Whale on the Table

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

AKTOVIK, Alaska -- You've heard about the Atkins diet, the South Beach diet, the Dean Ornish diet, the Zone. Well, based on my research here in the Arctic, let me present to you the one approach that is guaranteed to help you lose 10 pounds a week or your money back!

[Note: to apply for a refund, you must send a notarized receipt showing that you purchased this day's newspaper in Kaktovik, as well as "before" and "after" swimsuit photos of yourself; suitable for publication.]

I'm talking about the Eskimo diet, the traditional one. Even the portliest New Yorkers will slim rapidly if they eat nothing but whale blubber, caribou meat and anything else that they personally harpoon or hunt down.

I had this brainstorm for a new best seller to cash in on the diet craze the day the Inupiat Eskimos here in Kaktovik brought in their first whale of the season. Each year they have the right to harpoon three whales for their own subsistence diet, and the town was giddy with celebration.

The school closed, the shops closed, and even the U.S. post office took a break so the whole population of 270 could assemble on the beach under a gently falling snow to hug and cheer as the victorious whalers brought in the supply of winter meat and blubber. (An audio slide show of the event is available here.)

The elders spoke the Inupiat language, while the kids were more hip. One girl stared at the 43-foot-long bowhead whale and shouted, "Hey, man, that's heavy!"

Two bulldozers hauled the whale onto the beach (after breaking the two-inch-thick rope, twice). Children danced on top of the whale, and then the adults began carving it up, with one man dispatched to shoot his rifle periodically to ward off the polar bears that were circling the beach hungrily. The first "muktuk," or bits of skin and blubber, were rushed into a pot, then passed around to all.

"It's good with ketchup or A-1 Steak Sauce," one man explained, offering those condiments as well. The local people had handfuls of the muktuk; I tried it and found it pretty awful. That's a major reason the Eskimo diet will trim those waistlines.

That scene unfolded because, for all its "save the whales" piety in international forums, the United States has strongly and quite properly backed the right of American Indians and Eskimos to kill whales the way they traditionally have. Natives in places like Kaktovik depend on the whale meat, and harpooning whales is an essential part of their culture.
It's true that the U.S. government lists the bowhead whale as endangered, but the population appears to have recovered to a still modest 10,000. The tiny numbers taken by the natives keep their way of life intact without threatening the species.

Still, I can't help detecting a whiff of American hypocrisy here. If we insist on the right of Native Americans to kill whales listed as endangered, then how can we so vociferously oppose the hunting of much more populous species of whales by Norwegians, Icelanders and Japanese, who also have whale hunting as part of their traditional cultures?

Some whale species, like the blue, are truly endangered and should never be hunted. But there are hundreds of thousands of minke whales, perhaps as many as a million, and they don't seem in any jeopardy. So the ban on hunting minke whales can no longer be easily justified on the basis of saving the species. It is now possible both to save the whales and to kill them.

The remaining argument against whaling is an ethical one: whales are highly developed mammals, and it is immoral to prey upon them. That's a fine reason to spurn whale sushi oneself, but a lousy reason to prevent the Japanese from partaking. Otherwise, Hindus could try to prohibit our burger addiction.

Granted, there are lots more Norwegians and Japanese than Inupiat Eskimos, the Japanese "scientific" whaling effort is more about sushi than science, and none of us want to put whale populations in danger. One solution would be to keep the moratorium on large-scale commercial whaling in the open ocean, but to let any traditional whaling people (including the Japanese and Norwegians) harvest sustainable numbers of whales within 200 miles of shore.

Sure, whales are magnificent. But so are dogs, which end up on dinner plates in Asia. By insisting on the rights of our own natives to pursue the Eskimo diet while denying similar rights to other whaling nations, I'm afraid we in the U.S. aren't taking the moral high ground — we're just being hypocritical.