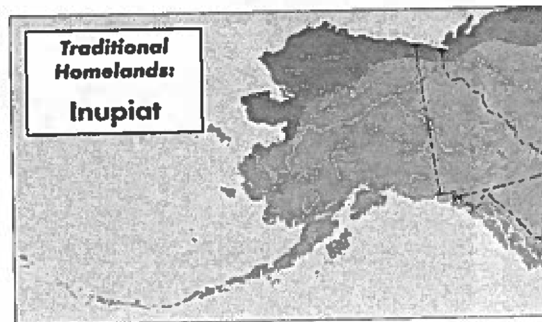
# Inupiat

The Inupiat Eskimos are the farthest north Alaska Natives. They include bowhead whale hunters living along the Chukchi and Beaufort coasts of the Arctic Ocean, who launch skin-covered boats into ice-choked waters to chase, harpoon and drag ashore 60-ton behemoths. They include polar bear, seal and walrus hunters of Kotzebue Sound and the Seward Peninsula. They include salmon fishermen, reindeer herders and caribou hunters along the coast, inland rivers, or in the arctic tundra of the central Brooks Range. They include women skilled in sewing skins into boat covers, who can fashion fur garments to protect against instant frostbite in howling winter winds, who spend days in their kitchens cooking up feasts of traditional, ceremonial and Western foods to feed entire villages.

Alaska's Inupiat live in many small villages where their ancestors have lived for centuries, and they live in larger towns built atop ancient trading sites. More than 12,600 Inupiat people live today in their traditional homelands — the face-shaped northwest corner of Alaska and along the North Slope. Inupiat people also are among the 6,000 Eskimos living in Anchorage, and more than 1,500 Eskimos in Fairbanks; the census does not distinguish between Inupiat and Yup'ik.




Barrow, the northernmost city in Alaska, is one of those old Inupiat trading sites. With a population of 4,100, more than half of whom are Inupiat, Barrow is home to Arctic Slope Regional Corp., perhaps the richest Native corporation in the state, and headquarters for the North Slope Borough, one of the wealthiest local governments in Alaska by virtue of property taxes on North Slope oil field developments. It's a place where whaling captains are as comfortable in the corporation's mirrored-glass office tower as in their skin *umiats* on the ocean. Tucked down around the coast off Bering Strait sits Kotzebue, a largely Inupiat town of nearly 3,600 people. Kotzebue serves as the regional and commercial center for northwest Alaska. The Inupiat region extends south to encompass the Seward Peninsula to Unalakleet River. It includes the gold-mine

FACING PAGE: *Many people from Anaktuvuk Pass, an Inupiat village in the Brooks Range, depend on caribou for food. Here, Jenny Paneak cuts caribou meat at fall hunting camp about 15 miles from the village. (Henry P. Huntington)*

town of Nome with about 3,500 people, about half of whom are Inupiat.

Westernization has come to Inupiat villages in various forms and degrees during the last two decades, blending with remnants of earlier times. Many efforts are being made in Inupiat towns and villages to strengthen cultural connections, such as Inupiaq language and culture programs in the schools. In Barrow, for instance, signs throughout the city are written in Inupiaq as well as English, and the local radio station broadcasts some programs in Inupiaq.

"Our Elders have always told us that if we lose our language, we'll lose our culture," says Fannie Akpik, head of the Inupiat studies program at Ilisagvik College in Barrow. Along with teaching, she broadcasts the Inupiaq "word of the day" over radio station KBRW, which also airs an Inupiaq story hour each weeknight. Most fluent speakers of Inupiaq are Elders or middle-aged adults.

Inupiat people living in Alaska's largest cities such as Anchorage, like other Alaska Natives in urban settings, may be more physically isolated from traditional lifestyles. A group of 25 Inupiat women from the North Slope living and working in Anchorage during the 1980s and 1990s talked about this with researcher Nancy Fogel-Chance. To maintain their cultural identity, the women purposefully maintained an important aspect of Inupiat culture — sharing. This included frequent visiting among members of small groups to help each other with transportation, childcare, food, finances, practical skills and wisdom.

"We just do what is needed," one of the women explained.

Fogel-Chance elaborates. "A direct request for assistance would be improper," she writes in the journal *Arctic*. "People are not always able to provide help. It is a serious breach of etiquette to put someone in the position of having to say 'no.' Making a need known is usually done indirectly. Additionally, the reciprocity is a long-term matter...it is rude for someone to reciprocate immediately.... Sharing does not offer a means of getting ahead, nor is it a way of redistributing scarce goods. Mostly it wards off the atomization of urban Western

*This summer aerial shows a portion of Barrow, or* Utqiagvik, *the northernmost Alaska Native settlement. The red-roofed buildling is the new school; the causeway leads across the lagoon to the part of town known as Browerville. Less than a century ago, people here still lived in semisubterranean sod houses; today buildings are elevated on pilings atop gravel pads, a modern method of arctic construction in permafrost and wetlands. (Jon R. Nickles)*

life by reinforcing a sense of 'Inupiat-ness.'"

The Inupiat people can trace their ancestors to the beginning of time in their stories; archaeologists have traced them back thousands of years in Alaska, to camping and trading sites used by some of the first Inupiat ancestors to enter from Asia. One of their oldest sites is Onion Portage on the Kobuk River. Archaeological finds in northern Alaska show a progression of cultural adaptations and change that includes hunting large mammals, netting fish and spearing caribou. About 2,500 years ago, Inupiat ancestors started hunting seals and other sea mammals. Whaling technologies appeared about 1,500 years ago. One of the oldest whaling settlements was at Point Hope. Coastal camps grew into large settlements, as people cooperated to harvest the large sea mammals. Eventually, someone started fishing with hooks and lines, and people moved inland to live by lakes and rivers. The introduction of the sinew bow from Asia gave new efficiency to caribou hunting. About 500 years ago, people started harnessing dogs to sleds to work.

Elmer Goodwin, a 55-year-old Inupiat living in Kotzebue, said that as a youngster his grandparents taught him by example such things as setting snares for rabbits and using dog sleds. "When outboards (motors) came, they taught me how to do that. Then snow

BELOW: *Ellen Paneak of Kotzebue has been flying planes through rural Alaska for about 15 years. She also carves ivory. (Barbara Willard)*

BELOW RIGHT: *Birchbark basketry is a traditional art in some Inupiat villages, as demonstrated by Jane Young in 1984 in Kobuk. Baskets are made for sale, for personal use and as gifts. (Roz Goodman)*

LEFT: *An Inupiat family returns to Barrow from fall seal hunting. (Chris Wooley)*

FACING PAGE: *Women gather at Burton Rexford's house in Barrow to sew bearded seal skins into an umiak cover. The edges of two skins are overlapped about an inch, and each edge is whipped down with stitches that go only halfway through the underlying skin. This is a water-proofing measure so needle holes do not penetrate both skins completely. Five to seven skins are needed for one cover. When the women finish, it will be stretched over the wooden umiak frame. (Henry P. Huntington)*

machines came. There's been a lot of changes since I've been alive — modern houses, telephones, cars in the village."

Goodwin lived in Los Angeles for 11 years after graduating from high school. He wanted to experience "life with white man in his own environment." He attended welding school, worked as a construction foreman and clerked in a furniture store. But he missed "my people, my Native food...seals, fish, dried fish and meat. And I missed my language. There was nobody to talk to down there." Each summer, he returned to his village to visit. Finally, he returned for good.

Today, Goodwin works in Kotzebue for the Northern Alaska Native Association, the regional corporation for 11 villages in the area. He coordinates Camp *Sivuniigvik*, "the place to make plans for the future." Elders at the summer camp teach language and survival skills to school-age youths as a way to reinforce Inupiat customs and traditions. It's held on the Kobuk River between Kotzebue and Noorvik.

Inupiat Elders, adults and young people in Kotzebue also come together as the Northern Lights Dancers, a well-traveled group that performs traditional Inupiat songs and dances in summer at the NANA Museum of the Arctic. The group was recently featured on national radio, during a broadcast from Anchorage of Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion." Radio listeners heard their drumming and singing; the studio audience saw their dancing.

Drummer Martin Woods told about seal hunting — how the hunter would shoot the seal, use a grappling hook to pull it from the water before it could sink, gut it, pay respects to its spirit, then bring it to the village for a celebration. He said he was excited about his first whale hunt with relatives from Barrow. Although he grew up spending summers in fish camp, he now has a job in town. "I'm like a city boy. I collect a paycheck. I pay taxes like everybody else." He explained how whales are hunted today with exploding harpoon tips, which more quickly kills the animal. This, he joked, "alleviates having to go on a Nantucket sleigh ride until they tire, jump on their back

and pierce their heart with a lance."

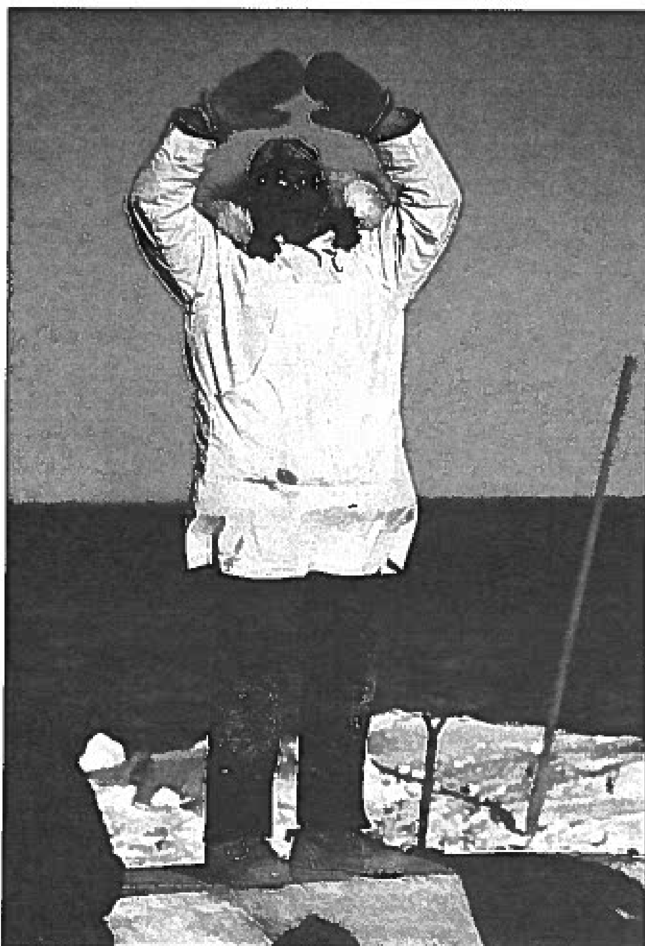
Native subsistence bowhead whaling has undergone numerous modifications in recent decades. The International Whaling Commission determines a quota for hunting, based on the strength of the whale population. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission then divides that quota among the whaling villages, allotting each a certain number of "strikes," or attempts. The AEWC is composed of Natives from each of the eight Inupiat whaling villages and the two Siberian Yupik villages on St. Lawrence Island.

Whaling figures prominently in the history of the Inupiat region. In the late 1840s, American whalers sailed to the Bering Strait region in the first big wave of outsiders. They brought trade goods and employed some Inupiat whalers seasonally. They also brought disease and alcohol. Although few whalers settled in the region, their impact was long-lived.

Today subsistence whaling remains a strong and visible aspect of Inupiat culture. Hunting these large creatures from small craft in the polar seas is dangerous and requires immeasurable seafaring skills and cooperation between boats. The entire community spends months preparing gear, clothing and food for the crews. Once landed, the whale is divided among crew members, and shares are given to Elders, families without hunters and sometimes sent to relatives in cities. Throughout the year, whale is shared at festivals, holidays and other special occasions.

Even though whaling is closely associated with Inupiat culture, the majority of Inupiat villages are not directly involved with hunting bowheads. However hunting for beluga whales, walrus, and bearded and ringed seals is important to most of the villages. Spring harvests in the Kotzebue basin focus on bearded and ringed seals off Cape Krusenstern and Cape Espenberg. Beluga hunters pitch tents along the beach at Elephant Point on Eschscholtz Bay, where belugas feed on spawning smelt.

What Inupiat people do largely depends on the season and available resources. In addition



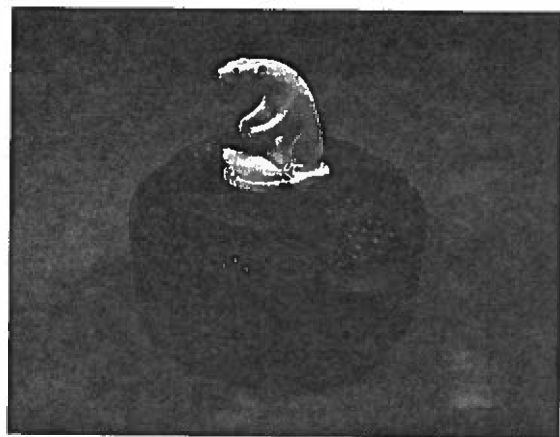
**FAR LEFT:** *On the ice outside Barrow, a jubilant Edward Itta is about to land the first whale of his career as a whaling captain. Here he shouts "walk away," the instruction for people to start pulling the ropes attached to the whale's tail. The use of a block-and-tackle helps the crew pull the whale onto the ice. (Henry P. Huntington)*

**LEFT:** *The women of a whaling crew prepare* uunaalik *(boiled fresh whale blubber, skin and meat) to feed the men doing the butchering. (Henry P. Huntington)*

to sea mammals, villagers may harvest caribou, polar and grizzly bears, musk oxen, whitefish, tomcod, salmon, smelt, arctic char, waterfowl, berries and wild vegetables. Subsistence activities are culturally important and often provide most of a family's nutritional needs.

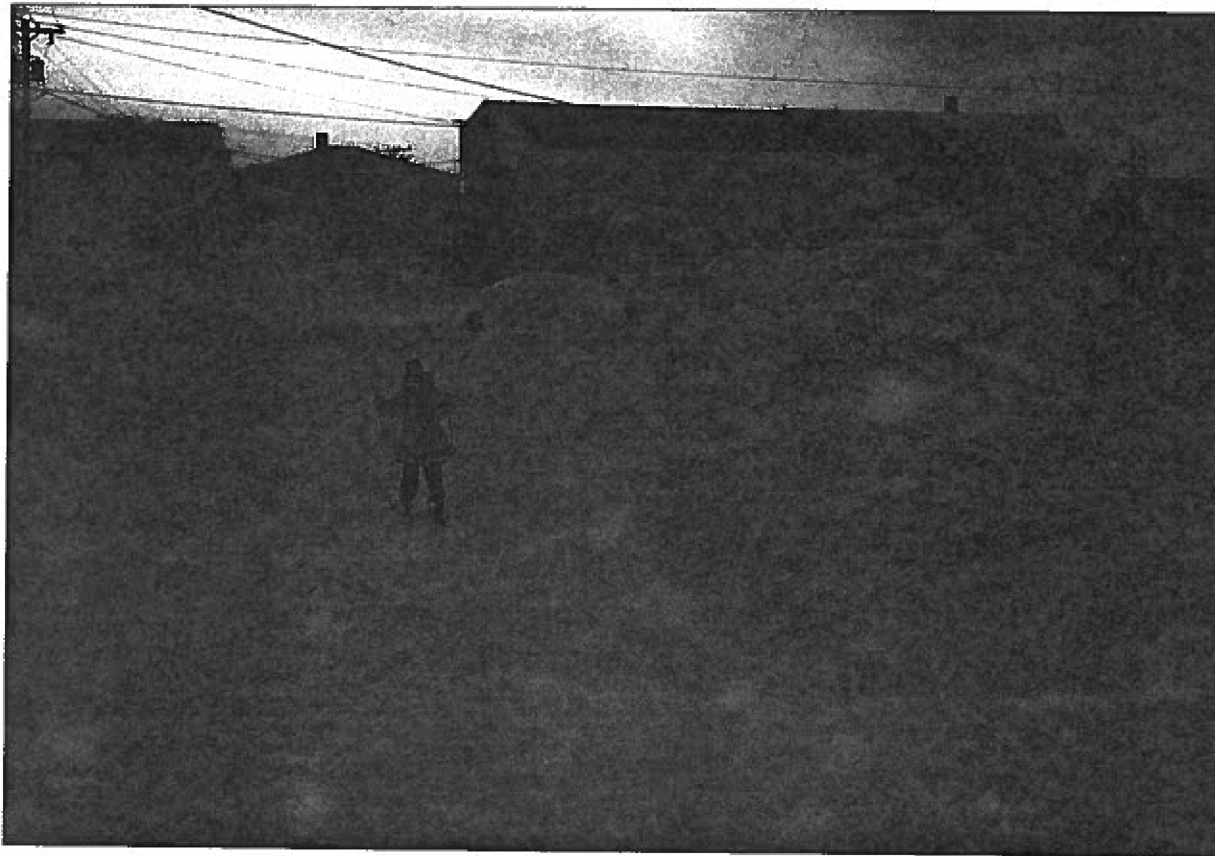
BELOW: *Inupiat people used baleen, a bony substance taken from the mouth of a bowhead whale, for buckets, scoops and sled runners; it was sought by commercial whalers for manufacture as corset stays and umbrella ribs. Baskets coiled from thin strips of baleen were first made in the early 1900s. This baleen basket with its ivory finial was made by the late George Omnik of Point Hope, a master of the art. Today, his sons James Sr. and John and his grandson James Jr. continue the tradition. (Steve McCutcheon)*

RIGHT: *Many villagers get around by snow machines or four-wheelers, depending on the season, but on this winter day a woman in Unalakleet prefers skis. (Roz Goodman)*



Subsistence can be a full-time job, but many people also need cash wage employment to pay expenses. They find work, often seasonal, at local schools, in government and small businesses, in commercial fishing and construction, and in the North Slope oil fields or the big Red Dog zinc mine near Kotzebue.

Some Inupiat herd reindeer, domestic cousins to caribou. Reindeer were introduced as a food source in northwestern Alaska in the 1890s by Sheldon Jackson, then superintendent of education for Alaska. A law passed in 1937 restricted reindeer ownership to Natives, and today about a dozen permit holders — individuals, families and Native corporations — manage 23,000 to 28,000 reindeer on the Seward Peninsula. Reindeer handling blends with subsistence activities. In spring, the herders monitor calving. In June, using helicopters to round up the herd, they harvest antlers for mostly Asian markets. In early winter, the herders on snow machines catch and butcher the steers. Much of the meat is processed commercially and sold as sausage.



In Anaktuvuk Pass in the central Brooks Range, caribou is the primary food. Many items are made from the skins, including masks. In earlier times, people walked from Anaktuvuk Pass to the coast to trade caribou skins and fur pelts for seal oil. Today traveling by airplane, people take great pleasure in sharing their subsistence foods and handiwork with friends and relatives in other villages.

A big trade fair with ancient traditions has once again become a much-anticipated annual event. The festival, *Kivgiq*, is held midwinter and draws upwards of 600 people to dance, eat, trade items, sell crafts, exchange gifts, tell stories and play games. It is not advertised to tourists; the hotels are filled with people from the region's villages. "It is a time to draw the community together," said Marie Adams, of the North Slope Borough, which sponsors *Kivgiq*. After hearing Elders reminisce about the old "messenger feast," last held in 1914, Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak sparked its return in 1988. "It was revived to help strengthen people's identity and culture," said Adams. "Our philosophy is that when people have a strong sense of themselves, they are less likely to get into trouble. This has helped people feel good about themselves and their culture." ■

ABOVE: *Beverly (left) and Samantha Thomas peek out the window as the day's wash dries in Buckland, a small Inupiat village near the head of Kotzebue Sound. (Danny Daniels)*

RIGHT: *Tommy Pikok and his grandson, Gilford* "Mongoyuk" *Pikok, perform with the* Nuvukmiut *Dancers of Barrow during the 1995 Inuit Circumpolar Conference in Nome. The ICC represents Inuits around the polar rim on environmental and political concerns. (Roz Goodman)*