warming has changed the climate of the Alaskan wilderness, Native Alaskan hunters have seen the number of walrus steadily decline.

Anna Oxereok, a Native Alaskan, grew up eating walrus in her village. Today it is such a rare treat she can't bring herself to use the walrus meat in her freezer.

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

Her brother caught two walrus this spring and shared the meat and fat, but it did not go very far in their village of 150. However, she is thankful for what she got.

Warming Waters Force Walrus To Move

Walrus is hunted and eaten in Native Alaskan communities dotted along the edge of the Bering Sea. In recent years, hunters throughout the region have seen a steep decline in the number of walrus. Hunting walrus is against the law for most Americans, but Native Alaskans are allowed to hunt the large sea creatures because it is a traditional part of their culture.

Walrus is highly prized by Alaskan Natives as a food to store for winter. The adult male walrus averages 2,700 pounds and the taste of the meat has been described as somewhere between that of veal and beef. Native Alaskan hunters also sell carved ivory from the tusks of walrus. They are the only people allowed to do that. Ivory sales bring in extra income to Native communities, many of which have high unemployment rates.

Hunters and scientists say walrus migration patterns are changing as temperatures change. The warming climate has caused ocean ice to melt, and walrus use the ice to dive and rest. As a result, many walrus have followed the ice. Village elders tell scientists the wind is blowing in new directions, which may also be contributing to the walrus' disappearance.

Consequences Of Melting Ice

The lack of walrus has been felt in Gambell and Savoonga, two St. Lawrence Island communities. Hunters from the two villages killed more than 1,100 walrus in 2003. Ten years later, they managed to take only 555. The hunters aim to catch one walrus per person in their communities, so 555 was far too few. This year, things are not looking any better. In the spring, hunters killed 233 walrus, according to estimates. That is hardly enough to go around for Gambell and Savoonga's 1,430 residents.

Iver Campbell is a Yup'ik Eskimo hunter from Gambell, population 713. He explained that the disappearing ice has not only caused walrus to migrate, but has also made hunting more difficult. The shore ice once blocked the wind for hunters, but that is no longer the case.

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

Indeed, according to the Office of Naval Research, the past eight years have had the eight lowest amounts of summer sea ice on record.

Grocery Store Trips Are Expensive

For the Native Alaskans, not being able to hunt enough walrus has made it difficult to keep food on the table. Store-bought food is costly in remote villages. A dozen eggs cost nearly \$7, a gallon of milk is \$15, and a loaf of basic white bread can cost \$6.25. People rely on local food for as much as 80 percent of their diets.

In these communities, people eat only the minimal amount to survive. In fact, the low harvest this year prompted a donation of 10,000 pounds of frozen halibut to four affected villages.

Vera Metcalf is the director of the Eskimo Walrus Commission. She said that the increasing difficulty in finding food in the area was "an economic disaster that threatens the health and welfare of the people in the communities."

Fewer Walrus To Go Around

Some Native communities can search for other animals, like reindeer or caribou. Other communities are struggling to find any food at all. Diomedes is a small community on the western coast of Little Diomedes Island, only a few miles from Russia. The 120 residents harvested just one walrus in 2014, prompting city and Native leaders to seek assistance from the state.

This year, 10 walrus were harvested, according to Diomedes hunter Robert Soolook. There are still walrus in the area, he said, but they are migrating sooner. No one has started any long-range planning to address the shift, but Soolook believes hunters eventually will need to change their practices, even going out earlier in the year.

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

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