

90-06-109

Elders in Residence Collection. Elder Ross Ahngasak is interviewed by students of the Alaska Native Studies 401 class at the University of Alaska Fairbanks

Keywords: Hunting – walrus; traditional beliefs – hunting; food - walrus

Release agreement: Yes, no Internet

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Summarized by: Cecilie R. Ebsen

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Notes:

[The elder on this recording, Ross Ahngasak, speaks Inupiaq. English questions are posed, then translated and answered in Inupiaq and translated back]

Various people

00:00:00.00

[Small talk in both Inupiaq and English]

Students

00:02:59.49

They would like information on hunting skills and walrus hunting.

Ross Ahngasak

00:03:05.95

Ross asks that the questions are limited to his area, because he grew up there and know of the terrain and people.

Teacher

00:04:37.55

Asks Ross to talk about what time they hunted walrus and how they were hunted.

Ross Ahngasak

00:05:54.55

They hunted in June and July, after the ice had left and returned there were usually a lot of animals around. Before the Inupiaq began using snow machines etc. for traveling, when they were using dog sleds, they would hunt for long periods at a time without getting much sleep.

People used the umiak to hunt walrus. People need to be very careful, and understand the dangers of, for example, hunting an animal that has been wounded. Especially the person steering needs to be aware of the animals' activities. If he is not cautious, walrus might come up from the water and tip or damage the boat.

Those who are hunting walrus from a boat need to be very careful how they

approach the ice that the walrus are on. They have to make sure they can make direct contact with the ice on the surface and not hit the ice underneath the water first. In that way their boat will go right alongside the iceberg before they strike the walrus.

Ross Ahngasak

00:11:04.65

As a young man, Ross participated in a walrus hunt where they approached the ice with the walrus. They were told to look in the water because there might be walrus swimming underneath that can do damage to the boat. If they saw a walrus, they were told to move their hands over the water [demonstrates it], and they would usually swim away. They are afraid of the movement.

It was forbidden to hunt the young walrus.

If the adult walruses hear a baby walrus cry, they will come to help it no matter the consequences. They might even break up the ice that the other walrus are staying on from underneath.

The hunting crew does not like to include a person who has boasted of walrus hunting because the walruses will sense that and will act to show that person what they are capable of.

Ross Ahngasak

00:14:19.00

During walrus season the people of Barrow are busy. Walruses provide meat for the people and food for their dogs.

If it is foggy while they are out hunting, one person in the boat gets close to the water and hollers ["Oh-oh-oh" like a walrus] to attract walrus in the area.

Students

00:15:48.60

A student asks if they hunted walrus off the beach: if they come to the coast?

Ross Ahngasak

00:16:27.51

Ross explains that they do not stay on the shore ice, but they come on the ice when it returns from the sea.

Students

00:16:42.23

An interviewer asks what kinds of weapons they use?

Ross Ahngasak

00:17:08.39

When Ross was growing up, they used guns like a 30/30.

Teacher

00:17:26.74

The teacher says that whenever he hunted seal in Southeast they would sink very quickly and they always had to act fast to get them. How is that with walrus?

Ross Ahngasak

00:18:07.52

Walruses sink quickly. They have a tool for retrieving them: a retriever. They are told that when they hunt, they should not shoot walruses on the edge of the ice, because when the commotion begins the other walrus will try to push the walruses that have been wounded into the water. They are told to shoot a walrus that is positioned away from the edge of the ice.

Students

00:19:23.80

A student asks if it is true that a walrus pack positions the males in the outer circle to protect the females in the inner circle?

Ross Ahngasak

00:20:14.77

Ross confirms this and would like to know where the interviewer has learned this.

Students

00:20:29.15

The student explains that she learned it from Linda Ellanna, professor of Anthropology, married to a King Islander.

Ross Ahngasak

00:20:52.97

Ross emphasizes that he does not want to hear about facts from other communities because each community and environment are different.

Ross Ahngasak

00:21:45.42

When the walruses are in the water, they stay away from them. A big herd of walruses might be in the water for five to seven miles.

When there is no ice, they have a formation stretching over several miles and they are very dangerous in that formation.

Students

00:23:10.24

Why was only the female walrus' skin used for making boats?

Ross Ahngasak

00:23:18.70

In Barrow, the walrus is not used to skin boats. They use sealskin instead.

Students

00:23:46.33

A student asks if they ever use modern, aluminum boats?

Ross Ahngasak

00:23:59.48

Ross answers that they only use those for whaling. The umiak [not sure if they are saying something slightly different] is used for walrus hunting, which was the whaling boat of the first whaler. It has a sail in the back. Only a fool would go walrus hunting in an aluminum boat. Today they might use them, but traditionally they did not. The walrus hunting techniques have changed in this way.

Ross Ahngasak

00:25:07.58

Today walrus hunting is not as big of an activity as it used to be because only few people hunt. Instead they have permanent jobs that take up most of their time

Students

00:26:18.72

[Asks a question about ivory]

Ross Ahngasak

00:26:32.93

Ross answers NO! If a person is caught doing that he is not allowed to hunt ever again.

Unknown

00:28:23.22

[Various people talk in Inupiaq]

Ross Ahngasak

00:29:01.04

[Show a harpoon and describe what it is made of and how it works. This is quite difficult to follow when not seeing it]

Ross Ahngasak

00:31:53.68

When a walrus is struck, but not killed, it gets furious and can destroy parts of the umiak. Walrus is very dangerous in the water and the hunters have to be very careful.

Students

00:32:51.03

Asks if it usually takes multiple shots to kill a large walrus?

Ross Ahngasak

00:33:08.59

Ross explains that it usually just takes one shot, right in the head.

Students

00:34:15.26

How old does a person have to be to go out hunting?

Ross Ahngasak

00:34:47.72

Ross was 12 years old when he went on his first walrus hunt. Younger boys are also welcome to come along as long as they have someone older to take care of them.

Students

00:35:22.79

Asks if Ross remembers the first walrus he got, because the interviewer always remembers the first deer he ever got.

Ross Ahngasak

00:35:43.13

Ross explains how when he was a member of the walrus hunting crew, he stayed towards the end of the boat. Only the very best hunters could be in the front section of the boat.

Students

00:36:41.05

Does he remember who he hunted with?

Ross Ahngasak

00:37:12.14

[Talk in Inupiaq] Sean Komosak [sp?]

Students

00:37:35.14

What do they use the walrus for?

Ross Ahngasak

00:39:05.47

They prepare the walrus for food, they sew it back together with the flesh inside [write or draw on blackboard]. It is stored in a dry place, where it is fermented. This kind of fermented meat is called tuktaq.

Students

00:41:05.66

Do you mean aged, when you say fermented?

Ross Ahngasak

00:41:08.81

Yes, aged. The intent is to eat them during winter.

Students

00:43:13.39

[Discussing the preparation of walrus as food]

Ross Ahngasak

00:43:14.63

Intestines are removed right away and then cooked and eaten.

Students

00:43:35.42

Is it seal intestine that they use for raincoats in Barrow?

Ross Ahngasak

00:44:02.17

The raincoats were not made from walrus. Ross asks that questions are only regarding walrus right now, as that is the subject they are talking about. Other questions can be asked later.

Students

00:45:08.47

How was the walrus meat distributed?

Ross Ahngasak

00:45:29.55

The walrus is divided between the crewmembers and the tusk is the property of the hunter who killed it.

Students

00:45:55.70

Where was the fermented meat stored?

Ross Ahngasak

00:46:10.25

Usually on a platform covered with something that prevents dilution.

Students

00:46:38.99

Are there different terms for different parts of the animal/meat and how it is taken?

Ross Ahngasak

00:47:13.31

[Write or draw on blackboard] [Inupiaq terms are described for flippers, blubber, meat etc.]

Ross Ahngasak

00:48:30.73

The people in Barrow prepare their food so that insects cannot get to them.

Students

00:48:55.67

Are there cases where people have died of eating badly fermented/prepared meat?

Ross Ahngasak

00:49:53.64

The meat is prepared and stored away from the sun. Only if the sun warms the fermenting meat will it become poisonous.

Ross Ahngasak

00:50:43.01

What they might have heard about is people eating silo [sp?] which is dead walrus carcasses lying on the beach.

Ross Ahngasak

00:53:44.80

Most of the blood has already run out of the walrus when they ferment the meat, so they do not drain it as part of the preparation for fermenting.

Ross Ahngasak

00:55:32.67

When the walrus meat is not fermented, it is boiled.

Ross Ahngasak

00:56:31.33

Upon a question of whether they butcher the walrus while it is still in the water, Ross explains again how hunters aim to kill the walrus that are in the middle of the ice and any walrus that falls into the water has to be dragged back up on the ice before being butchered.

Ross Ahngasak

00:57:23.46

Ross used to carve out of ivory when the Navy first came to their area and sell it to the sailors.

Ross Ahngasak

00:58:56.54

When asked if he knows anything more about how the walrus communicate over longer distances, he says he does not know. When the walrus are on the ice they primarily sleep and do not make much noise.

Ross Ahngasak

01:00:54.23

He has never had any encounters with polar bears while hunting and butchering walrus.

Ross Ahngasak

01:01:51.34

The walrus eat mussel and seal.

Students

01:04:35.05 – 01.10.57

[Class discuss topics for the next class]