

CHAPTER FOUR



Oftentimes the Yup'ik cannot use all the fish that the men catch before it spoils. To avoid wasting any of this vital resource, they dry a portion of it—like this salmon from the Kuskokwim River.

climate is not for the weak. It takes knowledge of the area and a great deal of strength and fortitude.

Native Alaskan Joan Naviyuk Kane is an award-winning poet and novelist who writes about the struggles of the northern Alaskan Natives. Through her work she helps her own Inupiaq culture carry on.

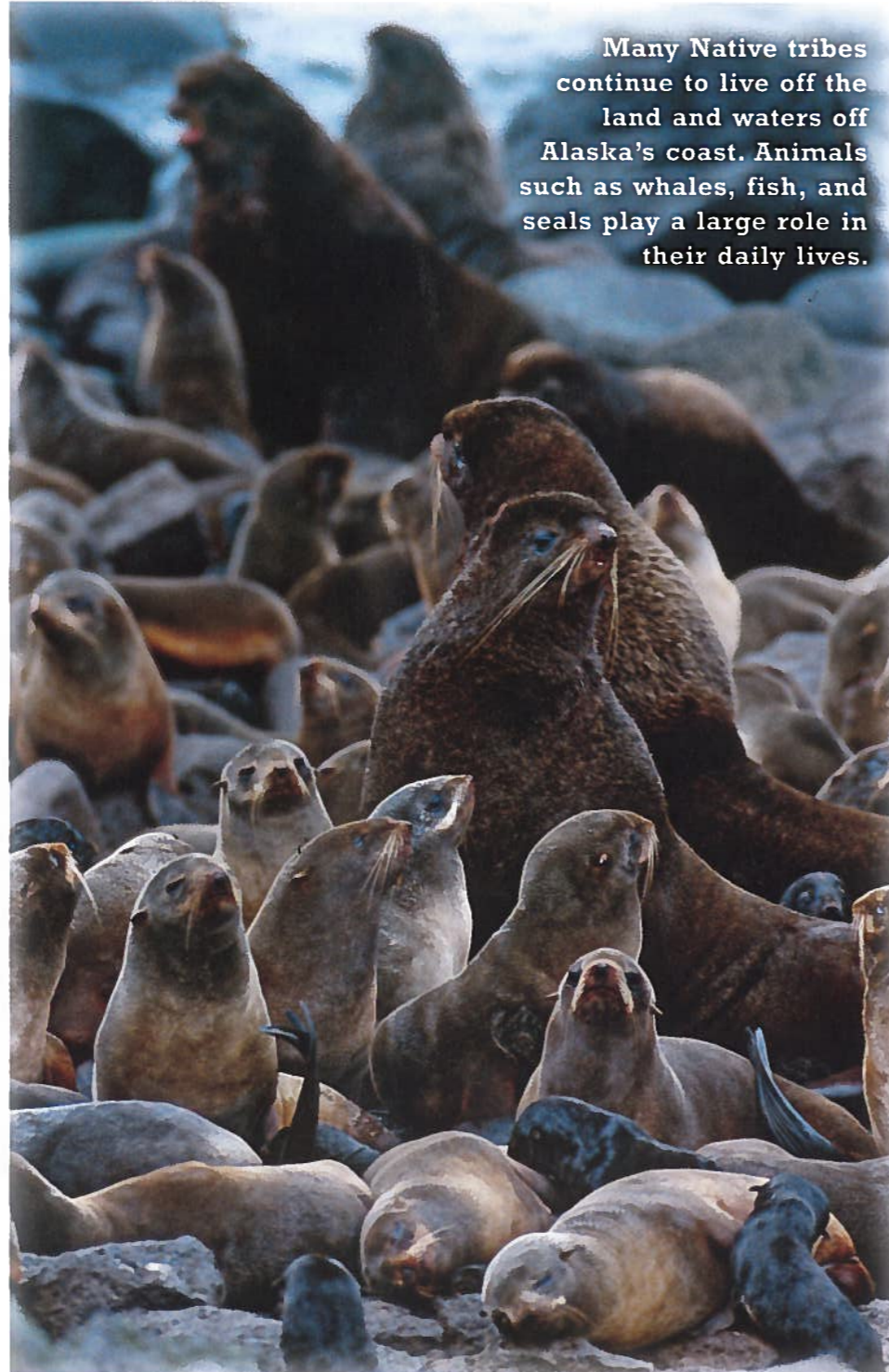
“Part of the reason why King Islanders were renowned carvers, singers, and dancers was because they had this supreme location for marine mammal hunting, so that part of survival was not a big issue,” she explains. “My boys know a couple of dances. My 22-year-old niece, who is living with us now, is a fabulous, graceful Eskimo dancer. The only video she lets my boys put on is Eskimo dancing. I’m extremely ungainly and awkward,” Kane laughs, “but I’m trying to learn.”¹

The Inupiaq and the St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik

Her own work deals with a more serious side of life as a Native Alaskan. “In history, federal Indian policies moved from extermination to assimilation to the self-determination we see today,” Kane says. “In 1959, which is also the year that Alaska became a state, it was the height of the assimilation era. Also, it was increasingly difficult to keep teachers out on King Island, and they finally shut down the school.”²



In order to survive, Native American cultural practices must be passed from one generation to the next. Here, an elder Yup'ik woman teaches younger Native Alaskans how to do bead work at Akiak High School.



Many Native tribes continue to live off the land and waters off Alaska's coast. Animals such as whales, fish, and seals play a large role in their daily lives.

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Kane credits her parents for supporting her interest in hanging onto her Inupiaq culture. "My mother's generation, people who lived on the island before relocation, are fully bilingual. I've been very fortunate to attend public schools in Anchorage and have my parents supportive of my wanting to learn things. My mother worked very hard to make me feel proud of who I was."³

Kane knew that not all her family members had been so lucky. "My grandfather never spoke a word of English," she reveals. "Providing for his ten children was entirely dependent on hunting seals and walrus and trading with mainlanders for reindeer and salmon. It was a very hard life. I don't know how to, say, split a walrus skin to make a kayak. I don't know how to do any of the things that were just a part of daily life."⁴

Another part of Kane's culture that she fears for is the King Island dialect of the Inupiaq language. Kane says she doesn't want to create an image of her Native people vanishing, "but the fact of the matter is that most of the people in my generation do not understand the dialect at all. My mother was emphatic about speaking the dialect to me."⁵

Out of all the different groups of Native Alaskan clans, the Yup'ik languages are still spoken by the most people. Linguist Michael Krauss is the founder of the Alaska Native Language Center. He has made it his life's work to document and preserve Alaska's twenty Native languages. As he explains, "Only Central Yup'ik is still spoken by children, in about a dozen villages out of about sixty. It's by no means a safe language, but it's the best in Alaska by far. There may be a minority of children on St. Lawrence Island, in Gambell and Savoonga, speaking Siberian Yup'ik." He adds, "When a language is no longer spoken by children, it will become extinct in a lifetime."⁶

So how has Central Yup'ik survived? "It was luckier than most," Krauss shares, "in that the area had almost no resources or harbors that white men were interested in. And it had a relatively large population to begin with that has gotten much larger. And it happened to attract Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Moravian missionaries who were quite interested and empathetic

CHAPTER FOUR

toward the language. For a while, missionaries reinforced the Central Yup'ik language, until American schools moved in and punished children for speaking their own language."⁷

Some people think that all Americans should speak a single language. But, as Krauss points out, "Languages are not merely different words for the same things. Each language is full of specialized information about the world that only those people have learned. And each language has its own take on the nature of our common existence. No human language is better than another in that regard."⁸

The problem is not unique to the Native Alaskans. "We're losing languages, worldwide, about one a week," shares Krauss. "It's unprecedented, mass extinction."⁹

Gambell is one of two villages on the island of St. Lawrence. Along with Savoonga, it is located on the island's north shore. But the villages do not interact with each other—or other parts of Alaska—much at all. The terrain between the villages contains no road. And the nearest town, Nome, is 150 miles away on the mainland.

The Inupiaq and the St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik



Repeat After Me . . .

One of the reasons that Native Alaskan languages are difficult for some people to learn is that some letters are used in a variety of ways. The Inupiaq language, for example, includes only three vowels in its alphabet. But they can be used and pronounced a total of twelve different ways.

a = uh
aa = aahhh
ai = long a
au = oh

i = short i
ia = ee-uh
ii = eeeeeeeeeeee
iu = eee-oo

u = oo
ua = oo-uh
ui = oo-ee
uu = oooooooooo

