

FAQs

WALRUS HARVESTS

IN A WALRUS HARVEST, WHAT PARTS OF THE ANIMAL ARE USED?

Alaska Native people have depended on Pacific walrus for millennia. Today, walrus remain crucial for the food security of Alaska Native Arctic coastal communities. The meat, organs and blubber are prepared and preserved for food throughout the year, while other parts are used for tools and materials, drums and art pieces. In a walrus harvest, the entire animal is used. A fundamental cultural practice of Arctic Indigenous people is respecting and honoring the whales, walrus, seals and other marine or land animals. It is understood the animals give themselves for the harvest, which means the people - receivers of this precious gift - cherish all it offers, including the bone and ivory that become artwork and handicrafts.

HOW MANY WALRUS ARE HARVESTED ANNUALLY?

The annual harvest of Pacific walrus is less than 2% of the current population estimate of 283,000 as determined by U.S. government managers in collaboration with Russian researchers and Alaska Native communities. The annual harvest is sustainable to maintain a healthy walrus population and is shared with Native Chukotkans across the Bering Strait in Russia who also rely on walrus for their food security.

(Information provided by the Eskimo Walrus Commission, the co-management organization representing 19 Alaska Native coastal communities' interests in Pacific walrus.)

ARE WALRUS HARVESTED RESPONSIBLY?

Yes. Alaska Native communities and the Eskimo Walrus Commission strongly advocate and promote the traditional harvest management practices that have conserved and protected the Pacific walrus population for thousands of years. Additionally, the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) provides protection, management and enforcement of regulations for marine mammal harvests. MMPA allows for Alaska Native harvests 1) for subsistence purposes, 2) for the purposes of creating and selling authentic Alaska Native artwork, handicrafts and clothing, and 3) that are not done in a wasteful manner.

WALRUS IVORY

WHO IS ALLOWED TO CARVE WALRUS IVORY?

Pacific walrus are protected by the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and may only be harvested by coastal-dwelling Alaska Native people. After MMPA became law in 1972, raw walrus ivory may only be sold by Alaska Native people to other Alaska Native people. Only Alaska Native people can carve or scrimshaw walrus ivory into art and craftwork that can be legally sold whether directly to an individual or a store for resale.

HOW DOES WALRUS IVORY SUPPORT A COMMUNITY?

Alaska Natives in remote villages not only rely on subsistence hunting, gathering and fishing as a critical source of nutrition and usable materials, they also rely heavily on sales of authentic, Native craftwork to bring money into communities that have limited economic resources and high cost of living. In a recent survey of artists in the Bering Strait Region, 68% depend on the sale of their artwork to supplement their income for basic needs. The carving and etching of walrus ivory has a long history in Alaska Native communities. Ivory carving remains a strong tradition passed through generations reaching back millennia.

(Taken from Arts of the Bering Strait Region: The Economic, Social, and Cultural Role of Traditional Art and Crafts prepared by McDowell Group and published by Kawerak, Inc. 2020.)

HOW CAN I IDENTIFY VARIOUS TYPES OF IVORY?

Although ivory from different animal species, such as elephant and walrus, are similar in appearance, they can be properly identified in most situations, as each type has distinct features.

For example, walrus ivory is normally white but may darken through age or exposure to environmental factors.

For more information about identifying various types of ivory, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's online forensic library.

WALRUS IVORY PURCHASES

AM I ALLOWED TO PURCHASE OR OWN WALRUS IVORY?

Federal law explicitly allows the sale and ownership of walrus ivory products when legally produced by Alaska Natives.

However, some states have banned all ivory, including walrus ivory. These "blanket ban" laws are well-intended and aim to help end elephant poaching, but the unintended consequences for Alaska Native communities have been severe. These laws also violate the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. Alaska visitors and consumers are encouraged to check their own state laws and contact their legislators.

CAN I TRANSPORT ALASKA NATIVE IVORY ART AND CRAFTWORK?

Authentic Alaska Native artwork made of walrus ivory may be exported. Consumers should keep the receipt for any items purchased. The receipt should include the name, address and tribal affiliation of the vendor with clear identification that the item was purchased in the United States.

To determine whether an export permit is needed for travel out of the country, contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska at (907) 271-6198. Travelers should also check with the destination country as import permits also may be required.

LAWS ABOUT WALRUS IVORY

DO INDIVIDUAL STATES HAVE BANS ON WALRUS IVORY?

In 2018, after aggressive movement worldwide to halt the poaching of African elephants for their ivory, U.S. states began to pass laws that banned the sale of all ivory, and did not distinguish elephant ivory and walrus ivory.

State governments may not be familiar with the sustainable, responsible and traditional harvest of walrus, nor the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and its provisions.

As of 2021, six states have enacted overbroad bans on ivory sales, including walrus ivory, and several others are considering adoption of such laws.

While these blanket ivory ban laws are designed to help stop the horrific practices associated with the elephant ivory trade, they have unintentionally harmed the ability of Alaska Native people to effectively continue the respectful and responsible harvest of walrus in their communities. These laws also violate federal law as the harvest and sale of walrus ivory by Alaska Natives is protected by the MMPA.

Individual bans have caused confusion among consumers about the legality of possessing handcrafted works of walrus ivory art, dramatically impacting Native artists and their local economies.

HOW ARE BROAD IVORY BANS IMPACTING ALASKA NATIVES?

These bans have already had significant economic impacts on individuals, families and businesses in Alaska Native communities that make and/or sell walrus ivory products.

Alaska Native hunters will struggle to obtain the economic resources needed for gas and tools used to hunt for food to feed their families and communities. It would also contribute to loss of culture because artists would no longer be able to support themselves with traditional practices.

WHAT SHOULD STATES WITH BROAD IVORY BANS DO?

Lawmakers whose states have blanket ivory bans need to know about the unintended consequences their laws have on Alaska Native people and how deeply those laws negatively impact Alaska Native communities.

Legislators in states that have enacted ivory ban laws should check the language used in the legislation and ensure it distinguishes between the ivory types and does not inadvertently ban walrus, mammoth or mastodon ivory. Laws should be consistent with the Marine Mammal Protection Act because Alaska Natives can sell their legally harvested ivory anywhere in the United States.

States considering ivory bans should ensure the language distinguishes the type of ivory that is illegal and should avoid banning all ivory. Ivory that does not contribute to the decline of any species and is traditionally used by Alaska Natives comes from harvested walrus, and prehistoric mammoth and mastodon ivory.

ARE FEDERAL LAWMAKERS WORKING TO ADDRESS OVERLY BROAD IVORY BANS?

Senate Bill S.804, known as the Empowering Rural Economies Through Alaska Native Sustainable Arts and Handicrafts Act, made progress through the 116th Congress (2019-20). This bill amends

the Marine Mammal Protection Act to prohibit any state or locality from banning the importation, sale, barter, or possession of an authentic Native handcraft article of mammoth, mastodon, walrus ivory or marine mammal bones produced by an Alaska Native person. This bill also prohibits states from imposing bans on marine mammal and fossilized ivory products produced by Alaska Native people.

Unfortunately, S.804 didn't make it through the legislative process in time, and changes in Senate seats after the 2020 election required the bill to start the process over. The bill will be updated and reintroduced, and senators will need to be reeducated on the significance of walrus ivory among Alaska Native people, as well as the negative impacts of blanket ivory ban laws.

WALRUSIVORY.ORG

WHAT IS WALRUSIVORY.ORG?

This effort is designed to create awareness about the importance of walrus ivory art to Alaska Native people.

WalrusIvory.org aims to help lawmakers and consumers better understand the stark differences between the responsible, respectful and critical harvest of walrus and the tragedies of the elephant ivory trade.

Those with an interest in supporting Alaska Native art, culture, traditions and economies are asked to speak up and introduce both legislators and consumers to the beauty and necessity of the walrus harvest and use of walrus ivory.

PANDEMIC EFFECTS ON NATIVE ARTISTS

HOW IS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTING ALASKA NATIVE WALRUS IVORY ARTISTS?

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a considerable drop in the number of travelers visiting Alaska communities and shops. Tourism travel and travel by artists to access markets in larger communities came to an immediate halt.

This led to a notable decline in the purchase of Alaska Native handicrafts, which created a significant financial loss for Alaska Native artists.

In a 2020 survey of Alaska Native artists, 52% stated they suffered dire consequences as the result of almost no in-person tourist sales.

In addition to the lack of in-person sales, the opportunity to reach individuals to provide information correcting the misperceptions around walrus ivory was also impacted.

WHAT CAN SUPPORTERS DO TO HELP OFFSET THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ALASKA NATIVE ARTISTS?

Travelers are encouraged to visit Alaska and celebrate Alaska Natives' living tradition. Support Alaska Native artists, their communities and their cultures by purchasing ivory artwork.