

CARVING A PATH

Walrus ivory art is part of a tradition spanning generations

By Eric Lucas

» **Susie Silook learned to carve walrus ivory from her father** and brother-in-law, who had learned from their forebears, who'd learned from theirs—an Arctic Indigenous heritage stretching back millennia. But modern themes mark her use of this ancient tradition, which blends fantasy with women's empowerment and justice issues using timeless Yupik forms such as dolls.

When Silook was a girl growing up on St. Lawrence Island, in far-western Alaska, her family depended heavily on her father's Bering Sea walrus hunts for much more than ivory. The marine mammals provided sustenance and clothing—and cash, when her father carved the animals' tusks into artworks for sale.

"Sometimes there was literally no food on the table until my dad came home from the hunt," recalls Silook, now based in Anchorage, and an internationally known Alaska Native artist who has continued her father's craft.

The walrus harvest heritage for Western Alaska coastal peoples continues, too. "Every year, our hunt crew provides for at least five families in our community," says Perry Pungowiyi, an elder and community leader in Savoonga, one of the two Yupik villages on St. Lawrence Island, and a place where a simple steak bought at the store can cost \$45. "I learned from my uncles when I was growing up how to hunt responsibly, and because the walrus ivory provides cash, it extends our food source beyond the meat."

Pungowiyi also carves tusks, as do many Native residents along Alaska's western coast from Bristol Bay to Utqiagvik. Walrus ivory has been the basis of a cash economy in Western



» Above, Susie Silook's *Flying*, carved from walrus ivory. Below left, an umiak boat with a walrus-skin covering in Utqiagvik.

Alaska since at least 19th century whaling days, when demand for scrimshaw brought global recognition to this ancient art. But now the craft is in trouble, inadvertently swept up in the 21st century campaign to protect elephant populations by banning ivory possession and sale.

Although walrus ivory harvest and use is completely legal under federal law, five states have recently banned possession or sale of ivory of any sort. And carvers are finding that global publicity about elephant ivory bans means that demand for their art is dropping—even though it is legal and has absolutely

nothing to do with elephant conservation.

Official population surveys estimate the Pacific walrus population at about 283,000—far above the late 19th century low point of around 50,000. The annual harvest by Alaska Native hunters is about 4,000, estimates Vera Metcalf, director of Nome's Eskimo Walrus Commission, which represents 19 Yupik and Iñupiat communities along the Bering Sea coast. Add in about 1,300 walrus taken by Chukotkan Native hunters in Russia, and the annual take is less than 2% of the walrus population.

"That's a totally sustainable subsistence

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hunt," Metcalf declares. "But now some of our community members fear they could face prosecution in these states, even though it's completely legal under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. We support the elephant ivory ban. But walrus ivory is totally different. This is placing a lot of pressure on the ivory-carving craft," she says. "These pieces are made in the entryways of houses, or in the garage, and it's amazing what the carvers accomplish. It represents the walrus's gift to us."

Indeed, walrus ivory is transcendently beautiful. Silook's neotraditional Yupik dolls present an ethereal glow, like moonlight. And they reflect thousands of years of human life in Arctic regions.

"In Alaska, walrus populations are well-monitored, and the animals are treasured by Alaska Native people, who have relied on them for thousands of years," says Diane Kaplan, president and CEO of Rasmuson Foundation,

one of Alaska's most prominent forces in culture and arts. "The meat is eaten all year; hides are used to make skin boats; and tusks are used to make handles for *ulus* (knives) and weights for ice fishing. The ivory also provides a valuable source of income to carvers who turn it into stunning pieces of artwork. We are passionate about ensuring that Alaska Native people can do what they have always done and continue to make art from ivory."

Silook, who is a zealous advocate of Indigenous rights, is even more outspoken. "This is probably the strongest remaining subsistence culture in the United States," she observes. "Walrus numbers are strong, and it's not good to have overpopulation among wild animals."

"Most of the remaining biodiversity in the world is in Indigenous territory. And we know how to care for it."

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