Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Interior Department officials have recommended that the United States oppose the June 1977 ruling of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) which has the effect of banning the subsistence hunting of bowhead whales by Alaskan Eskimos.

Interior under Secretary James A. Joseph proposed this position to Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance in an October 10 letter in which he said, "Our trust responsibility to this Native American population cannot be ignored or subjugated to other concerns."

In a position paper on the subject, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Forrest Gerard said that the United States is now apparently faced with a choice "between resource protection and the cultural integrity of our own indigenous people, the Eskimos."

Gerard pointed out that yankee whalers, not Eskimos, caused the critical decline in the Bowhead whale stocks. He urged objection to the IWC ban together with "the steps necessary to ensure that there will be effective Eskimo self-regulation of the 1978 hunts, responding to the concerns raised by the IWC and by U.S. scientists."

United States citizens would not be bound by the IWC ruling if the United States officially objected to the ruling.

Gerard, in his paper, argued that protection of the whales and maintenance of the Eskimo's cultural/nutritional practices were mutually consistent goals.

Gerard said: "Eskimos have already initiated efforts to establish an effective self-regulatory regime, and they will be receptive to our concerns if we act in a manner consistent with our trust. Since the U.S. scientists agree that the bowhead population can withstand some hunting, our most responsible action would have to include working cooperatively with the whaling villages to reduce the number of whales killed in a manner which least infringes upon Eskimo cultural values and subsistence activities."