

Iñupiat Heritage Center

Paglagivsi Iñupiat Heritage Center-mun

Iñupiat Heritage Center
Alaska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



PHOTO BY NATHANIEL WILDER



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LUKMANIA WISTAKER

THE IÑUPIAT HERITAGE CENTER is a place for learning, sharing, remembering, and passing on Iñupiat traditions. Its collections in archeology, art, ethnology, historical photography, and oral history help perpetuate the Iñupiat culture, history, and language of the North Slope through exhibits, classes, performances, and activities.

The facility includes a gallery, a traditional room for working on arts and crafts, a classroom, and a large conference/performance room. It also contains the offices of the Iñupiat History, Language and Culture Commission and the Tuzzy Consortium Library.

The Center houses and maintains collections and archives while a gift shop sells local crafts like baleen baskets, ivory carvings, jewelry, and educational materials. The Center opened to the public in early 1999 and is currently managed by the North Slope Borough Department of Iñupiat History, Language, and Culture.

Thank you for your visit.

Quyanaq, isiqattaagiagaviñ.



Exterior view of Iñupiat Heritage Center.
NPS PHOTOGRAPH

A Place of Living Culture

The Iñupiat Heritage Center is a place where Iñupiat people can share, practice, and remember their traditional ways. The Traditional Room serves a unique function in the community, providing a space where traditional activities can be carried on and taught to the next generation. In February and March, whaling crews build, repair and cover their skin boats in the Traditional Room. During marathon sewing sessions, the wives and female friends and relatives of the whaling crews sew the amiq, or skin covering,

onto the umiaq, a process which can take all day and night. In the summer months, the Center hosts demonstrations of Iñupiat dancing, games, and the blanket toss. The IHC also sponsors a variety of life-long learning opportunities: school tours and class activities; Iñisagvik College's classes on Iñupiaq language, sewing, art, and dance; and the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium public lecture series.

ABC (Arnold Brower Crew): Sewing their umiaq are Cheryl Brower, Ellen Frantz, and Vera Williams. IMAGE COURTESY IHC



Below: Women sewing cover on umiaq, circa 1921-1922.
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES D. BROWER. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. IMAGE ARCHIVES, DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURE & SCIENCE, B&T-1753



People of Whaling



Aiken's Crew.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MURIEL LESTER-CRELL

The Iñupiat Heritage Center's permanent exhibit, "The People of Whaling", is a window into the world of Iñupiaq whaling. You can observe life on the ice at whale camp; feel the joy of community sharing and celebration at Nalukataq, the annual whale feast and blanket toss; and experience

"People of Whaling" exhibit, you have the opportunity to fully enter the unique world of Iñupiaq whaling. You can observe life on the ice at whale camp; feel the joy of community sharing and celebration at Nalukataq, the annual whale feast and blanket toss; and experience

the respect the Iñupiat people feel for the whale when it gives itself to a hunter. The seasonal round of other subsistence activities, such as fishing, seal hunting, and caribou hunting, are also important elements in Iñupiaq life. Just as in Iñupiaq whaling, the mixture of traditional

and modern tools and practices that are used in subsistence hunting are manifestations of the continuity and change that exists in modern Iñupiat culture. The Iñupiat Heritage Center collaborated with the University of Alaska Museum of the North to develop this unique and

world-class exhibit, and consulted with members of seven North Slope communities to develop profiles that highlight the traits and history of their villages, and which show the variation between the inland and coastal Iñupiaq lifestyles.



Above: After anchoring a block and tackle to the ice, "all hands walk away" until the whale is hauled onto the ice.
PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL HESS

Left: The "People of Whaling Exhibit".
NPS PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN ROBINSON

Visiting Utqiagvik



The Iñupiat Heritage Center is located in Utqiagvik, Alaska, the largest city in the North Slope Borough and the northernmost city in the United States. Utqiagvik can be reached via commercial and charter flights from Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Located on the Arctic Ocean, Utqiagvik is cool to cold all year. Summer can bring fog, wind and rain

and temperatures range from highs around 70 to lows into the 30s. Winter temperatures are normally below zero, often dropping to minus 30 and lower. Wind often exacerbates the cold temperatures. Visitors should bring raincoats and sweaters or light jackets in the summer and warm boots, mitts, and heavy parkas with hoods in the winter.

Aerial view of Utqiagvik.
NPS PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN ROBINSON

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A Harsh Land of Plenty

The home of Alaska's Iñupiat people is a treeless tundra, bordered by the nearly impassable Brooks Range to the south, the vast Colville River Delta to the east, the Arctic Ocean to the north and the Chukchi Sea to the west. The 70,000-odd square miles of tundra is whipped by bitter winds and suffers winter temperatures of minus 30 and below. The

sun refuses to set for 72 days around the summer solstice, but every November it hides behind the horizon and plunges the region into darkness until January. The Arctic plain is a "polar desert" where precipitation averages no more than 5-7 inches of rain or snow each year (most snow blows in from elsewhere). Rivers, streams, lakes, and sea are

all frozen for most of the year, and the pure, blazing white light that reflects off the snow can blind a human being.

The Arctic Slope is a dynamic place, where life thrives and is constantly on the move. Millions of birds migrate here every summer from around the world to mate and raise their young, just as the

great bowhead whales migrate to the cold waters of the Beaufort Sea every spring to calve. Hundreds of thousands of caribou roam the tundra in the summer, heading south every autumn in herds so vast they defy imagination. The ocean teems with rich and varied marine life, including ringed and bearded seals, walrus, and polar bears (a marine

William Smyth's "Natives of Elson's Bay." 1825-1828. ALASKA NATIVE HERITAGE CENTER, BARROW, ALASKA

mammal). Using these resources, the Iñupiat people were able to not only survive, but to flourish, building a complex society in one of the most demanding climates on Earth.



From the City that Lit the World to the Ends of the Earth: Commercial Whaling in the 19th Century



Ivory whale talisman attached to umiaq skin covering. PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL HESS.

Traditional Iñupiat Whaling

One and a half millennia ago, around 600 AD, whaling became a major part of Arctic Eskimo culture. For the next thousand years, the Eskimos of Siberia, Alaska, Canada and Greenland possessed the most sophisticated whaling technology in the world. Every spring, whaling crews would cut miles of road through several miles of jagged sea ice so that they would have a path over which they could drag their *umiaks* (light and flexible skin boats) to the edge of the ice. When they reached the lead, a six-week-long vigil began as they waited for the whales. They slept and ate little, because they had to be ready to launch their *umiak* at a moment's notice.

When the crew spotted a whale, they would silently paddle up to it. The harpooner would stand up in the bow of the boat, raise his heavy harpoon and strike. Attached to the harpoon was the "poke" - a float fashioned from the

inflated skin of a seal. When the wounded animal dived, it dragged this enormous balloon behind it, slowing its progress and exhausting it. Every time the whale resurfaced to breathe, the poke would surface first, indicating to the whalers where the whale was about to rise. During the hunt, the *umialik* (whaling captain) and the harpooner sang magical songs to entice the whale to them and to protect their crew from harm. They continued to attach pokes to the whale until it was exhausted enough to allow itself to be stabbed with the killing lance, or until it simply died from blood loss. A successful whaling crew believed that the 60-ton animal had given itself to them as a result of their virtuousness in the preceding year and their rigid adherence to the proper rituals. Iñupiat whaling was both a means of subsistence and a religious ritual, and the two could not be separated.



Charles D. Brower with two baleen plates, circa 1925. RANGE ARCHIVES, DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURE & SCIENCE, B&T-1702

In 1848, New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the whaling capital of the world. Known as the "City that Lit the World," it was the home to the oil barons of its day, the whaleship owners. Whale oil lit city streets and lubricated the mighty machines of the Industrial Revolution. When petroleum replaced whale oil as an illuminant in the 1860s, the industry turned its attention to baleen, which was in high demand because of its use in ladies' corsets. Whale stocks in the Atlantic were already badly diminished when the 19th century dawned, and whaleships were forced to sail around Cape Horn into the Pacific on voyages that could take four years or more. As more and more whales fell to the whalers' onslaught, the ships were forced to work their way across the Pacific, continuing steadily, inexorably north. In 1848, the New Bedford whaling captain Thomas Roys stumbled upon the bowhead whal-

ing grounds in Bering Strait (Alaska), a discovery which not only prolonged the life of the commercial whaling industry, but would bring young whalemens from Massachusetts and around the world into contact with Alaska's Iñupiat Eskimos, who had depended on the bowhead whales for generations.

In the early years of the Arctic whaling industry, commercial whalers were cautious of encounters with the Iñupiat, who, while generous to strangers in need, were known to protect their ancestral lands vigorously. But as the whalers depleted the whales and walrus populations, Iñupiat people began to go hungry, and many went to work for the whalers on the commercial ships.

By the 1880s, commercial whalers began to set up semi-permanent whaling stations in and near Iñupiat communities from Point

Painting of whaling vessel. COURTESY NATIONAL JAHN SERVICE, HARPOON CENTER, ARTIST THOMAS FREEMAN

Hope to Barrow. These shore-based whaling stations borrowed much of their technique and technology from their Iñupiat neighbors: they used Iñupiat crews and set out from the ice edge in skin boats, or umiat. The whalers blended this age-old technique with their new innovations, like bomb guns, and so a new type of whaling arose that was a fusion of Iñupiat and American techniques. At the same time, some commercial whalers decided to stay in the Arctic and build lives here. Charles Brower and Fred Hopson were just two of these whalers who married Iñupiaq women and founded new dynasties in Barrow. Their descendants continue the whaling tradition of their forefathers, both Yankee and Iñupiat, to this very day.

The Iñupiat People

Iñupiaq life was supremely adapted to the arctic environment, and depended wholly on animal products. Their semi-subterranean winter houses were constructed from whalebone and earth, their lamps lit and houses warmed by whale and seal oil, and their tools were made from bone, ivory, baleen, and stone. Iñupiat clothing, some of the most sophisticated outdoor gear ever created, was made from the hides of caribou and seals and designed on the "air capture" principle, in which the clothing is cut to allow an insulating layer of air to surround the body. Clothing had to be lightweight, warm, and strong. Iñupiaq seamstresses were skilled artisans, creating works of art in which form and function were intimately intertwined. Social life revolved around the family; there was no government or social rank outside of the family structure. For most of the year, people lived in small villages that ranged in size from 10 to 800 people, and could be made up of one or several extended families. The largest settlements, like Point Hope (Tikigaq), Barrow (Utqiaġvik) and Point Barrow (Nuvuk) were located near favorable whaling spots. Iñupiaq nations were decentralized and comprised of groups of 15 - 40 interrelated families who shared the same territory, unique local dress, dialect, customs, and beliefs.



"Mrs. Jim Allen and son. Point Hope, Alaska." POSTCARD COURTESY UC BERKELEY LIBRARY

Agviq: The Bowhead Whale

The bowhead whale is the only baleen whale that spends its entire life near the sea ice. Two of the physiological features of the bowhead that enable it to survive in the harsh Arctic seas are what made them so attractive to nineteenth century whalemens: their

blubber and their baleen. The bowhead's blubber is up to 1 ½ feet thick, and is used for insulation, food storage, and padding. Their baleen lines their upper jaw, and it is used to filter microscopic organisms from seawater.

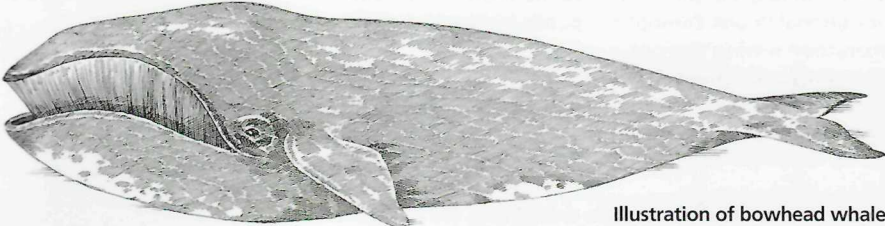


Illustration of bowhead whale. © LARRY ARONSON

Commercial Whaling Products

The products of the commercial whaling industry were everywhere in 19th century America and Europe. Supple baleen was the 19th century's plastic, and was used for the stays of corsets for Victorian ladies. Baleen was also used in scores of other

products from parasol ribs to fishing poles. The oil rendered from whale blubber was used to lubricate the machines of the Industrial Revolution, to light streetlamps, and to degrease wool in textile factories.



Harpoon rest. PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER FORMAN, COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Contact Us

The IHC is open Monday - Friday: 8:30 am - 5:00 pm (closed noon-1 pm) Saturday: 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm (May 15 through September 15 only) Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day and all other North Slope Borough holidays.

Admission is charged and group rates are available. For groups of ten or more persons, reservations are recommended. Facilities are handicap accessible.

Website: www.nps.gov/inup or www.north-slope.org Tel.: (907) 852-4594 Fax: (907) 852-4224

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