

# Iñupiat Heritage Center

Affiliated Area to New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park

*"Whaling is our keepsake, given to us by our ancestors; it is our birthright and our destiny."*

Herbert O. Anungazuk,  
Whaling Captain and Cultural Anthropologist



## A Harsh Land of Plenty

Aiken's Crew. Photograph courtesy Iñupiat Heritage Center



The home of Alaska's Iñupiat Eskimo 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 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 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



Painting of whaling vessel courtesy National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center, artist Thomas Freeman

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, the Iñupiat 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 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 umiak. 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 there. Charles Brower and Fred Hopson were just two of these whalers who married Iñupiat 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



"Mrs. Jim Allen and son. Point Hope, Alaska." Postcard courtesy UC Berkeley Library

clothing is cut to allow an insulating layer of air to surround the body. Clothing had to be lightweight, warm, and strong. Iñupiat 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,

Iñupiat life was supremely adapted to life in the Arctic, 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 all their tools were made from bone 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

and could be made up of one or several extended families. The largest settlements, like Point Hope (Tikiġaq), Barrow (Utqiagvik) and Point Barrow (Nuvuk) were located near favorable whaling spots. Iñupiat nations were decentralized and comprised of groups of 15 - 40 interrelated families who shared the same territory, unique local dress, dialect, customs, dress and beliefs.



Charles D. Brower with two baleen plates, circa 1925. All Rights Reserved, Image Archives, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, BA21-792

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 whaling grounds in Bering Strait (Alaska), a discovery

which not only prolonged the life of the commercial whaling industry, but would bring young whalers from Massachusetts and around the world into contact with Alaska's Iñupiat Eskimos, who had depended on the bowhead whales for generations.

## Commercial Whaling Products



Illustration of woman courtesy National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center, artist Pete Nisbet. Illustration of whaling products courtesy National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center, © artist John Burgoyne

The products of the commercial whaling industry were everywhere in 19<sup>th</sup> century America and Europe. Supple baleen was the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 (pictured below). 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.



## Traditional Iñupiat Whaling



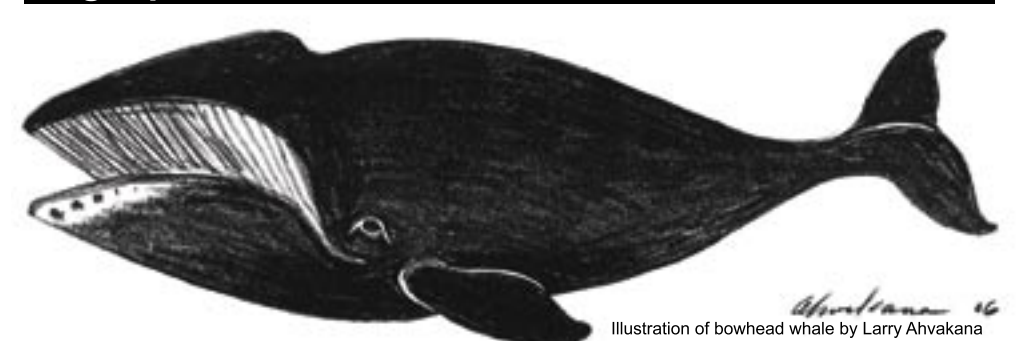
One and a half millennia ago, around 600 AD, whaling became a major part of Arctic Eskimo culture. For the next thousand years, the Eskimos of Siberia, Alaska, Canada and Greenland possessed the most sophisticated whaling technology in the world. Every spring, whaling crews would cut miles of road through jagged sea ice, forming a path over which they could drag their umiaq to the edge of the ice. When they reached open water, a six-week long vigil began. The whalers slept and ate little during this time, ready to launch their umiaq 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.

Left: Ivory whale tusk attached to umiaq skin covering

## Aġviq: 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 whalers:

their blubber and their baleen. The bowhead's blubber is up to 1½ feet thick, and is used for insulation, food storage, and padding. Their baleen lines their upper jaw, and is used during feeding to filter microscopic organisms from seawater.



# Welcome to the Iñupiat Heritage Center

# Paġlagivsi Iñupiat Heritage Center-mun



Photograph courtesy Lucianna Whitaker



Alice Allen, circa 1921. Photograph by Alfred M. Bailey. All Rights Reserved, Image Archives, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, BA21-186

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 Planning Department.

Thank you for your visit.

Quyanaq, isiqattaaġiaġavin.



Harpoon rest. Photograph by Werner Forman. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum



Exterior view of Iñupiat Heritage Center. NPS photograph

## People of Whaling



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

The Iñupiat Heritage Center's permanent exhibit, the *People of Whaling*, is a window into the world of the Iñupiat people and their traditional and modern life and values, told from the Iñupiaq perspective. Iñupiaq life centers around hunting the bowhead whale, and in the *People of Whaling* exhibit, you have the opportunity to fully enter the unique world of Iñupiat 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 Iñupiat 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.



The People of Whaling Exhibit. NPS photograph by John Robson

## Contact Us



Barrow dancers/Tupaaq Crist. Photograph courtesy the Iñupiat Heritage Center

The IHC is open Monday - Friday: 8:30 am - 5:00 pm (closed noon-1:00 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, and a wheelchair is available

Website: [www.nps.gov/inup](http://www.nps.gov/inup) OR [www.north-slope.org/IHCSite](http://www.north-slope.org/IHCSite)  
Tel. (907) 852-4594  
Fax: (907) 852-4224  
Address:  
Inupiat Heritage Center  
P.O. Box 69, Barrow, AK 99723

## A Place of Living Culture



Women sewing cover on umiaq, circa 1921-22. Photograph by Charles D. Brower. All Rights Reserved, Image Archives, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, BA21-753

The Iñupiat Heritage Center is a place where Barrow's 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 Traditional Room 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; Iñsaġvik 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

## Visiting Barrow



Aerial view of Barrow. NPS photograph by John Robson

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

Located on the Arctic Ocean, Barrow 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.



Model airplane fashioned from whale vertebrae. NPS photograph by John Robson