

Testimony of Megan Onders
Chief, King Island Native Community
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
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Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Val Hoyle, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today. My name is Megan Onders and serve as Chief of the King Island Native Community; Chair of the Bering Strait Development Council, our regional economic development organization and serve as the Bering Strait region village representative of the Alaska Federation of Natives Board of Directors. I also serve on the Kawerak Board of Directors, our regional self-governance non-profit for the Bering Strait.

It truly is an honor to share with you why this bill is so important for Alaska. Thank you, Congressman Begich, for being our advocate in Congress and working to advance this bill. This bill is central to the economic health of Alaska Native villages, especially in the Bering Strait communities of Diomede, Gambell, Savoonga and Shishmaref. This bill is about our way of life. This bill affirms the right of Alaska Native people to utilize the bones, ivory and baleen of whales and walrus in cultural and traditional art. The Artist Act is a jobs bill.

Our artists or ivory carvers are our cultural bearers, who hold the knowledge of the environment and of the relationships with marine mammals of which are reflected in ivory carvings. Carving is a skill passed down from generation to generation. This bill ensures that our way of life and the Native art we create and be sold legally in State that have banned our Alaska Native walrus ivory carvings. This bill enables our carvers to pay their heating fuel bills which can cost upwards of \$1000/month during our recent Dec-March 30 below zero winter. This bill enables Native people in our villages to afford groceries and other non-durable goods such as cleaning supplies. This bill is also an employment bill; carving is a form of cash employment and a social support system. Ivory carving is an art form passed from generation to generation.

Alaska Native marine mammal hunting is regulated, through cooperative agreements with the federal government. Section 119 enacted in the 1994 amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act established the authority for the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to enter into cooperative management agreements with Alaska Native Organizations for the purpose of conservation and subsistence use by Native people. The Eskimo Walrus Commission and the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission are two of such ANOs that co-manage the species within the context of national and international law. Our tribes in addition have enacted tribal codes with regard to subsistence hunting.

The exemption for Alaska Natives in the MMPA allows for the taking of marine mammals for subsistence purposes (16 USC §1388(b)(1)) as well as for the purpose of selling handicrafts and clothing (16 USC §1388(b)(2)). The Marine Mammal Protection Act authorizes the Secretaries of Interior and Commerce to enter into cooperative agreements with Alaska Native organization for the co-management of subsistence species including the collection and analysis of data on marine mammal populations, monitor the harvest for subsistence, participate in marine mammal research by federal, academic and private organizations, as well as develop co-management

structures with State and Federal agencies (16 USC §1388). This is a regulated way of life, and our Alaska Native walrus ivory carvers are a central driver of village economies. This bill specifically amends the MMPA to prohibit any State from banning the importation, sale, barter or possession of authentic Alaska Native art, such as made from ivory or baleen.

We are here today, because our right to carve and sell walrus ivory was included in a noble, yet overly broad effort to curb the sale of elephant ivory from Africa. In 2014, New York and New Jersey banned the sale of ivory. In 2015 California banned the sale of ivory from walrus, mammoth and mastodon. Residents often find mammoth ivory and create beautiful carvings. By 2016 both Hawaii and Oregon banned the sale of ivory. For more than a decade this effort has threatened the stability of our walrus art market and the economic system that pays the bills. It has also caused confusion. Tourists who are increasingly visiting our homeland believe they cannot legally buy ivory. This is not the case. In fact, the Indian Arts and Craft Board and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have played their part with education pamphlets on the legal purchase of walrus ivory.

Our way of life is not just one of survival, but an economic system of hunting, gathering, sharing and in fact thriving. Our marine mammals provide basic food and nutritional support for people in our communities. In fact, it's among the healthiest foods on earth known for high levels of omega 3s and a source of vitamin D that enables Inuit to survive long dark winters. Our ivory and baleen art reflects the intelligence, knowledge and talent of our people. It's a blending of cultural and cash economy that makes life possible in our rural and remote communities. The passage of this bill through Congress will ensure the health, well-being, social support and employment within our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. In closing, For the record, I would like to thank Senator Sullivan of Alaska who has been a champion of this bill for nearly a decade. Thank you for not giving up on our way of life, on our economy and acknowledging the importance of bill to our people.