

ilitqusia agvigum

spirit of the whale

A way of life for the Iñupiat and Yupik people.



point hope

Rich in subsistence resources and archeological sites, Point Hope is one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in North America. Its whaling traditions extend back thousands of years, and Tikigaq—its Inupiaq name—is widely regarded as one of the most traditional villages in Alaska. The people hunt caribou, moose, seals, walrus, birds, fish, beluga whales, and polar bear, but the bowhead whale remains the focus of the annual subsistence cycle. Today the population of Point Hope is approximately 700.

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qaimarutin welcome

Subsistence whaling is a way of life for the Inupiat and Yupik people who inhabit the Western and Northern coasts of Alaska. From Gambell to Kaktovik, the bowhead whale has been the center of our culture for centuries and our people are reliant on its abundant meat to feed their families and our communities.

The bowhead whale is a significant resource that draws generations of Eskimos together and ensures our way of life will flourish into the future. As Alaska's first people, we are deeply connected to the land, the sea, and the resources of the area, and each is essential to our sense of identity and to our continued vitality. Through whaling, we express that connection and pass it on to the next generation along with the responsibility of sharing the food we harvest to provide for the needs of the entire community.

To our people, the bowhead is more than food. It keeps our families together. It keeps our children in school. It allows our elders to pass generational knowledge to our youth. It teaches us patience and perseverance. It teaches us generosity. It strengthens our community. It provides wisdom and insight. It gives us hope. It is our way of life. The spirit of the whale lives within each of us.

George Noongwook, Chairman
Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission

Our Mission

To safeguard the bowhead whale and its habitat and to support the whaling activities and culture of its member communities.

Our Objectives

- To preserve and enhance the marine resource of the bowhead whale, including its habitat.
 - To protect Eskimo subsistence whaling.
- To protect and enhance Eskimo culture, traditions, and activities associated with bowhead whales and bowhead whaling.
 - To undertake research and educational activities related to bowhead whales.

AEWC Commissioners

George Noongwook, Chairman (*Savoonga*)

Harry Brower, Jr., Vice Chair (*Barrow*)

Merlin Koonooka, Secretary (*Gambell*)

Raymond Hawley, Treasurer (*Kivalina*)

Isaac Nukapigak (*Nuiqsut*)

Joseph Kaleak (*Kaktovik*)

John Hopson, Jr. (*Wainwright*)

Luther Komonaseak (*Wales*)

Julius Rexford (*Point Lay*)

Rex Rock, Sr. (*Point Hope*)

Ronald Ozenna, Jr. (*Little Diomed*)

AEWC Executive Director

Johnny L. Aiken

nuiqsut

A photograph of three whalers on a boat at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and yellow glow. The whalers are wearing heavy, light-colored jackets and are holding long, dark poles. The water is dark and choppy. The overall scene is dramatic and captures the end of a day of whaling.

The village of Nuiqsut has a population of approximately 380 people. The Barrier Islands to the east of Nuiqsut are a productive area for hunting marine mammals, and the fall whaling sites of Cross Island and Narwhal Island have a long history. Today, Nuiqsut whalers travel to Cross Island in late August and early September to begin whaling. This long journey takes them past the oil fields surrounding Prudhoe Bay and into the often icy waters of the Beaufort Sea. The hard work of the journey and the hunt is rewarded when successful whaling captains share the whale with the community and other villages at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and at Nalukataq the following spring.

kivalina

The village of Kivalina sits on a narrow gravel island near the mouth of the Wulik River on the northwest coast of Alaska. Although the permanent village is less than a century old, the whole coast of this region has long been used for whaling and other hunting camps. In addition to whaling, Kivalina residents hunt caribou, sheep, walrus, seals, beluga whales, birds, and fish. Kivalina has close ties with Point Hope, sharing many of the same festivals and whale distribution customs. The village has a current population of approximately 350 people.



Photo courtesy Jenny Evans.

our history

The Inupiat and Siberian Yupik Eskimos living in the coastal villages in northern and western Alaska have been hunting the bowhead whale for thousands of years. As the International Whaling Commission (IWC) itself has acknowledged, “Whaling, more than any other activity, fundamentally underlies the total lifeway of these communities.”

The entire community participates in the activities surrounding the subsistence bowhead whale hunt, ensuring that the traditions and skills of the past associated with their culture will be carried on by future generations. Each whale provides thousands of pounds of meat and maktak, which is shared by all the people in the community. Portions of each whale are saved for celebration at Nalukataq (the blanket toss or whaling feast), Thanksgiving, Christmas, and potlucks held throughout the year.

IWC was established by the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling in 1946. For many years, the IWC focused only on the regulation of commercial whaling activities. During this time, there was no commercial exploitation of the bowhead whale; the Yankee and British whaling operations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had substantially reduced the size of the stock. However, in the early 1970's, as opposition to commercial whaling operations started to grow, some countries raised concerns about the

status of the Bering Sea stock of bowhead whales and the Eskimos' subsistence harvest of this stock.

The Eskimos were not made aware of this international interest. In 1977, the IWC extended its regulation to aboriginal subsistence takes of bowhead whales and immediately imposed a ban on the harvest of bowhead whales by Alaska Eskimos. This was the result of a report erroneously estimating the Bering Sea stock of bowheads to have between 600 and 2,000 whales. The Eskimos hunters learned of this action after the fact. Had they been asked, the Eskimos would have informed the IWC that there were at least 4,000 bowhead whales in the population.

AEWC In 1977, as a result of the ban, Eskimo whalers established the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) to represent the whaling communities in an effort to convince the United States Government and the IWC to take action to preserve the Eskimos subsistence hunt of bowhead whales. Since

our history

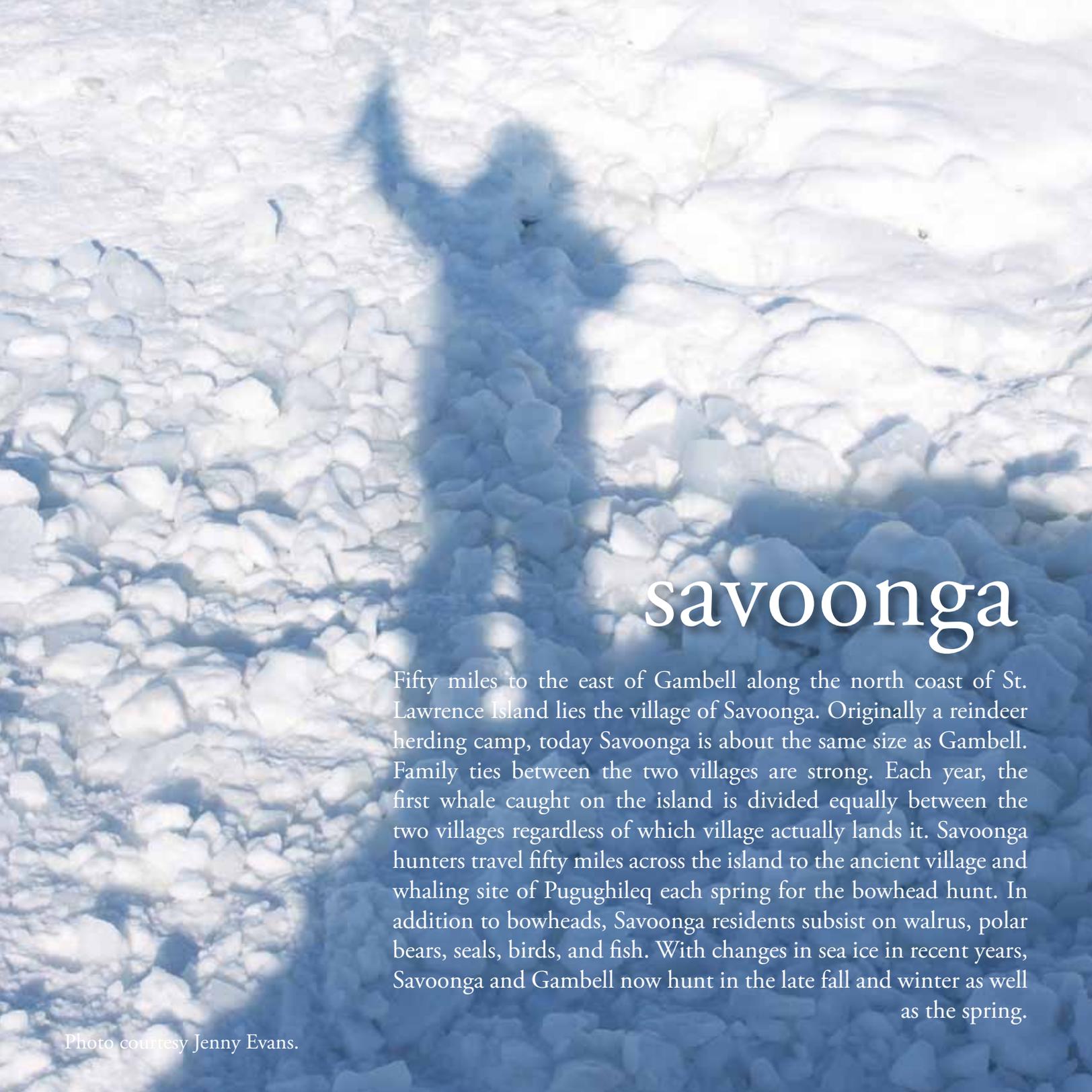
The members of AEWK are the registered whaling captains and their crew members of the eleven whaling communities of the Arctic Alaska coast: Gambell, Savoonga, Wales, Little Diomedede, Kivalina, Point Hope, Point Lay, Wainwright, Barrow, Nuiqsut, and Kaktovik.

1977, representatives of the AEWK have attended every annual meeting of the IWC, providing scientific research on the bowhead whale conducted through the efforts of the AEWK, the North Slope Borough and NOAA. State-of-the-art research methods are the foundation for management of this hunt. The hunters have devoted many years of research and development to upgrades of their traditional hand-held weapons, to ensure the safest, most efficient, and most humane hunt possible. The IWC has accepted the quantitative method used for establishing and updating Alaska Native Aboriginal subsistence need for bowhead whales.

Since 1981, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission has managed the bowhead whale subsistence hunt locally through a Cooperative Agreement with the United States

Department of Commerce/NOAA. The AEWK works closely with NOAA throughout the year and reports to NOAA on the results of each spring and fall whaling season.

Since 1981, AEWK has demonstrated the effectiveness of cooperative management. The subsistence whalers are proud of their record of sound management, of supporting research, and of improving the equipment used in the traditional whale hunt. The original ban on the bowhead whale subsistence hunt was lifted in favor of a very low quota, which resulted in years of food shortages in the AEWK's villages. Better methods for estimating the population have helped secure an increased quota closer to the actual need of the whaling communities as established through documentation of historic use.

An aerial photograph of a vast, cracked ice field. The ice is broken into numerous irregular, rounded floes of varying sizes, creating a textured, mosaic-like appearance. A large, dark shadow is cast across the center of the ice field, likely from a person or object on the ice. The lighting is bright, highlighting the white and light blue tones of the ice.

savoonga

Fifty miles to the east of Gambell along the north coast of St. Lawrence Island lies the village of Savoonga. Originally a reindeer herding camp, today Savoonga is about the same size as Gambell. Family ties between the two villages are strong. Each year, the first whale caught on the island is divided equally between the two villages regardless of which village actually lands it. Savoonga hunters travel fifty miles across the island to the ancient village and whaling site of Pugughileq each spring for the bowhead hunt. In addition to bowheads, Savoonga residents subsist on walrus, polar bears, seals, birds, and fish. With changes in sea ice in recent years, Savoonga and Gambell now hunt in the late fall and winter as well as the spring.

Photo courtesy Jenny Evans.



barrow

With a population of approximately 3,500, Barrow is Alaska's largest subsistence whaling community. Seat of the North Slope Borough and home of the AEWFC office, Barrow also has several sites of great archeological significance, and continues to have a strong subsistence tradition. Hunting and sharing Native foods is a central part of life, and skins and meat can be seen curing throughout the town. Residents of Utqiagvik take whales, caribou, seals, walrus, bears, birds, and fish, and like all subsistence hunters they are active year-round. Barrow's whale hunt takes place in both spring and fall. Following the spring hunt, successful captains host Apugauti and Nalukataq, drawing people from throughout the region to take part and enjoy the celebration and the sharing. The whale is shared at other community events, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, potlucks, as well as in people's homes.

Photo courtesy North Slope Borough.

our work

AEWC strives to increase the efficiency of the bowhead whale hunt through development and implementation of AEW's WIP with a focus on the penthrite projectile.

Under the Cooperative Agreement with NOAA, the AEW monitors the subsistence harvest of bowhead whales and reports to the federal government. During the spring and fall whaling seasons, the AEW Commissioner in each village is responsible for keeping the AEW office up to date on all whaling activities, especially when whales are struck and when whales are landed. The AEW collects additional information on landed whales, including size, sex, and details of the hunt. This information is included in the report to NOAA, and is also used by the AEW in its efforts to improve hunting equipment and techniques.

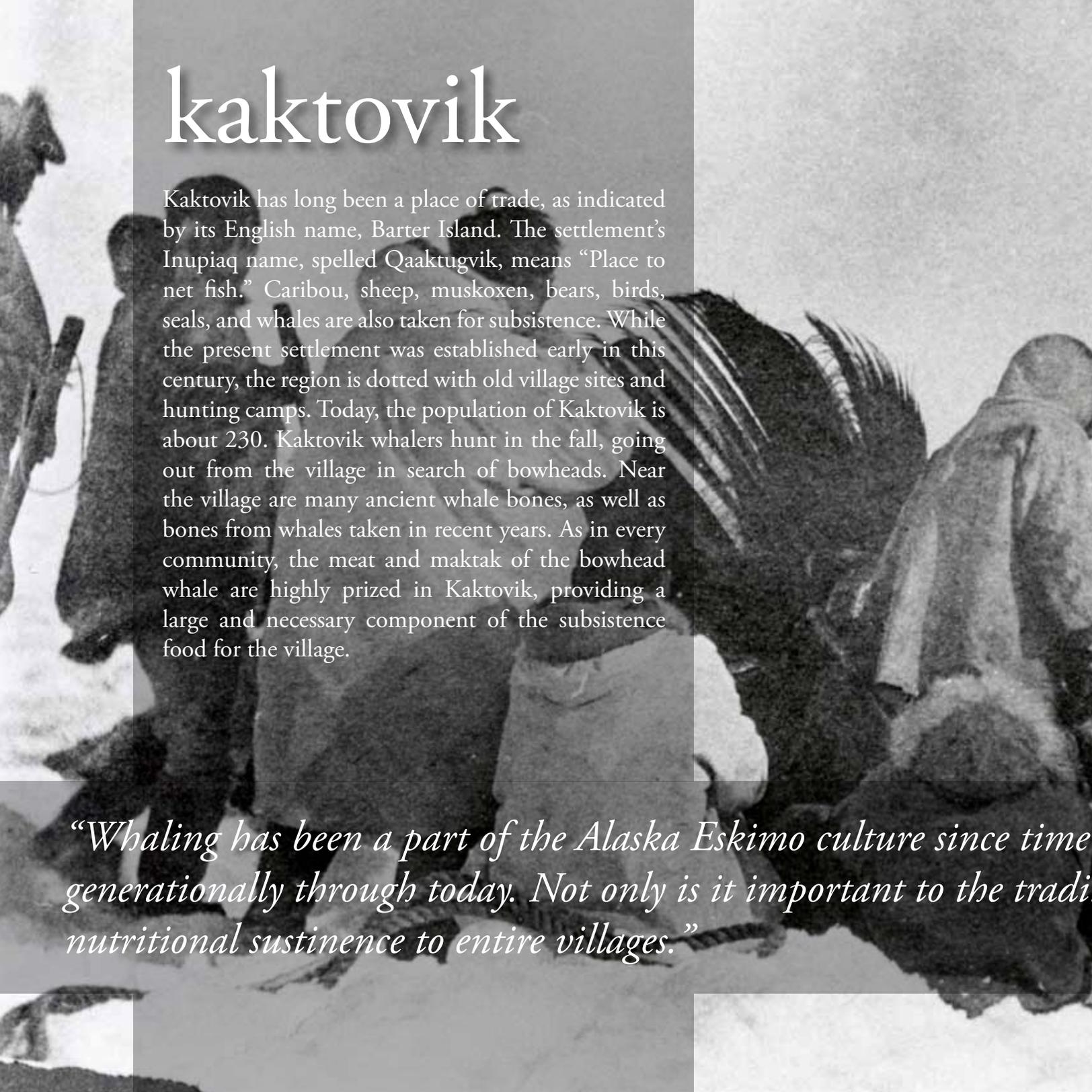
Weapons Improvement Program (WIP)

A key part of the AEW's work is the Weapons Improvement Program (WIP). This has the objectives of improving the reliability and safety of the weapons, making the hunt as safe and humane as possible, and increasing the efficiency of the harvest by landing a higher percentage of struck whales. Exploding projectiles, fired from a hand-held darting gun and the backup weapon, the shoulder gun, have been used in the subsistence hunt

since the 1880's with only slight modifications since then. These weapons, developed by Yankee whalers in the 1860s, are hand-held and designed for use in small boats. The darting gun is mounted on a long wooden shaft to which a harpoon is also attached. The shoulder gun is a smooth-bore gun weighing 35 pounds (16kg) and is used after the harpoon and float are attached to the whale.

Through the WIP, AEW has sponsored the development of a projectile charged with penthrite for the darting gun. Penthrite delivers a stronger explosive charge than the black powder that has been used for over a century. Since its development, the use of the penthrite projectile has increased in the villages outside Barrow, with training from the AEW and the Chairman of the WIP Committee. The new projectile shows promise in reducing the time to death in this hunt. The AEW now is undertaking development of a new, standardized pusher shell to further increase the effectiveness of the penthrite projectile. Both the efficiency and effectiveness of the penthrite projectile are studied by AEW and scientists from the North Slope Borough. The AEW reports annually to the IWC Humane Killing Working Group on its progress with the penthrite projectile and the WIP.

kaktovik



Kaktovik has long been a place of trade, as indicated by its English name, Barter Island. The settlement's Inupiaq name, spelled Qaaktugvik, means "Place to net fish." Caribou, sheep, muskoxen, bears, birds, seals, and whales are also taken for subsistence. While the present settlement was established early in this century, the region is dotted with old village sites and hunting camps. Today, the population of Kaktovik is about 230. Kaktovik whalers hunt in the fall, going out from the village in search of bowheads. Near the village are many ancient whale bones, as well as bones from whales taken in recent years. As in every community, the meat and maktak of the bowhead whale are highly prized in Kaktovik, providing a large and necessary component of the subsistence food for the village.

“Whaling has been a part of the Alaska Eskimo culture since time generationally through today. Not only is it important to the traditional nutritional sustenance to entire villages.”



*immemorial. Traditional knowledge of whaling has been passed
tion and culture of the whaling people, it also provides important*

our work

AEWC has continued to adapt to the changing environment in Alaska and throughout the world—from navigating the political arena of the international whaling community, to development of the Open Water Season Conflict Avoidance Agreement (CAA) to safeguard the bowhead whale habitat—acting as advocates for the villages that rely on the bowhead whale for their survival.

Open Water Season

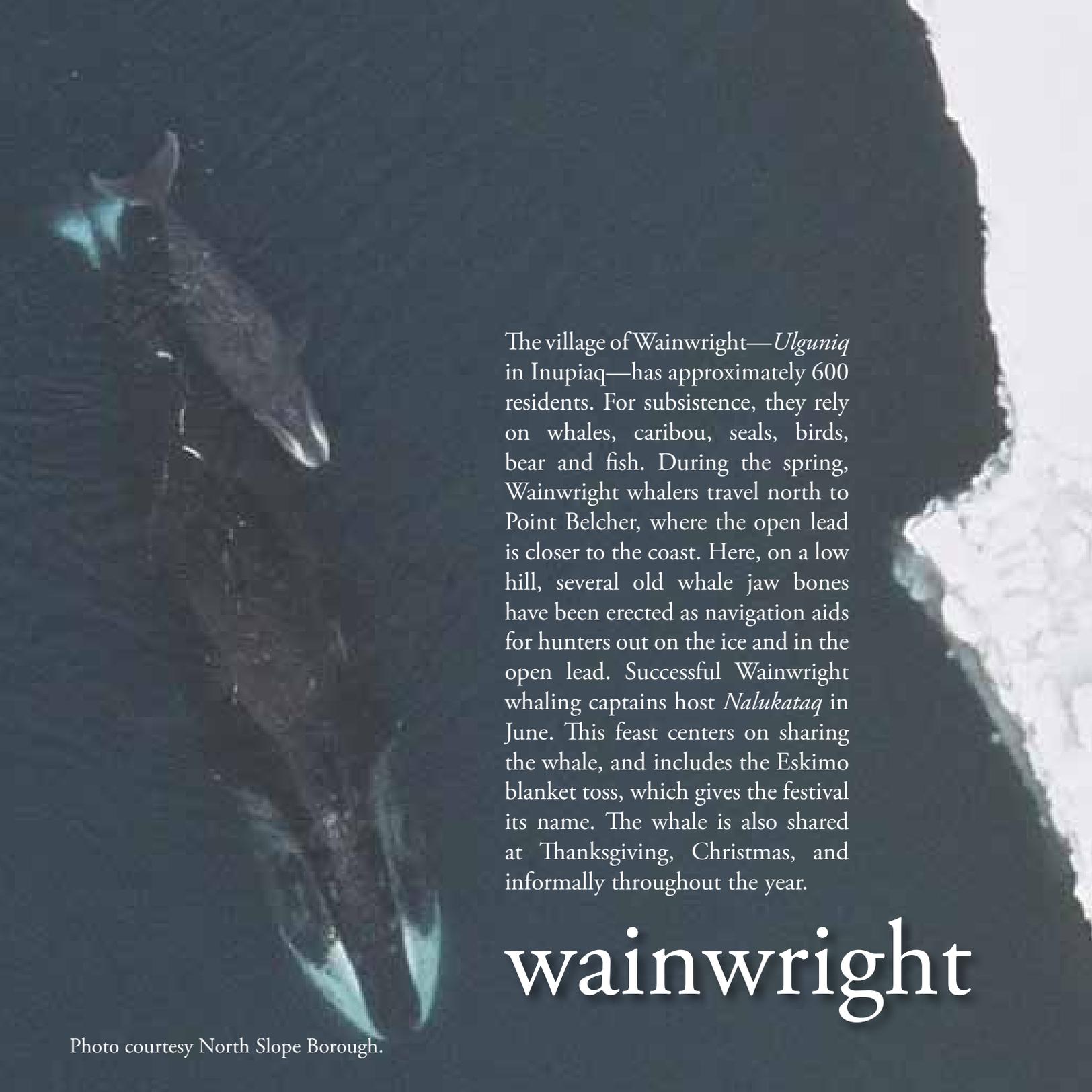
AEWC first started work on the Open Water Season Conflict Avoidance Agreement (CAA) in 1985, for the 1986 operating season. In those days it was called the Oil/Whaler Agreement. The goal of the CAA is to balance development with our subsistence so that our subsistence resources and livelihood are protected while our country and our communities receive the benefits of development. Our work has included amendments to federal law, creating a role for the CAA in Arctic offshore development planning and making AEWc and the North Slope Borough part of the scientific review process for offshore development.

The annual Open Water Season Peer Review Meeting was created as the result of an AEWc initiative to bring higher quality research to questions of offshore oil and gas activity impacts to Arctic marine mammals and habitat. AEWc representatives work with the NSB Department of Wildlife Management to offer suggestions on research

proposals under review during the meeting and measures for managing interaction between our subsistence hunting and resources, and offshore oil and gas operations. Through our participation in the Open Water Season Peer Review Meeting, we extend our practice of blending our Traditional Knowledge of the arctic ecosystem with western science and research.

Scientific Research

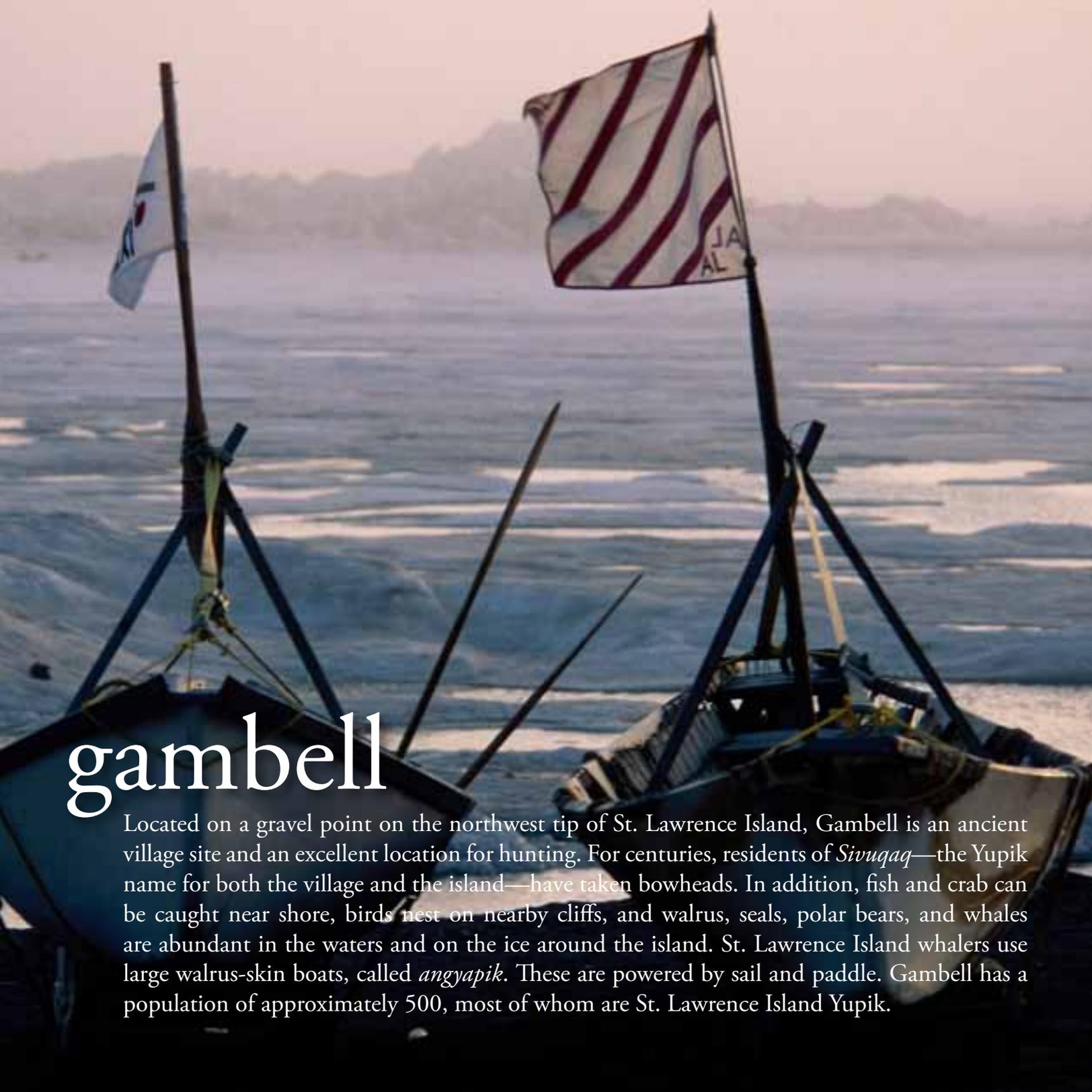
AEWC strongly encourages and supports scientific research on the bowhead whale and its environment. The North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management, on behalf of AEWc, conducts a regular census of the bowhead whale. Population size and trend estimates are critical information that AEWc and NOAA utilize to maintain the bowhead whale subsistence harvest; this information is provided to the IWC Scientific Committee at its annual meetings. Key research efforts, including ice-based census, aerial surveys, photo identification, age estimation, stock structure/genetics, and movements via satellite tagging.



The village of Wainwright—*Ulguniq* in Inupiaq—has approximately 600 residents. For subsistence, they rely on whales, caribou, seals, birds, bear and fish. During the spring, Wainwright whalers travel north to Point Belcher, where the open lead is closer to the coast. Here, on a low hill, several old whale jaw bones have been erected as navigation aids for hunters out on the ice and in the open lead. Successful Wainwright whaling captains host *Nalukataq* in June. This feast centers on sharing the whale, and includes the Eskimo blanket toss, which gives the festival its name. The whale is also shared at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and informally throughout the year.

wainwright

Photo courtesy North Slope Borough.



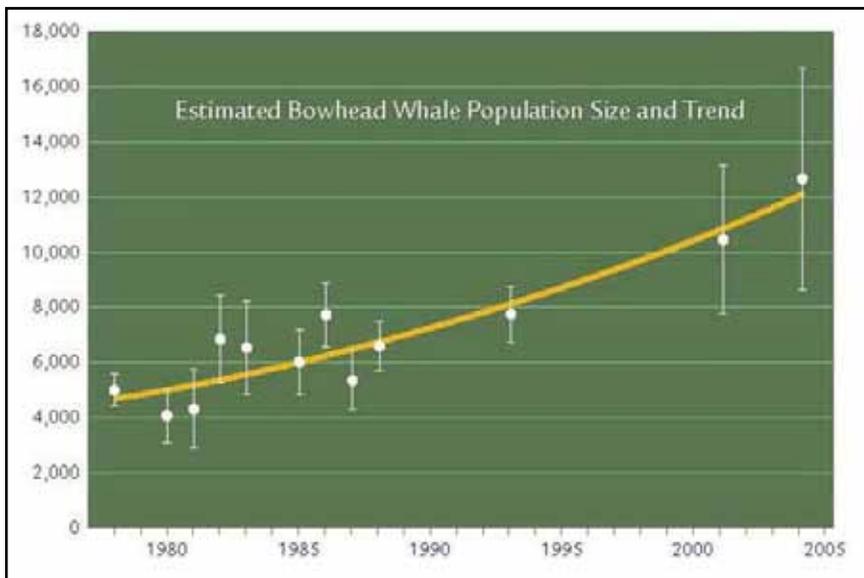
gambell

Located on a gravel point on the northwest tip of St. Lawrence Island, Gambell is an ancient village site and an excellent location for hunting. For centuries, residents of *Sivuuqag*—the Yupik name for both the village and the island—have taken bowheads. In addition, fish and crab can be caught near shore, birds nest on nearby cliffs, and walrus, seals, polar bears, and whales are abundant in the waters and on the ice around the island. St. Lawrence Island whalers use large walrus-skin boats, called *angyapik*. These are powered by sail and paddle. Gambell has a population of approximately 500, most of whom are St. Lawrence Island Yupik.

our work

A new abundance estimate is required by the IWC at least every 10 years. The last ice-based abundance estimate was obtained in 2001 (10,470) and an updated estimate was obtained via aerial surveys and photogrammetry in 2004 (12,634). A new ice-based census (combined with aerial surveys and photogrammetry) is underway, with efforts occurring in the spring of 2009, 2010, and 2011. Preliminary reports have been provided for the 2009 and 2010 efforts.

The 2001 ice-based census estimate was 10,470 (or between 8,100 and 13,500 with 95% confidence intervals) bowhead whales (see George et al. 2004). The graph below shows the population trend as of 2004 when the calf production reached 10.4% and the growth rate was estimated at 3.4%, indicating a healthy, growing population of about 12,634 (or between 7,900 and 19,7000 with 95% confidence intervals) (see Koski et al. 2010) bowhead whales in the Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Seas (BCBS) stock. Harvest examinations to date also indicate that bowhead whales are healthy, with low contaminant levels.



then & now

“We take IWC regulations very seriously and abide by them. And, everybody at home knows when our quota is going to be up for review by the IWC. People can’t sleep. They worry. If something goes wrong with our quota, how are we going to feed our families? The decisions made at IWC have a very real impact on our people’s lives.”

Whaling is vital to the sustenance of the Native people that inhabit the Arctic coast of Alaska. Just as they have for centuries, the whaling communities represented by AEWC rely on the bowhead whale for both the nutritional and cultural value they provide. These 11 coastal villages in northern Alaska are among the most remote in a land of harsh winters and environmental obstacles that most can not comprehend. Without access by road, each of these villages relies on the bowhead whale for a major portion of its food supply.

Unlike the modern conveniences of the grocery stores that most people in modern society enjoy and take for granted, these villages typically have one general store with few options. The average price for a pound of meat (when it’s available) may be \$10 to \$12. Gasoline costs between \$7 to \$10 per gallon.

Compounding the problem of limited availability of supplies is the lack of jobs in these villages. With very limited employment opportunities, many people in the villages do not have the means to purchase groceries from the store. They rely on what they harvest from the ocean as the means to feed their families—importantly the bowhead whale. There are no other options for the survival of the people.

The bowhead whale is the thread that was spun thousands of years ago and has over the years woven together the fibers of the the most ancient of Alaska’s civilizations, providing nutritional sustenance, cultural identity, and a means for survival. The Spirit of the Whale provides now as it did then for the Eskimos of the Arctic coast of Alaska.

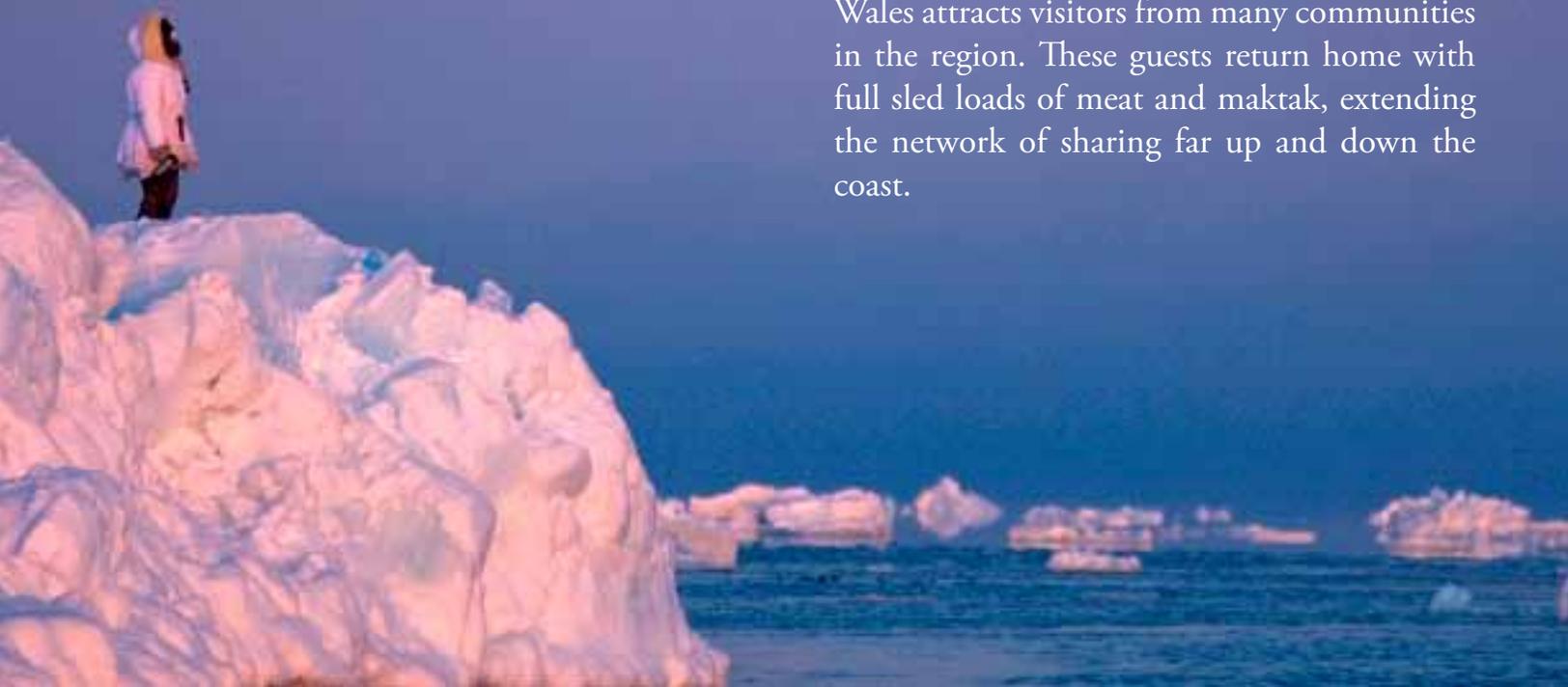
In the middle of the Bering Strait, the island of Little Diomede rises sharply from the sea. There is no room for an airstrip on the island, so planes to the community of *Ignaluk* can land only in winter on a plowed stretch of sea ice between Little Diomede and its neighbor, the Russian island of Big Diomede two miles to the west. Because of its remoteness, Little Diomede was not included in the formation of the AEWAC and its needs were not taken into account in determining the bowhead quota for Alaska Eskimos. In 1992, Little Diomede was formally recognized as a whaling community. Like Wales, Little Diomede has a population of approximately 170. Residents take walrus, seals, polar bears, birds, fish and crabs, hunting from the sea ice in winter and from walrus-skin boats in summer.



little diomede

wales

As the point of mainland North America closest to Asia, Wales has long been a site of travel and trade between the two continents. Ancient artifacts, grave sites, and village mounds show the long history of settlement at *Kingigin*, the Inupiaq name for the village. For local hunters, the Bering Strait is a productive area for marine mammals, migratory birds, and fish. On land, people hunt moose and herd reindeer. With approximately 170 residents, Wales is one of the smallest of the whaling communities. Its whaling traditions extend far back, and as the only whaling village on the Seward Peninsula, when a whale is taken, the whaling feast in Wales attracts visitors from many communities in the region. These guests return home with full sled loads of meat and maktak, extending the network of sharing far up and down the coast.



the bowhead



The bowhead whale, *Balaena mysticetus*, can reach a length of nearly 60 feet (over 17 meters), and weigh up to 80 tons. Bowheads feed on pelagic zooplankton, primarily euphausiids and copepods. They filter these tiny crustaceans through their baleen, which can be over 12 feet (3.6 meters) long, the longest of any whale.

The bowhead whales in Alaska, known as the Bering Sea stock, are the world's largest remaining population of bowheads. Every spring the bowheads migrate from the Bering Sea, where they spend the winter, to their summering waters in the Canadian Beaufort Sea. Beginning in late March and early April, the whales travel

through the open leads and pack ice along the coast. In September and October, they make the return journey to the Bering Sea.

Bowhead whales, call *aghveq* in St. Lawrence Island Yupik and *agviq* in Inupiaq, are well adapted to navigating ice-covered seas. Their blowhole is surrounded by a hump of dense fibrous tissue, enabling them to break through ice up to a foot (30 cm) thick in order to breathe. Bowhead vocalizations range from brief grunts to complex songs which change annually. Their calls may help to locate deep sections of ice blocking their path, and also to follow the movements of other whales.

a way of life

The 11 whaling villages of the Arctic coast of Alaska include:

Savoonga • Barrow • Gambell • Kivalina • Nuiqsut
Kaktovik • Wainwright • Wales • Point Lay
Point Hope • Little Diomede



point lay

The village of Point Lay is located near the Chukchi Sea about 175 miles southwest of Barrow. With a dwindling population in the 1960s and 1970s, Point Lay was not among the original nine villages to receive a quota when the IWC formally recognized the Native subsistence bowhead hunt in 1978 and authorized the landing of 12 whales. Even as the population grew over the next several decades, villagers bore the burden of traveling significant distances to other whaling villages to participate in bowhead hunts as a means to provide meat for their families. It was not until 2008 that Point Lay became officially recognized as a whaling village and provided with its own quota. In addition to the bowhead, the Inupiat of Point Lay subsist on seal, walrus, beluga, bowhead, caribou, and fish as staples of their diet.





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Photo courtesy North Slope Borough.