

Qayassiq Walrus Commission-Background, History and Overview

Background and History

Members of the Alaska Native tribes in Bristol Bay, Alaska continue to practice a traditional way of life passed down from many past generations. The traditional walrus hunt at Round Island has customarily occurred in the early Spring and Fall seasons. Round Island, since time immemorial, has been a traditional hunting and camping area for walrus harvesting.

In 1960, the State of Alaska designated the cluster of islands outside of Togiak as a state game sanctuary. Included in the Walrus Islands Game Sanctuary was Round Island (or “Qayassiq” in Yupik). For over 30 years, Alaska Natives were unable to hunt walrus from this favored location. In the early 1990’s hunters from Togiak and other Bristol Bay area villages successfully petitioned the Board of Game to reinstate subsistence access to hunt walrus on Round Island. After a long, four-year crusade Togiak and other Bristol Bay villages were successful in reinstating access to the Round Island traditional hunting grounds.

As a result, the Qayassiq Walrus Commission (QWC) was formed after the Board of Game gave permission for a limited subsistence walrus hunt on Round Island. The Qayassiq Walrus Commission with the cooperation of the Round Island Cooperators set the harvest season and harvest limits for the traditional annual Fall walrus hunt to Qayassiq. The Board of Game only has authority for access to Round Island, and authorizes access during set dates for the traditional walrus hunt. All other regulations are developed through the cooperative agreement by the four signatories. The Eskimo Walrus Commission, the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the QWC completed and signed a cooperative agreement in September 1995. The agreement outlines the hunt regulations and designates the responsibilities of each party involved.

In March 1995 the Qayassiq Walrus Commission (QWC) formed to oversee walrus harvest activities for the Bristol Bay area. The Qayassiq Walrus Commission has the authority to add new villages, determine walrus harvest allocation for each village and monitor harvest activities, and other factors related to the hunt. Originally, the QWC included seven area villages who were invited to co-manage the annual walrus hunt. Since that time, the membership has increased to nine villages. Currently, the QWC village representatives include nine villages: Togiak, Twin Hills, Manokotak, Aleknagik, Dillingham, Clark’s Point, Ekuk, Ekwok, and New Stuyahok.

The tribal councils select a QWC Commissioner and an Alternate Commissioner who represents the QWC villages at a Fall QWC Pre-Hunt Meeting, and a QWC Post Hunt Meeting. At the meetings, the Commissioners are granted one vote in issues up for debate or election. The QWC Hunt Captains also participate at the QWC Commissioners meetings.

Current Harvest Guidelines:

After two successful harvest seasons, the Round Island walrus hunters proposed a few changes to the original cooperative agreement. In 1997, the QWC proposed to change the harvest season from October 31 to September 20 – October 20 and to increase the walrus harvest limit. The original harvest season increased the risk of personal injury and loss to the hunters, since Bristol Bay weather is extremely unpredictable during the Fall and early Winter season. Fierce storms often threaten the hunting parties and prevent villages from approaching Round Island, because in the past, skiffs, outboard and other hunting equipment have been lost by the storms.

The current QWC Round Island walrus hunting harvest season opens on September 10 and closes on October 20. During the harvest season, **ADF&F Round Island Access Permits** and **QWC Hunt Permits** are issued to allow hunting parties from member villages access to Round Island waters and beaches for the specific activity of walrus hunting. All access to Round Island and waters within three (3) miles of Round Island requires an Access Permit from the State of Alaska, Department of Fish & Game. Round Island is part of the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary managed by the State. During the rest of the year, visitors to Round Island are prohibited from accessing beach areas except when arriving or leaving the Island. **Both permits are required and must be issued before departure to Round Island.**

The QWC Commissioners know that the QWC villages have traditionally hunted walrus each year when they are able to, and sometimes, there is the flexibility that walrus will not always be hunted each year due to unforeseeable circumstances. Nevertheless, the Native tradition of walrus hunting will continue on for many generations at Round Island. Generally, the permits are issued at the QWC Pre-Hunt Meeting, but may be completed any time before travelling to Round Island. Jim Woolington (Dillingham ADF&G) issues the Round Island Access Permits and BBNA Natural Resources Department issues the QWC Hunt Permits. The QWC hunt captains are required to have both permits on-hand while hunting on Round Island.

A maximum of 20 walrus may be taken **including** any walrus “struck and lost.” This means that any struck and lost will be subtracted from the total number allotted for the villages. During the QWC Pre-Hunt Meeting, the QWC Commissioners and hunters decide the allocation for each village.

In the 2001 QWC Pre-Hunt Meeting, the Qayassiq Walrus Commissioners drafted a proposal to the QWC Cooperators and the Board of Game for an earlier walrus hunt in the Eastside (Nushagak drainage villages) from September 10 –October 31 each year, but the Togiak and Twin Hills hunting dates would be unchanged.

The extreme weather conditions have prevented the Nushagak area villages and Togiak and Twin Hills from participating in the Round Island walrus hunt. BBNA presented the draft proposal to the QWC Cooperators for a Round Island walrus hunt extension in the event that bad weather prevents QWC communities from harvesting walrus.

At the March 2003 Board of Game meetings, the Board adopted an amended proposal revising the hunting period for walrus hunting on Round Island in the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary. The newly adopted hunting period for hunting begins September 10th and ends October 20th every year. Since the walrus hunt in the sanctuary is governed by a cooperative agreement and the changes adopted by the Board of Game required the cooperators to modify the Round Island Cooperative Agreement. On April 22, 2003, the four signatories to the cooperative agreement began updating this document. A final cooperative agreement was signed with the hunt date changes by September 3, 2003. Every time any walrus hunt issues need to be taken care of and proposals have to be drafted for the QWC Cooperators, they have to go through this process. The Qayassiq Walrus Commissioners are the primary ones responsible for drafting any proposals to change the annual Qayassiq (Round Island) subsistence walrus hunt date changes or take action on any walrus related issues. If the issue will make a significant change to the QWC Round Island Cooperative Agreement, then the four Cooperators consisting of QWC, EWC, ADF&G, and USFWS meet and come to a consensus prior to signing off on the agreement amendments.

Harvest Monitoring

In 1992, with the cooperation of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, ADF&G, and BBNA, the QWC selected an Alaska Native to monitor the harvest for each village. The Monitor traveled to Round Island with each hunting party, documented the events, measured the length and girth of the walrus, tagged ivory tusks and prepared a summary report of the harvest season. For the past several years BBNA, upon approval of the QWC Commissioners, have successfully employed a Round Island Harvest Monitor to monitor the walrus hunt.

From 2003 to 2005, the QWC approved to have Mary Cody, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service of Anchorage, and Helen Aderman, QWC Executive Director and BBNA Staff to monitor the annual Qayassiq (Round Island) subsistence walrus hunt from September 7th to 22st. But, since 2006, there has been no funding from the Round Island Cooperators to monitor the traditional Fall walrus hunt. Other hunt monitor participants have included ADF&G biologist staff Marian Snively who mentored Michelle Snyder, Fall Monitor intern of Dillingham. They monitored the walrus hunt in 2006. After September 22nd until October 20th, the QWC Commissioners authorized BBNA Natural Resources Department staff to hire Round Island Monitors as needed for the walrus hunts. The Togiak and Twin Hills hunt crew shared a Round Island Harvest Monitor to monitor their walrus hunts. Generally, if no QWC Hunt Monitor is hired, the QWC Hunt Captain can be designated as the monitor during the Round Island hunt.

The staff conduct daily walrus counts, record weather conditions, conduct seabird counts, and if time allows count the Steller sea lions at Eastcape side of the Island. Having a monitor on site has been helpful to the QWC Hunt Captains and crew. They call Round Island via VHF radio, the monitor lets the hunt captains know the number of walrus currently on Main Beach of Round Island, the weather conditions (wind direction,

kilometers, wave conditions, visibility conditions, etc), and answer any walrus population and monitor related questions. During the hunt, the monitor(s) are picked up at Boat Cove by the hunt captain/crew via outboat motor skiffs to the Main Beach designated walrus hunting site. The monitors collect data as mentioned earlier. A hunt monitor report is prepared prior to the Qayassiq Walrus Commission's Post Hunt meeting. The QWC Commissioners and QWC Hunt Captains attend the meetings and give a hunt report from their community and present any concerns to the Commission.

The QWC is proud to take an active role in harvest monitoring and hope to continue this project in the future years. The progress and some struggles of recent years shows Alaska Natives can co-manage and successfully manage their own Natural Resources. This itself is a testament to all the hard work and dedication of the original walrus hunters who petitioned for the Round Island harvest. We as Alaska Natives are moving forward and will continue to do so with our Ancestors guiding us along the way of positive changes around our world.

After nineteen successful harvest seasons, the QWC is proud to demonstrate the positive result of cooperation between the USFWS, the ADF&G, and the Eskimo Walrus Commission. Now that the walrus hunt has been established, the villages look forward to hunting walrus where their ancestors hunted, and sharing fresh walrus every Fall. The QWC also strives to assume greater responsibility for each harvest.