

CELEBRATING NUNAVUT HONOURING THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



# CANADIAN Geographic

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NUNAVUT 25



## ON THE COVER

Canadian Geographic photographer-in-residence Michelle Valberg shot this light-washed portrait of lawyer, activist and designer Aaju Peter.



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By Thomas Lundy; with photography by Emina Ida

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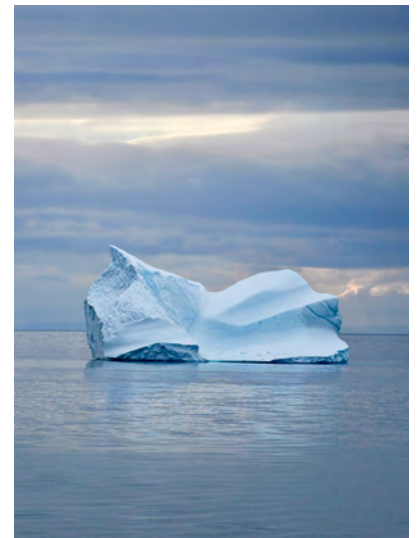
For even more stories highlighting Nunavut's past, present and future, visit [cangeo.ca/nunavut25](http://cangeo.ca/nunavut25)



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Northern food is expensive and food security is a top issue in Nunavut, where more than half of residents don't have adequate access to affordable and nutritious food. Photographer Pat Kane shines a spotlight on the issue, focusing on how northern communities are stepping up to nourish their own through traditional harvesting, as well as through creative pilot projects aimed at improving access to culturally appropriate foods.

[cangeo.ca/foodsecurity](http://cangeo.ca/foodsecurity)



## CASE STUDY

Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, or IQ, is a way to understand the world, crafted and passed down by generations of ancestors in specific regional contexts. Like western science, IQ values evidence, experimentation, curiosity, objectivity and peer review. A look at combining scientific methods for a more ethical approach to research in the North.

[cangeo.ca/scienceiq](http://cangeo.ca/scienceiq)

## COVER STORIES

Celebration meets reflection as *Canadian Geographic* takes a trip down memory lane, looking back at the photographs and maps we chose and the stories we told in this 1999 issue to mark the creation of Canada's newest territory. A 2019 issue also made its way to newsstands on the occasion of Nunavut's 20th anniversary.

[cangeo.ca/nunavutmemories](http://cangeo.ca/nunavutmemories)

## SMALL FINDS

Seven years. Six hundred samples. Over four trillion bacteria and microbes recorded. Researchers are mapping the Arctic Ocean using environmental DNA. How will this in-depth database of what's going on in the world's smallest ocean empower Inuit communities to make decisions about the lands and water comprising their homeland?

[cangeo.ca/arcticdna](http://cangeo.ca/arcticdna)

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**CELEBRATING A MILESTONE**

**TWENTY-FIVE YEARS GOES BY** in the blink of an eye. Inuit have been on this land for thousands of years, and so, even as we celebrate our accomplishments in the 25 years since Nunavut became a territory, we continue to look to the wisdom of the past for guidance as we forge the path ahead.

The Nunavut of today faces many pressing issues — from climate change to a housing shortage to one of the highest costs of living in the world. We know there is much change on the horizon. But as we navigate and invest in the future, Nunavummiut are firm in the knowledge that our land is our strength.

This magazine — translated into Inuktitut, English and French so we can share our stories across Canada — highlights just a few of the infinite stories about this magical land. There is a beautifully photographed feature about the Nunavut Quest, a 500-kilometre dogsled race that is revitalizing a once-threatened tradition at the core of Inuit culture. Also inspirational is a profile of the community of Taloyoak and the residents' decades-long fight to protect the land — and a way of life — a true example of the realities Nunavut communities face.

I would encourage readers to also visit *Canadian Geographic's* website, where a dedicated web page highlights even more stories showcasing the pride and ingenuity of the people of Nunavut. Dive into a feature on how Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit — roughly translated as traditional knowledge — is informing research in the North; be awed by the breathtaking design for the upcoming Nunavut Inuit Heritage Centre; and find out how northern communities are spearheading creative pilot projects to improve access to culturally appropriate foods.

I hope these stories provide insight into the pride we feel for Nunavut. Our Land. 🍷

— Nellie Kusugak, O.Nu.

*Nellie Kusugak is a former commissioner of Nunavut (June 2015 to June 2020). She is a Governor of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.*

# BIG PICTURE

Celebrating Nunavut





**PHOTO BY KATHERINE TAKPANNIE**

Urban Inuk photographer Katherine Takpannie uses her lens to capture her journey while also jump-starting conversations about contemporary issues faced by Inuit in Canada. *Nirijunga #2* (nirijunga means "I am eating" in Inuktitut) sees her anaana (mother) Kunnuk Takpannie using an ulu to cut into tuktuk (caribou) provided by her son Jackie Takpannie. The tableau of traditional Inuit foods – which also includes clams, crowberries, ptarmigan and Arctic char – is simultaneously an evocative still life and a recognition that country foods are both an integral part of Inuit identity and crucial to self-sustaining communities.



Katherine Takpannie is represented by Olga Korper Gallery.  
View her website at [www.katherinetakpannie.ca/home](http://www.katherinetakpannie.ca/home).



Governor General Mary Simon and Whit Fraser mark Nunavut's anniversary at the territorial legislature in Iqaluit.

## The Circle of Change

Reflections on Nunavut's past, present and future

BY WHIT FRASER

**NUNAVUT IS 25 YEARS OLD.** Amazing when you stop to think it was a mere 25,000 people who carved out this territory — one that now covers one-fifth of Canada's land mass. But make no mistake; not an inch of Nunavut came easily. Negotiations were long and bitter. An Inuit homeland in Canada was not in the imagination of any southern politician or bureaucrat or, for that matter, aspiring journalist. This was the Inuit dream, and everyone else had to be convinced.

On April 1, 2024, my wife, Governor General Mary Simon, and I were in Nunavut to mark its anniversary. I have my own dear memories of the creation of Nunavut because I broadcast that event live with my CBC colleague and friend, the late Jonah Kelly. We knew we were covering a historic day. Nunavut was the Inuit victory after years of fighting colonialism, assimilation, marginalization and, yes, racist policies and attitudes.

The Arctic is where Mary was born (in Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik), while I first set foot in the North back in 1967 when I was hired by the CBC to broadcast out of a little 40-watt radio station that served an odd collection of "frontier" interests. Back then, Iqaluit was known as Frobisher Bay, home to about 300 Qallunaat (white people) working as government administrators, doctors, nurses and teachers, or with the RCMP, the Hudson's Bay Company and Transport Canada. The "Eskimos" (as they were then called) numbered about 1,200, and while they were the largest group in the community, they were also the most neglected. And yet, within 10 years the Inuit — "the People" — would effectively erase the word Eskimo from the Canadian vocabulary and,

in doing so, began the long journey towards reclaiming their identity.

On our recent visit, everyone asked the same question: “Bet you see a lot of changes?” Certainly, the population has exploded — from 1,500 to close to 10,000. In Iqaluit, the hills and ridges to the north and east that sheltered the tiny “lower base” community I knew are now lined with high-rise apartments, multi-storey office complexes and hotels. Along the shoreline, family homes are now squeezed into every cove, inlet and rocky shelf, each offering a breathtaking view of sweeping Frobisher Bay and the rolling hills beyond.

The political changes are equally striking. We were welcomed into the beautiful iglu-shaped legislative assembly by Premier P.J. Akeeagok, who was still a teenager in 1999, and Eva Ariak, a former premier (and also teacher, community leader and businessperson) who is now commissioner of Nunavut — the territorial equivalent of a lieutenant-governor. Their ceremonial mace, a symbol of British parliamentary authority, is an ivory narwhal tusk nearly two metres long, engraved with animal motifs and set with precious stones from all parts of the territory.

I recall a time when legislative members were appointed by a federal minister in Ottawa. Now, an elected assembly sit in a chamber where tanned sealskins drape the chairs and tables. In 25 years, these officials have breathed life into the vision articulated so long ago by ambitious and committed leaders like Tagak Curley and John Amagoalik.

But the heart and soul of their Nunavut vision is happening just as much outside government as within.

A few blocks away, commitment and obligation to language and cultural preservation is on full display at Pirurvik, a homegrown Inuit learning institute, where the centrepiece is a comprehensive Inuit language education program. The territory has also unveiled blueprints for the Nunavut Inuit Heritage Centre, a cultural and heritage complex that will be part museum, part archives and all cultural showcase.

A third on-the-go initiative is the Place Names Program. Consider that Nunavut has more than 100,000

## QAJAQS AND QAMUTIQS have been skimming over these waters, land and ice for thousands of years.

kilometres of coastline. Qajaqs and qamutiqs have been skimming over these waters, land and ice for thousands of years, and the people of this land have been naming all the places they go. The Nunavut Heritage Trust is working to restore tens and tens of thousands of traditional names on Nunavut’s maps. A geographer’s dream or nightmare?

One frightening change for this territory is brought into sharp focus through photographs we take outside in Qikiqtarjuaq, Baffin Island, during our celebratory April visit.

It is a magnificent day. The sun is bright, warm. The 72-year-old hunter and Canadian Ranger Stevie Aulajiaq describes the situation plainly: “This is June’s weather. We no longer know what is happening, and we can no longer depend on our traditional knowledge to travel the ice.”

To me, these photos are worth a thousand troubling words. Many of us are in shirts or sweaters. There are no gloves or hats to be seen. In photos taken a few decades ago, our frozen breath would have been clouding out the smiling faces. Trained to smile, in these sunny 2024 photos we forget there is little in the soft warm southern breeze to smile about.

There are few places where the effects of climate change are more visible than the Arctic. Nunavummiut see the changes of global warming almost daily. Most noteworthy is ice that is no longer predictable. The short- and long-term effects on the fish and wildlife remain murky.

I see a climate paradox. These northern people make up just 0.1 per cent of Canada’s population. They leave no more of a carbon footprint than a hunter’s qajaq leaves a wake on the ocean. And yet they are experiencing some of the first, and perhaps most significant consequences of climate change.

So once again, Nunavummiut are confronting external challenges, determined to find solutions and ready, yet again, to fight big governments and big industry to protect their culture and environment. Have I witnessed change come full circle, or is this a continuum? ❄️



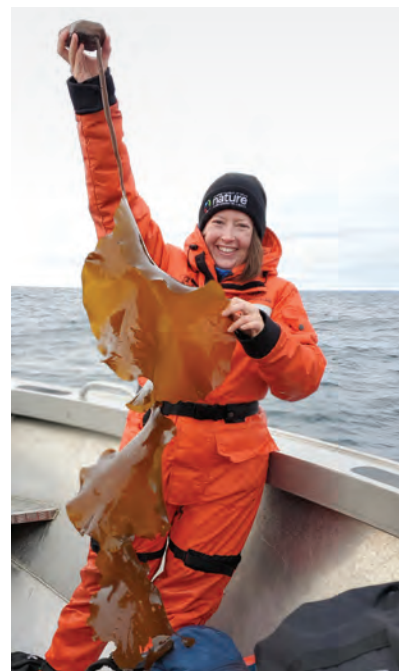
## Cambridge Bay deep dive

A spotlight on the Canadian High Arctic Research Station — and what divers are discovering under the ocean's surface

BY DAVID MCGUFFIN



Roger Bull, Camille Lavoie, Karen Filbee-Dexter and Amanda Savoie at Cambridge Bay; Savoie (right) shows off *Laminaria solidungula*, a species of kelp that only grows in the Arctic.



**WHEN AMANDA SAVOIE SHOWS** people photos and videos from her dives in the Arctic Ocean off Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, they are invariably astonished by what they're seeing.

"The water in Cambridge Bay is crystal clear, like tropical Caribbean colours," she says. "There are sandy beaches, clear water, but it's actually freezing." And it's not just the colour of the water that comes as a surprise — what's beneath the surface is equally mind-boggling. When Savoie showed some underwater videos to Inuit Elders in Cambridge Bay, she says they were amazed; for much of the year, the surface of the land and sea come in various shades of white and grey, but dive into the ocean, and there are "anemones and seaweed and all this life. It's all really colourful — red, yellow, blue."

Other divers in these waters describe seeing soft corals living on the edge of the photic zone — the upper layer of water that receives sunlight. They glow red, yellow and purple when lit by a diver's headlamp. And then there is the rich sea life that swims about, including healthy populations of fish like cod, char and sculpin as well as mammals such as seals and whales.

Research and exploration of these decidedly icy waters is possible because of the existence of the Canadian High Arctic Research Station, a \$250-million scientific hub that opened in Cambridge Bay in 2019. Run by Polar Knowledge Canada, the station is a gleaming, multi-storey steel-and-glass building on the edge of the 2,000-strong Inuit community here. Since 2022, Savoie

has led the dive teams that use CHARS, which includes a fully operational dive centre, as a base from which to explore the waters around Victoria Island.

Savoie speaks in obvious delight about the place where she gets to carry out her summer field work studying marine macroalgae, better known as kelp and seaweed, for the Canadian Museum of Nature and for Polar Knowledge Canada. She is among the first to research the kelp forests in this part of the Arctic Ocean. In part, her work is aimed at developing a baseline survey of these forests to better understand the impacts of climate change on this important ecosystem.

Kelp forests act as both a key fish habitat and a carbon sink, absorbing and storing vast amounts of carbon



Divers captured photos of colourful subtidal seaweeds near Kinngaaryuk, and collected a sample of red algae (below) to press and preserve.

dioxide from the atmosphere as they grow. But researchers are only now doing comprehensive surveys to find out where the Arctic kelp forests are growing and how much kelp is out there. Having CHARS takes a lot of the logistics out of this research.

"It's like there's a dive shop in the Arctic," says Savoie. And that's a big deal because elsewhere in the Arctic, researchers have to ship scuba tanks and compressors by barge a full summer before they head north on a dive. Having a team at CHARS to take on the task of shipping and inspecting equipment removes a huge burden for visiting divers — after all, diving in subzero Arctic waters is hard enough work.

Chris Arko was a senior diver at the research station who helped run the dive centre from its opening in 2019 to late 2023. A longtime resident of Cambridge Bay, he also dives in the Arctic Ocean just for fun. He explains that, because of the salt content, the temperature of the water can actually fall just below zero degrees Celsius while still remaining a liquid. "Something really interesting happens when you get into the negative temperatures," he says. "That water is no longer just

trying to chill your body; it's physically trying to change the state of your body from a liquid to a solid."

That means you need much more than just a wetsuit to dive and survive. Divers layer up, often wearing a down jacket under their dry suit, which is sealed at the neck and wrists to keep the water out. "Then you wear a hood and gloves — so your hands and your head get wet, but your core is warm." But in that kind of deep cold, even all that layering buys a diver only about 45 minutes underwater to do what they set out to do.

Most of those diving at CHARS are researchers coming in from the south. Because of the specialized gear, it's an expensive pastime, which can exclude participation from members of the local community. Arko has previously worked with two Inuit divers at CHARS but says no community members are currently diving in Cambridge Bay, though he does know of Inuit divers in Pond Inlet and Pangnirtung.

Still, he hopes the research station will lead to a revival of, and a rich future for, local diving. "A number of community members have been diving in the past," he says.

The father of one of his co-workers, for example, was an avid diver for years. "They did fantastic things like junk cleanup (in the bay), where they'd be diving and hooking ropes onto garbage and having people haul it out."

Though CHARS is an amazing facility, it's the beauty of what lies beneath the waters of the Arctic Ocean that keeps divers like Savoie and Arko coming back to Cambridge Bay. "I've had the absolute privilege of diving with narwhal here,"

Arko says. "Being underwater with narwhal is as close as you can get to diving with unicorns." ❄️



# *The Return of the Caribou*

**CARIBOU NUMBERS ARE ON THE RISE** on Baffin Island! A 2014 survey had recorded a devastating decline in the population, but this year's count found signs of a recovery in south Baffin. The updated survey from Nunavut's Department of Environment focused on caribou populations around the communities of Iqaluit, Kimmirut, Kinngait, Pangnirtung and Qikiqtarjuaq; the rest of the island will be surveyed over the next few years. While the 2014 survey revealed that caribou numbers had dropped from around 150,000 in the 1980s to just 4,600, local hunters have reported seeing an increasing number of healthy calves and cows. Their observations, along with aerial surveys, point to a rebound.



## Hidden in plain sight

**NUNAVUT'S NEWEST AND LARGEST TERRITORIAL PARK** contains rare plant and lichen species previously found only farther south. Agguttinni, on northern Baffin Island, is also home to important cultural sites — Thule sod houses from a thousand years ago, as well as stone tent rings and camp remains — and is a haven for many bird species, various types of whales and various land mammals, from Arctic hares to polar bears.

During a recent survey of the park's biodiversity, researchers documented 141 vascular plant species, 69 bryophytes and 93 lichens. They found the northernmost Canadian examples of Lapland diapensia (*Diapensia lapponica*) and flame-tipped lousewort (*Pedicularis flamme*) and the first identified Nunavut records of powdered matchstick lichen (*Pilophorus caeruleus*), Starke's fork moss (*Kiaeria starkei*) and sprig moss (*Aongstroemia longipes*). The finds confirm the importance of biodiversity conservation in the park.



## ARCTIC PRIMATES TELL THE FUTURE

**THOUGH THE ARCTIC CIRCLE** had warmer temperatures 52 million years ago, the winters were still long and dark. To compensate, *Ignacius*, which were closely related to primates and about the size of a small cat, evolved robust teeth and jaws for crunching through hard foods during the winter. *Ignacius* fossils from Umingmak Nuna (Ellesmere Island) were recently identified and named *Ignacius mckennai* and *Ignacius dawsonae*, two species new to western science.

Studies of how these animals adapted to survive in the high latitudes of the Arctic are timely because they may give researchers insights into what future Arctic ecosystems will look like as the region warms due to climate change.

## NARWHAL REBOUND

**AFTER A SIZABLE JUMP** in the narwhal population since its last assessment, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada says narwhals are no longer at risk. A survey in 2004 estimated the population at around 40,000, prompting the federal advisory panel to list the species as being of "special concern." But the most recent assessment suggests there are around 160,000 unicorns of the sea and that conservation strategies have helped the famous whales rebound back to stable numbers. While narwhals face many challenges to their survival, including melting sea ice and a rise in boat traffic, their population numbers reflect their adaptability.

↑ 388 kilometres

## Arctic hare, record holder

**A NUNAVUT-BASED ARCTIC HARE** named BBYY has set the world record for the longest distance travelled by a hare, rabbit or relative. Tagged with a satellite tracker, the adult female was tracked crossing more than 388 kilometres in 49 days, a feat that stunned researchers. Ecologists from the Université du Québec à Rimouski fixed satellite tracking collars on 25 hares near the tip of Umingmak Nuna (Ellesmere Island) in 2019 to identify their movement patterns. While many of the hares took on long journeys, none of the others came close to BBYY's epic trek. Even though BBYY died of unknown causes a month after completing her journey, the data she provided will help inform conservation efforts in the North.



Read *Canadian Geographic's* latest wildlife stories at [cangeo.ca/wildlife](http://cangeo.ca/wildlife)



# ON THE MAP

Exploring Cartography

## Knowing Nuna

As the territory turns 25, a call for an Inuit self-determined future in Nunavut

MAP BY **CHRIS BRACKLEY**  
WITH TEXT BY **DAVID KORGAK**

We are patient. That's a defining trait among Inuit. That patience has served us well for thousands of years as we not only survived the harsh conditions of the Arctic but thrived. It took more than three decades from the initial assertion that Inuit are a distinct Indigenous people within Canada to the creation of the Nunavut (Our Land) territory on April 1, 1999. Our patience was tested. Fortunately, when we exchanged Aboriginal title to all our traditional land in the Nunavut Settlement Area for the benefits set out in the Nunavut Agreement, we were able to secure certain rights to protect our way of life. Central to our argument was that we have always been here, well before it became convenient to Canada.

Now, with Nunavut's devolution official, and Canada handing over ownership of Crown lands and natural resources to the territorial government, what will Our Land look like?

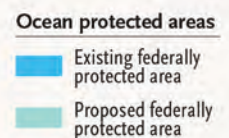
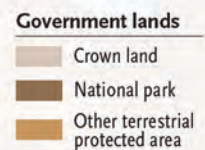
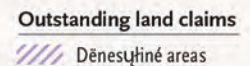
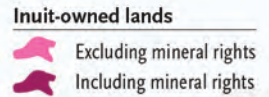
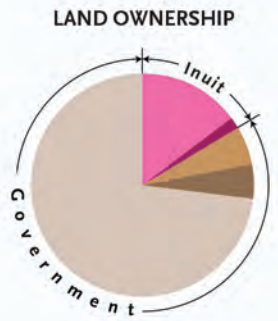
The relationship of Nuna (the land) and ummajuit (animals) is integral to Inuit well-being. Since time immemorial, we have overseen Nuna and the coastline using umiaq and qajaq. We devote our time to exploring, learning and adapting to our surroundings. Knowing Nuna means you can survive another day. But knowing Nuna will be different in the future. We will continue to adapt modern tools and modes of transportation, using them to help secure a sovereign Arctic for Inuit, Nunavummiut and the rest of Canada. I envision an Inuk as the captain of a coast guard ship monitoring our coast as we have done in umiaq for generations. Inuit will have expanded guardianship programs to monitor Nuna for its health and security. And Inuit will have final say on resource and exploration projects — knowing our surroundings will take on new meaning as we examine the resources within it.

As an Inuk, I am proud of our resilience in adapting to Canada's colonial efforts. We fought tooth and nail to create this territory, protecting our way of life — the land, water and animals; our language and our culture; and our right to Inuit self-government. And over the next 25 years, that self-government will help guide us forward, with insights from our Elders and inspiration from our youth. We also fought to firmly install ourselves as active participants in the global economy, mainly through the arts and culture where our fashion, artwork and film have been recognized internationally, and we continue to expand commercial exports of key staples of our diet, such as Arctic char and turbot.

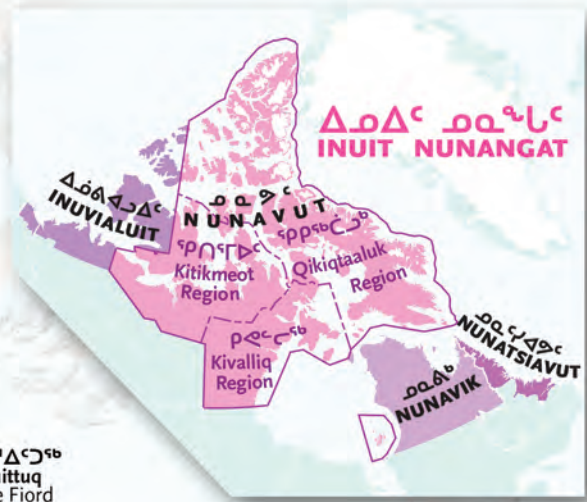
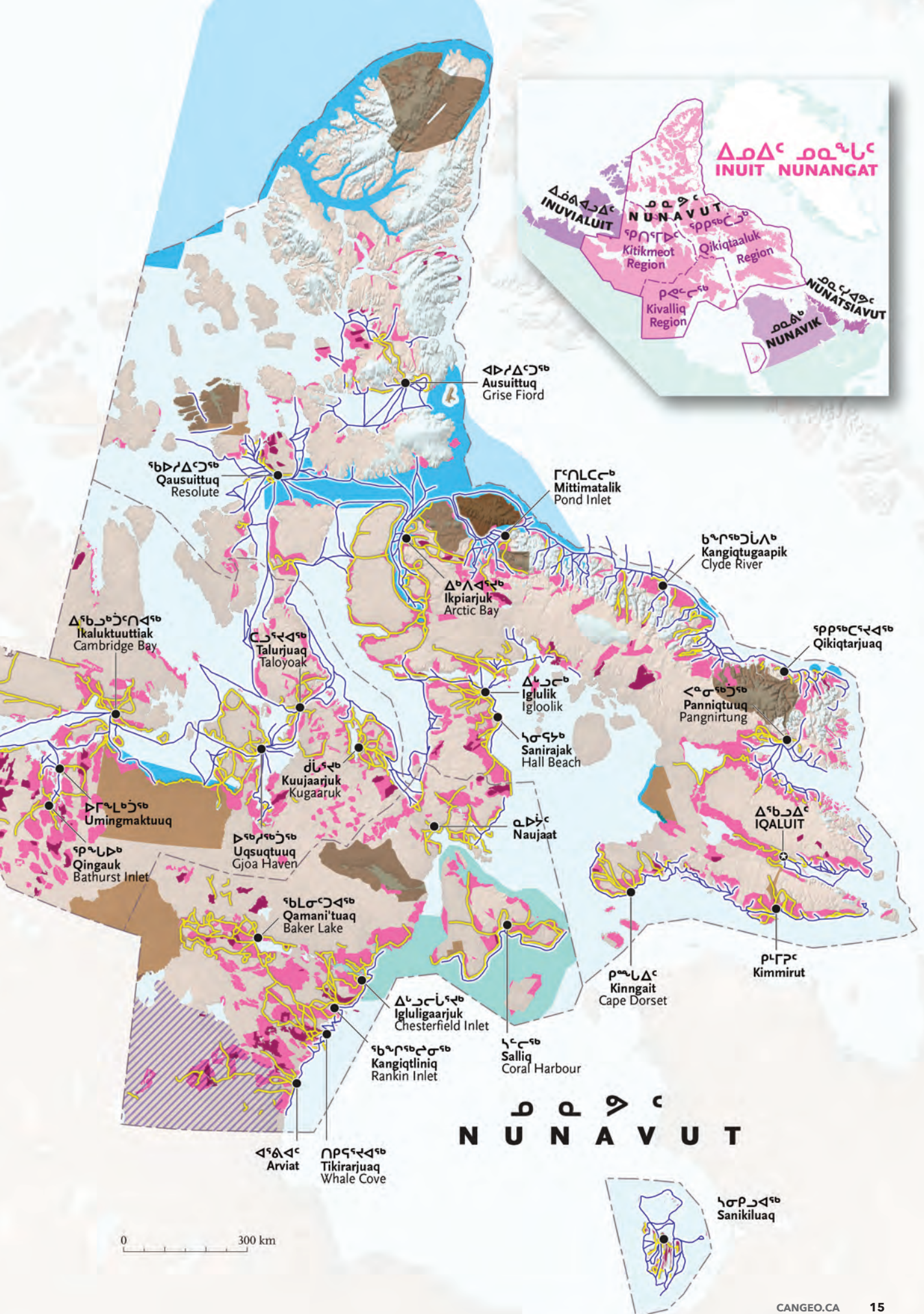
Since Canada has claimed the North as its own, there has been a perpetual push to send its value south. As part of the Nunavut Agreement, Inuit actually own just 18 per cent of the land in the territory — the Crown owns 80 per cent. But as lands and resource rights are returned to Nunavut in the coming years, Inuit will expand our guardianship over Nuna. An Inuit self-determined future means we become the ultimate decision-makers.

As we bide our time above the breathing hole of the proverbial seal, Inuit patience will be rewarded. When we strike our catch, it will be with the same enthusiasm as that of our ancestors to secure the survival of our people. There is one certainty: Inuit will continue to stand up for ourselves and, through our patience and resilience, adapt to our surroundings. But in the future I foresee, I am hopeful that our surroundings will adapt to us. Inuit must and will secure ownership over Nunavut. It is, by definition, Our Land. 🌐

*David Korgak is from Iqaluit. He works for Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. to advance Inuit rights, culture and well-being.*



MAP DATA: INUIT OWNED LANDS: NUNAVUT TUNNGAVIK INC.; PROTECTED AREAS: CANADIAN PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS DATABASE, 2023; PROPOSED FEDERALLY PROTECTED AREA: DRAFT NUNAVUT LAND USE PLAN, 2021. MAP 3.2-6; OUTSTANDING LAND CLAIMS: DRAFT NUNAVUT LAND USE PLAN, 2021. MAP 4.2-4; SEA ICE TRAVEL ROUTES: DRAFT NUNAVUT LAND USE PLAN, 2021. MAP 4.1-3; LAND TRAVEL ROUTES: DRAFT NUNAVUT LAND USE PLAN, 2021. MAP 4.1-10



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Talorjuaq  
Taloyoak

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Sanirajak  
Hall Beach

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Ikaluktuuttik  
Cambridge Bay

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IQALUIT

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Qingauk  
Bathurst Inlet

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Qamani'tuaq  
Baker Lake

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Chesterfield Inlet

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Kangitliniq  
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Arviat

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Tikrarjuaq  
Whale Cove

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NUNAVUT




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Sanikiluaq

0 300 km

A vast, undulating desert landscape under a clear sky, with the text "Our Peace is out there" overlaid in white. The desert features rolling sand dunes and a prominent rocky ridge in the distance. The lighting is soft, suggesting dawn or dusk, with a warm glow on the horizon.

“Our  
Peace  
is out there”



THE NORTHERN TIP OF MAINLAND CANADA IS A PARADISE OF POLAR BEARS,  
CARIBOU AND ARCTIC CHAR AS YET UNDISTURBED BY MINING.  
THE RESIDENTS OF TALOYOAK, NUNAVUT, ARE FIGHTING TO KEEP IT THAT WAY.

BY **THOMAS LUNDY**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **EMINA IDA**



**STEPPING OUT OF HIS OFFICE** and into the soft golden hues of an October afternoon in mainland Canada's northernmost community, Jimmy Ullikatalik, a middle-aged Inuk with a laugh fit to fill a room lugs a heavy wooden crate over the threshold and onto the frozen ground. There's a muffled crunch as plywood eases into snow.

"It's a grenade launcher," says the manager of the Taloyoak Umarulirijigut Association (TUA) with a grin (umarulirijigut means "liaisons of environment and wildlife").

More accurately, it's a grenade-tipped harpoon gun, transported from Yellowknife in August by Ullikatalik's colleagues after the small Inuit hamlet of Taloyoak was granted a tag by the Kitikmeot Regional Wildlife Board to hunt arvik (bowhead whale) — one of only five tags allotted to the territory of Nunavut each year by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. The gun is going back to Yellowknife on the next plane.

Hunters had set out one morning in mid-August by boat, deploying

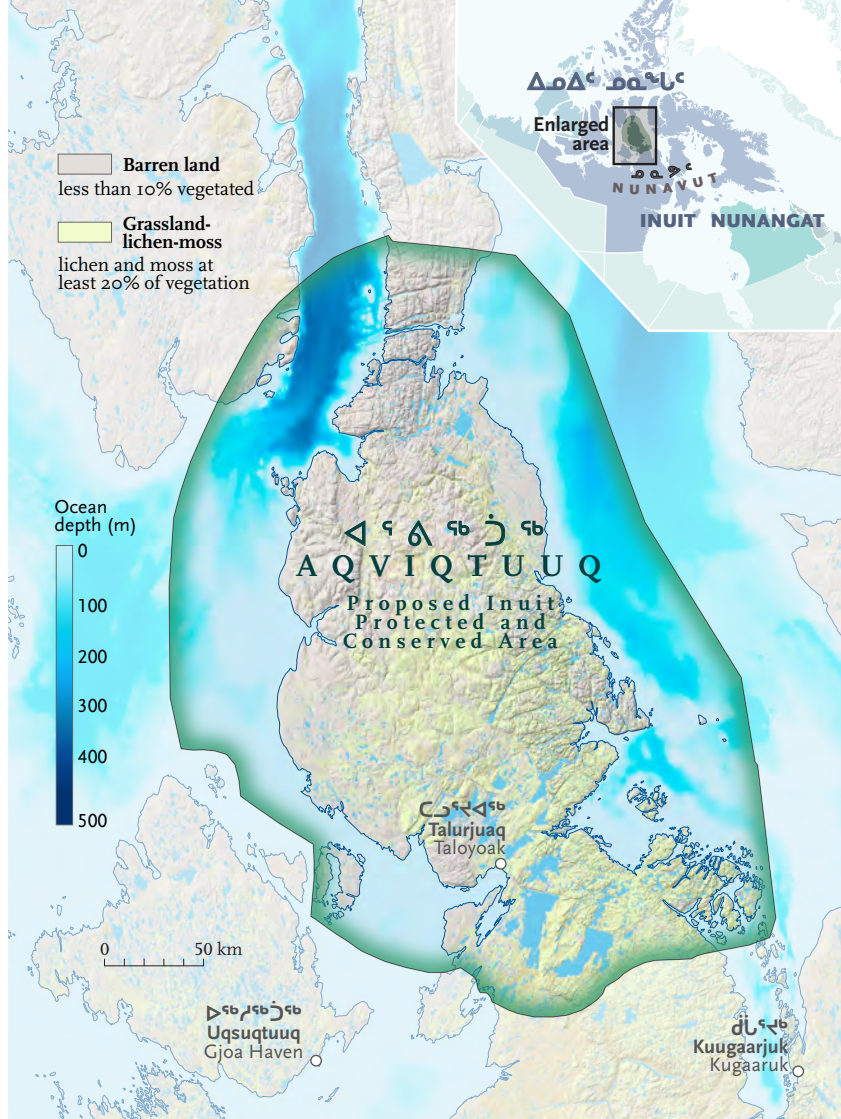


sonars at various points along the coast of James Ross Strait to monitor whale activity. And while the tools of the hunt have evolved, the result was the same: one bowhead whale, expertly dispatched, and about 50,000 kilograms of food, fuel and crafting materials to help sustain the whole community for the next year. Every part of the arvik is used, says Ullikatalik.

An announcement was made soon after the successful hunt via the TUA

Facebook page. Meat and blubber was now available in the community freezer to anyone who asked for it — with priority given to Elders, as is always the way.

As Ullikatalik tells the story of this season's successful hunt, more hunters whiz by on skidoos, rifle slung over their backs. October is the tail end of the fall caribou migration, and locals are keen to catch the last stragglers of the Ahiak caribou herd as the animals make



their way back to the barrens and boreal forest north of Great Slave Lake from their summer calving grounds near Taloyoak. Ullikatalik sidetracks from arvik to mention how Inuit almost always leave the caribou’s antlers where they fall, a mark of respect and gratitude to the animal that has sustained them for thousands of years.

The hamlet itself is a collection of brightly coloured one- and two-storey houses that overlook a bay of deep blue-grey. About 1,000 people call it home, along with about 2,000 polar bears that patrol the surrounding region. There are no roads in; for

most people, the only way in or out is a daily flight with Canadian North — a “milk run” stopping at the relatively nearby hamlets of Cambridge Bay, Kugaaruk and Gjoa Haven — unless weather means the plane can’t land. For locals willing to brave blizzards and bears, a 150-kilometre skidoo ride over to Gjoa Haven (the nearest of the three) is possible once sea ice has formed.

The sea ice hasn’t appeared yet, though thin crusts of ice are beginning to take hold where ocean meets land and the day is limited to eight hours of glorious twilight. In a couple of weeks, winter will close like a vice, the ice will seal off the ocean and the sun will dip below the horizon for the last time, leaving the sky dark until spring — save for the occasional drama of aurora borealis dancing across the night. The yelps of blue-eyed husky pups pierce the cold air.

The sun rises over the houses of Taloyoak, Nunavut (opposite, top). Jimmy Ullikatalik (opposite), manager of the Taloyoak Umarulirijigut Association, wants to protect the region as an Inuit Protected and Conserved Area. Caribou (above) are just one of the many species that pass by the community on their migration.

Taloyoak (meaning “many caribou blinds”) sits on a narrow inlet on the southwestern coast of Aqviqtuuq. The land, some 45,039 square kilometres all told, is a peninsula that juts north like a giant outstretched finger. “From here, there are only islands,” explains Ullikatalik, “so all wildlife has to pass through, by water or by land, during their migration.”

A short walk around the bay lie the ancient lines of rocks that give Taloyoak its name, placed there by the Netsilik Inuit who have inhabited

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Journalist Thomas Lundy (@ThomLundy) is the associate editor at Canadian Geographic. Emina Ida (@eidaphotography) is a specialist in Arctic resilient habitats with WWF-Canada.

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foxes, seals, whales and Arctic char has been under mounting threat. The thinning ice of the nearby Northwest Passage means increased shipping is on the way, and with it the threat of wildlife disruption and oil spills. The mining industry also covets the peninsula and already owns 19 mineral claims — including for diamonds. And while mining companies promise residents a quick road to prosperity, Ullikatalik says they conveniently leave out the potential social, cultural and environmental costs.

“When I look at Canada, and the whole world, and see what mining does to an environment,” says Ullikatalik, “and hear stories from our cousins down south about how they aren’t able to drink their water because it’s so contaminated...we don’t want that to happen for us and for our caribou.”

But alongside concern, there is also resolve. Ullikatalik and his colleagues at the TUA have a plan: The Aqviqtuuq Inuit Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA), the first Inuit-led conservation area in the world. This proposed area encompasses the entire peninsula of Aqviqtuuq, some 90,000 square kilometres of marine, terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems to be patrolled full-time by Guardians (Hapumiyiit in Inuktitut) employed to monitor the health of the land and its wildlife while also keeping the community freezer full.

“Our land and our caribou are healthy at this point,” says Ullikatalik, his voice rising. “We want to keep it that way.”

**THE INSPIRATION** for the Aqviqtuuq IPCA goes all the way back to 1972, when Panarctic Oils, Ltd. — a joint venture made up of energy companies like Imperial Oil, Gulf Canada Resources and others — discovered natural gas in Canada’s Arctic archipelago. Then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development



the area nomadically for millennia. They built the hunting blinds used to funnel migrating caribou into the firing line of waiting archers.

The settlement of Taloyoak, on the other hand, was founded relatively recently. It came into existence in 1949 after two Inuk men — both of whom were Jimmy Ullikatalik’s great-grandparents — recommended the spot to the Hudson’s Bay Company as a trading post based on the abundance of caribou in the area. Connections to this land run deep. “I was born

here, went to school here, and lived all my life here,” says Ullikatalik. “Our way of life is sacred to us. It’s our identity.”

Ullikatalik’s feelings for his home are echoed throughout the community, passed down from the generations before, who, he says, “put Taloyoak on the map so I could live here.” But when he tries to picture his great-grandchildren enjoying the land the same way he does, doubt enters his mind. For the last 50 years, this paradise of muskox, polar bears,



Jean Chrétien proposed a gas pipeline that would slash through Aqviqtuuq on its journey from Cornwallis Island, 400 kilometres to the north, down to southern Alberta. There had been no government consultation with the community, so the Elders of Taloyoak began meeting in their homes each night to figure out how to stop the pipeline.

To those proposing the pipeline, Aqviqtuuq simply looked like a mammoth expanse of unused land. What difference would one pipeline make? The Elders knew otherwise. When considering the six char running rivers on the peninsula and the caribou, polar bears, migratory birds, wolves and many more species that inhabit or visit here, many to birth offspring, Aqviqtuuq suddenly begins to look a lot smaller. Resolute, the Elders expressed their belief that there was no room for industrial activity. Against all odds, the pipeline project was eventually abandoned in the '80s — scuppered in part due to the political pressure the community helped create, as well

as regulatory hurdles and energy market fluctuations. According to Ullikatalik, the resolve of the Elders that helped stop the pipeline back then continues to inspire those fighting today. “We feel we have the privilege to protect Aqviqtuuq today in honour of those people in 1972” he says.

“Our land and our caribou are healthy at this point. We want to keep it that way.”

But in the mid-2010s, plans for a protected Aqviqtuuq became stalled. Both regional and territorial levels of government, some of which were pro mining, had denied the community’s land management proposals for an IPCA and the process was at an impasse. Feeling their voices weren’t being heard, the TUA made the decision to turn to the World Wildlife Fund.

**Clockwise from bottom left:** a country food drying shack decorated with caribou antlers; George Aklah, vice-chair of the TUA, enjoys his cabin as his granddaughter, Dolly, peeks through the window; Senior Guardians John Neeveacheak (left) and Raymond Mannilaq (right) submerge marine sampling devices.

Emina Ida and Brandon Laforest, associate specialist and lead specialist, respectively, in Arctic resilient habitats for WWF, have been visiting Taloyoak and lending their expertise to the Aqviqtuuq project ever since. Ida describes the WWF’s role as one of support — finding potential funders to back the Aqviqtuuq IPCA, garnering support from area stakeholders, and helping TUA break down its overarching vision for this peninsula into incremental, more attainable goals. “It’s really them,” says Ida. “We’re just following their leadership and making sure we’re hitting those milestones, those eventualities, that will get this IPCA established.”



With WWF's support, the TUA has begun to log tangible results. In 2020, Taloyoak won a \$451,000 Arctic Inspiration Prize, a grant funded "by the North and for the North" that provides seed money to up to 12 community-led projects each year. The town's winning project, called Niqihagut (meaning "our food"), while separate from the Aqviqtuuq project, has become inextricably linked to the proposed IPCA. At its centre is a country food cut-and-wrap facility. Having a plant on-site to process traditional Inuit food sourced from the land, including caribou, beluga, ringed seal and char, would help solve one of the greatest challenges the residents of Taloyoak face: food insecurity.

"Even though we're Inuit, we don't always have access to country food," Ullikatalik says grimly. Though wildlife is abundant, hunting equipment is becoming more expensive. And hunters who do get out onto the land have noticed that climate change is altering the landscape. Thinning ice is making hunting more treacherous and muskox, which until recently spent little time on Aqviqtuuq, are now overpopulated and are pushing the caribou away.



Those who can't get out on the land to hunt — Elders, single parents and low-income families — are often forced to turn to the wildly expensive local store. According to Nutrition North Canada's last report in 2021, the monthly cost of feeding a family of four in Taloyoak was \$1,962. As a comparison, Statistics Canada put Ontario's average monthly household food spending at \$819 at that time. Ullikatalik puts it in simpler terms: "It costs an arm and a leg."

To make budget, people opt for cheaper processed meals often packed with high calories, fat, sugar and sodium. Their health suffers. "We have many people getting diabetes today because they don't have access to country food. Country food is our natural food. We've been given it since birth, and if we eat it more, we'll be healthier," Ullikatalik says.

The ultimate aim of both the Aqviqtuuq IPCA and Niqihagut projects is to create a blue conservation economy — which incentivizes ocean conservation as an opportunity for growth — in Taloyoak focused on local consumption, rather than governments and companies in the south pushing imports of expensive

processed foods. Comparing it to agricultural systems down south, Ullikatalik calls wildlife throughout Aqviqtuuq their "livestock." The cut-and-wrap facility would allow Taloyoak to properly collect, prepare, store and distribute the food sustainably sourced from that livestock in larger quantities. It could also play a part in wildlife management. The facility will allow the TUA to hunt overpopulated muskox down to a more balanced number, relieving pressure on Aqviqtuuq's caribou. With the extra supply of meat, the TUA

"We're so used to being  
**out on the land.**  
We enjoy it so much that  
sometimes **we don't even**  
want to go home."

can sell their product to Taloyoak residents and other communities around Nunavut at a reasonable price — and even down south in the long term. Once it is built, the Taloyoak Umarulirijigut Association believes the facility will generate \$1.9 million in annual revenue, with the money

**Clockwise from bottom left:** Pushing hard to break off a large chunk of ice, which will be harvested and brought back for the Elders to make tea; Taloyoak on a September day in 2023; Emina Ida, an associate specialist at WWF-Canada.

reinvested in cultural programs for the community, and create local, culturally relevant jobs. Then there's the "guardian angels." "That's what people round here call the Guardians," says Ullikatalik with a chuckle.

The Guardians are the eyes and ears of the Aqviqtuuq project, a team of five locals led by former Canadian Rangers Lieutenant Abel Aqqaq. They patrol the land and waters of Aqviqtuuq daily, run a DFO-funded marine monitoring program and collect baseline data on marine species biodiversity and abundance in anticipation of increased shipping activity. They monitor caribou populations to better inform the sustainable harvest plan for Niqihagut. And, perhaps most importantly, they hunt and bring country food back to sustain the community.

Federal funding for the Guardians project came through in 2022, another milestone the TUA has



top: Aqviqtuuq Guardians (left to right) Steven Ukuqtunnuaq, Raymond Mannilaq, Abel Aqqaq, Hunter Lyall, John Neeveacheak, Clifford Mannilaq; Roger Oleekatalik (right), who has spent time as a Youth Guardian, has gained skills to carry on his peoples' legacy as protectors of Aqviqtuuq.

hit in recent years. Indigenous Guardian programs, first established in 2017 and in place in about 80 Indigenous communities around Canada, provide a stable funding base for community initiatives focused on environmental stewardship, sustainable harvesting, small-scale fisheries and tourism. Aqviqtuuq is no different. The University of Ottawa's Smart Prosperity Institute, which works to provide policies and solutions for a stronger, cleaner economy, estimates the Aqviqtuuq Guardians program has generated \$12 million so far in community co-benefits and created job opportunities valued at \$1.3 million a year.

To Aqqaq and his team, the benefits of being a Guardian run far beyond the monetary considerations. They have, quite simply, a dream job that they thank the TUA for every day — a chance to be on the land and to help their people. "In almost every community, there are Elders that can't get out to hunt for



themselves," says Aqqaq in a video produced by ArctiConnexion, an NGO that supports the TUA's scientific research projects. "So we hunt for them, for the community."

To Aqqaq, the program is also a valuable tool for keeping the next generation of Inuit in touch with their culture. As well as employing full-time Guardians, they also hire part-time Youth Guardians. "These guys grew up with their parents going out all the time hunting," he says. "They were taught to hunt, taught to survive out on the land. These young boys are respectful, easy to work with and want to learn."

What it boils down to for Aqqaq is that he sees the youth involved in the program are happy.

Roger Oleekatalik is one of those youth. Jimmy Ullikatalik's grandson sits in the library of Netsilik School only a stone's throw from his grandfather's TUA office. He's eating a plate of frozen caribou lung, stomach lining and fat. Tall and broad shouldered, he's on the verge of graduating and has a calm, mature air out of place in these lively schoolhouse surroundings. Oleekatalik is one of the lucky ones who has spent time as an Aqviqtuuq Youth Guardian. "Our peace is out there. We're adapted to it," he explains. "We're so used to being out on the land. We enjoy it so much that sometimes we don't even want to go home."

His eyes light up as he describes his first caribou hunt as a young



of playing dead when first hit, only to leap to ferocious life when its assailant is within reach, and describes the correct angle one should approach at to safely check for any such tricks. It was a rite of passage for him, a boy on the verge of being a man, an Inuk who now has — through his grandfather's and father's tutelage and through his role as a Youth Guardian — gained the skills to carry on his peoples' legacy as protectors of Aqviqtuuq.

At his age, Ullikatalik no longer gets out on the land other than regular visits to the cabin he built years ago on nearby Middle Lake. This is where he grew up catching char and trout at his parents' cabin and where Roger recently built a cabin of his own. Ullikatalik's boys are fully grown and take care of the hunting for the family, and the Guardians take care of stewarding the land on behalf of the community. But his work has taken him far — even to Glasgow, Scotland, in 2021, where Ullikatalik spoke at COP26 (the UN Climate Change Conference) on the impacts climate change is having on his community. From trying (and loving) haggis to trans-Atlantic flights to talking about Aqviqtuuq with Steven Guilbeault, Canada's minister for environment and climate change, it was a trip to remember.

Elders converse (above) as they enjoy a selection of fresh country foods, which includes (left) raw caribou, dried Arctic char (piffi) and narwhal blubber (muqtaaq).

boy: the chase on skidoo, his father holding the rifle steady and calling him over to pull the trigger for the final shot, the celebrations afterwards with a meal of frozen caribou and the joy on the Elders' faces when he shared his catch with them. The story has remarkable similarities to the one his grandfather tells of his first hunt.

"Caribou is like our soul food," Oleekatalik says with a smile.

The previous year, on his 17th birthday, Oleekatalik hunted his first polar bear out on the sea ice. In describing it, he demonstrates an intimate understanding of the animal's ways, knowledge that has been passed down through generations. He speaks of the polar bear's tactic

Still, what really gets his heart beating is talking about his memories of Taloyoak, the Aqviqtuuq IPCA and his hopes and dreams for the future.

"We're proud Canadians," says Ullikatalik. "We just want to contribute to Canada a place that has never been disturbed. I've always said, since I've been travelling around the world, if I had my own way I would never leave this place. Each hunting place, each place where you catch fish, is different. Each one has a special meaning. It might be where you first caught game or where your grandfather or grandmother taught you."

The target date for formally establishing the Aqviqtuuq Inuit Protected and Conserved Area is 2030, in line with the date by which the Government of Canada aims to conserve 30 per cent of the country's land and water.

And if they are successful, what a contribution a preserved Aqviqtuuq would make. To Canada, to the world, to Nunavut and, most of all, to the people of Taloyoak, who have been on this peninsula for thousands of years, and who plan to be here for thousands more. 🌐



In the summer of 2023, three women set out on the 16-metre sailboat Que Sera on an expedition aimed at writing Inuit women into the exploration history of the North.

# Beyond her horizons

## LISTENING TO THE WOMEN OF TALLURUTIK

AS TOLD TO **JESSICA HOUSTON, OKALIK EEGEESIAK,  
MARIAH ERKLOO AND ABBIE OOTOVA**  
COMPILED BY **MONICA KIDD**

**CENTURIES BEFORE** it was drawn on a map, Canada's Northwest Passage was a place of desire and empire. Hoping for a western route between Europe and Asia, England sent John Cabot to search for it in 1497. Following in his wake went explorers the likes of Martin Frobisher, William Edward Parry and John Franklin, who was declared missing, along with his two ships *Erebus* and *Terror* and his crew of 129 men, in 1848. Norwegian Roald Amundsen finally navigated the Northwest Passage over three winters on his ship *Gjøa*, arriving in Nome, Alaska, in 1906, five years before becoming the first to stand on Antarctica's South Pole.

But the Northwest Passage existed long before its boundaries were declared by European explorers. Every expedition attempting its channels encountered Inuit. The more successful ones relied upon the knowledge and work of Inuit women, who sewed clothing, cooked food and provided advice on how to survive conditions unimaginable to Europeans. Their stories have gone largely unrecorded in the official histories of the Northwest Passage.

In the summer of 2023, three women set out on the 16-metre sailboat *Que Sera* for a different kind of expedition. The Beyond Her Horizons expedition would not look for shipping routes or resources for extraction or footholds for land and sovereignty defence. Instead, the women onboard would attempt to write Inuit women into the exploration history of the North, while also collecting data on the changing sea ice, an issue that is already affecting Arctic communities and will have an even greater impact in the future.

Okalik Egeesiak, former chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and Jessica Houston, a Montreal-based artist, began their journey in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, stopping to speak with women in Gjoa Haven, Cambridge Bay and Tuktoyaktuk for their insight into surviving in a harsh climate — they shared their knowledge on everything from the land to the animals and about traditional women's skills such as sewing and keeping the qulliq going. They also talked about women's contributions to the success of explorers during early contact. McGill University PhD candidate Noémie Planat joined the expedition in Tuktoyaktuk and sailed to Nome, Alaska, measuring the salinity and temperature of the Alaska Current.

As with any Arctic expedition, the participants had to grapple with sea ice and wind, and life on a boat. This one also faced logistical challenges when Canada's worst forest fire season on record forced the evacuation of Yellowknife and the closure of its airport, interfering with planned crew changes.

The following are excerpts of what the expedition heard from the women of the Northwest Passage.

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*Beyond Her Horizons* was supported by a grant from the Trebek Initiative, NVision Insight Group Inc., Canadian Council for the Arts, Parks Canada, Canadian North and Fondation Pacifique. *Que Sera* is operated by the non-profit organization Fondation Pacifique. Watch an excerpt of the expedition documentary at [cangeo.ca/nunavut25](https://cangeo.ca/nunavut25).

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# Mary Muckpa

*Mary Muckpa grew up on the land around Pond Inlet. She is a seamstress, retired teacher and respected Elder.*

Back in the day, we worked to survive. [My ancestors] made kamik [boots] for their travels on the mainland. They would walk long distances on the land to the point that the soles of their kamik would get holes. They would have brought sewing supplies, bearded seal skins, for their travel inland, to be able to make repairs during their journey. That was how they lived.

There were times life on the land was hard, although we remember them as being happy times. The only times that seemed hard were when the weather was not cooperating in the summertime, when things became wet, and we weren't able to dry them out — when the sealskins had to be dry and the weather was wet with rain and drizzle. We tried to be prepared. We preserved what we harvested. We collected heather: we would keep it in our bedding to keep it dry and then use it for fire on wet days. We had to keep it dry so it would be ready to be used for heating and cooking.

We were not worried about difficult times then, or even stressed. It was how we grew up, and it was a way of life. I don't think people thought their way of life was hard or about how complex it was. I think we would find it difficult to live in those circumstances now.



this page: Mary Muckpa (top); Okalik Eegeisak casts Arctic cotton into the sea to honour Inuit women; a Tuktoyaktuk landscape; opposite page: Aaju Peter spends time with Okalik Eegeisak (middle), as well as Jessica Houston (bottom).





# Aaju Peter

*Aaju Peter is an Inuk lawyer, activist and sealskin clothing designer and a member of the Order of Canada. Born in Greenland, she moved to Nunvaut in 1981 and lives in Iqaluit.*

Unless we go to the Elders directly, it's hard to get our story. It's always told from somebody else's perspective. I listened to a series on the radio in Greenland about [Greenlandic-Danish polar explorer and anthropologist] Knud Rasmussen's travels from Greenland to Canada. It would have been nice to also hear it from the Inuit who encountered these outsiders, because we talk about different things

I firmly believe that our Inuit way of being is so important. Our Elders say you have to respect the environment, you have to respect the animals. Everybody is accorded the same respect and the same space. It took me many years to learn that. In the Inuit community, it's always *us*. What I learned in Denmark [where she was sent on her own to school at age 11] is *me, me, me*, then everybody else.

I have always thought Inuit women are so powerful. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Mary Simon, and the woman who went with Knud Rasmussen on their explorations. During the changing of our culture — being moved into communities, and our autonomy being taken over or run by outsiders, we women learned to survive.

I remember when one of the Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated presidents stood up in parliament and presented the Inuktitut name for the Northwest Passage, which is Tallurutik. This is the word for a woman's chin tattoos. The Northwest Passage looks like chin tattoos: huge, huge mountains going right down to the ocean. I've sailed the Northwest Passage a few times, and I remember my pictures being taken, with my tallurutik. That was a proud moment, looking at the horizon, and the mountains going down like the lines on my chin tattoos. That, to me, was amazing.





this page: A view from Pond Inlet, (to p) where Mariah Erkloo lives, and of the harbour at Gjoa Haven (bottom); opposite: Okalik Egeesiak looks at beading by Siusaruaq, also known as Shoofly omer (middle); a photo of Tookoolito (bottom), who was on the Polaris expedition (1871-1873) attempting to reach the North Pole.

# Mariah Erkloo

*Mariah Erkloo is a Pond Inlet resident and a sociology student at University of British Columbia. She has sailed through the Northwest Passage as a cultural ambassador and works with Oxen Network, a non-profit that aims to connect northern communities with the cruise industry through various programs.*

All these islands and channels in the Northwest Passage, they have English names. Growing up, I only knew the names in Inuktitut. And there's a special twist to how Inuit named places back then. They were not named after people who "discovered" them. Names just describe what the land provides or what it resembles. Qikiqtaq is Mount Island. And Qikiqtarjuaq, which means Big Island. These names are all around the Arctic. The water channel above Bylot Island, it's called Tallurutiup Imanga, the water belonging to the mountain. There's a mountain over there and it creates a V shape, like chin tattoos, so it's called Tallurutik. Land is not something we own. It's something we work with and respect.

There are a lot of stories about the Arctic, and they're all true. But it's more wholesome when the local community is involved in the storytelling.





# Miqqusaaq Bernadette Dean

*Miqqusaaq Bernadette Dean is the great-granddaughter of Siusarnaq, also known as Shoofly Come . Dean is from Southampton Island at the entrance to Hudson Bay, where she grew up hunting, fishing and ha vesting. She has worked closely with Elders and youth on cultural program development, as well as culture camps for Inuit youth and women.*

A lot of early explorers wouldn't have survived without Inuit women. My great-grandmother Shoofly was a very good seamstress. I've seen her work at the museum. Her stitches look like tiny pencil marks. That's how intricate her sewing skills were. I saw a picture of 20 or so whalers who wintered four winters in a row, and they're all clothed in caribou clothing. And there's a picture of the crew of *Neptune*, which was a government expedition in the early 1900s, and they're all dressed in caribou clothing. There's almost 40 of them, I think. They wouldn't have been able to make the clothing themselves; it would have been Inuit women. Families would go travelling together and go inland to harvest skins for clothing.

When [my great-grandmother died], the Hudson's Bay post manager wrote in his daily journal that whenever there was a catch of fish or seals or a harvest of animals, she always made sure that the Hudson's Bay boys got a share.

Tookoolito [also known as Hannah] and her husband Ipiirvik [also known as Joe] worked with Charles Francis Hall on the Polaris Expedition. A group of them — including maybe eight German guys, scientists, a Greenlandic family of five, Hannah, Joe, and their daughter — got separated and drifted away [on an ice fl e]. Hannah had a qulliq [lamp] and Joe built snow houses, even two or three times transporting them from thin ice to thicker ice. [The Polaris Expedition (1871-1873) was an American attempt to reach the North Pole. The ship was abandoned during an ice storm, and many crew, including Tookoolito, her husband and their young daughter, were left marooned for six months. They drifted about 2,000km south before being rescued off Labrador .]

We have such an unwritten history. I've been to Hannah's grave in Groton, Connecticut, twice. I brought her little bits of Arctic cotton and Arctic heather, a needle and some sinew. The second time I brought her roses.

Those Inuit women could have been considered explorers, but they didn't get that title or recognition. ❁



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*Inuktitut (roman orthography):* **Qimuksiq**  
*Translation:* **a person travelling by sled with their dogs**



Qimuksiqti Terry Uyarak draws closer to the finish of the second leg of the 2022 Nunavut Quest dogsled race.

# ᑭᓴᑦ

A 500-KILOMETRE DOGSLED RACE ACROSS THE HIGH ARCTIC AND THE REVITALIZATION OF A ONCE-THREATENED TRADITION AT THE CORE OF INUIT CULTURE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DUSTIN PATAR**



**CONTENT WARNING:**

*THIS STORY INCLUDES TESTIMONY ABOUT THE KILLING OF QIMMIIT (DOGS).*



**IT WAS COLD**, colder than usual for the time of year. Some 45 kilometres to the northeast, the Ikpiarjuk (Arctic Bay) airport would tally the low of minus 31.8 C as the coldest April 18 of the last 20 years. But the sun was shining, a clear indication that the darkness and true chill of winter had been washed away by the embrace of an early High Arctic spring.

Here, at the frozen mouth of the Iqalulik River on the northwestern corner of Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island), a small camp began to take shape. Not so slowly, a mix of well-worn white canvas tents seemed to pop out of the equally white sea ice, joined by others of bright orange and yellow.

As the tents went up, organized activity flurried around them. Plywood, blankets, sleeping bags and stoves were pulled from their resting places deep inside the qamutiit (traditional Inuit sleds) and placed inside the tents. A small number of saw- or shovel-wielding campers ventured out to where the sea of snow drifts was undisturbed, seeking the best snow and ice for drinking and cooking water. Another group, also gripping saws and axes, chopped whole frozen Arctic char and seals into small, manageable portions for dogs. Those too young to help out kicked a soccer ball through the snow.

Minus the occasional laugh of a child, enthusiastic conversation inside a tent or muffle hum of a small generator, the camp was quiet. There was an energy

The sun had just started to sink below the horizon when this racer neared the finish line on Day 2

there that caused everyone to occasionally look up and gaze north, straining to see as far as they could in the direction they had come from.

In a moment, that tension was released, cut free by the buzz of snowmobiles racing toward a point on the northern horizon punctuated by two royal-blue Qikiqtani Inuit Association flags. Beyond those was a speck, the size of a distant star, only inverse in colour.

While the camp watched, the speck multiplied into a blur of a dozen bounding objects. As the distance continued to melt away, a team of 12 qimmiit (dogs) pulled a darkly clad figure with a white pinny emblazoned with a bold, blue number two into view. It was David Oyukuluk from Ikpiarjuk, the first of the qimuksiqtiit (mushers) to cross the finish line in the first of six legs of the 2022 Nunavut Quest, the territory's preeminent dogsled race.

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The qimmiit used for the Nunavut Quest have barely changed over the last couple of millennia, just like their deep bond with Inuit (left). Racer Joshua Haulli (below) approaches Camp 1.

loving me, and I was trying to tell them to run, [but] they couldn't," recalls Uyarak with a laugh. "They were just really happy; they didn't know what to do."

It was, and continues to be, a lot of work, says Uyarak, who is also a Juno-nominated musician. He feeds the dogs every two days when he's not running them and every day when he is. Their food is mostly what he hunts, whether that's seal, walrus or whatever is in season. He doesn't run his team during the summer, but once there's enough snow, typically in November, he'll run them until June or July. To keep them active, Uyarak tries to run them at least 10 kilometres three days a week, which he tracks using a fitness app in ended for running, hiking or skiing.

It has been a long learning process, involving getting advice from community Elders and his father — and a lot of practice. For the longest time, Uyarak didn't feel quite right calling himself a qimuksiqtu (singular of qimuk-siqtiit), a title he accepted only after being called it by one of the community Elders.

Over time, his team has grown to 15 dogs and two puppies, whose names are given to them when they're born based on their appearance or how he'd like them to act. It's a bond no different, he says, than that of dog owners who love their pets so much they consider them a part of the family. "We just keep them outside."

But unlike dogs kept as pets, qimmiit are working dogs, and they're treated as such. "We try to keep them a little bit wild," says Uyarak.

The Canadian Inuit Dog (the official Canadian Kennel Club breed name) has remained relatively unchanged over the last 2,000 years. As one of the continent's oldest

By the time the sun had set and the quickly cooling landscape had been draped in hues of purple and blue, all 13 racers had crossed the finish line. Terry Uyarak, who crossed third, was happy with his results and finally having Day 1 in the books for the first time since the pandemic, three years earlier.

Although Uyarak, who was born and raised in Iglulik (Igloodik), grew up going on dogsled rides with his father, he didn't have his own team until six years before, when a friend on his hockey team was looking for someone to take on six dogs.

One of his first challenges as a dog team owner was simply trying to get them to go. "They kept going to me,



Indigenous dogs, they dispersed east across the North American Arctic alongside Inuit, a bond that was passed on to and spanned countless generations until the middle of the 20th century.



**SOMETIME AROUND 1966**, three dogs lay motionless on the ice in the hamlet of Ikpiarjuk. They were 16-year-old Moses Oyukuluk's best lead dogs. From what Oyukuluk was told, the community dog catcher had shot them because they were loose (in the newly established communities, unlike in traditional camps, dogs needed to be tied up at all times). It was a loss that ultimately led to Oyukuluk giving up his team.

What happened to Oyukuluk was not just a one-off. In the 25 years following the end of the Second World War, the killing of qimmiit across the region and beyond contributed to tearing apart the fabric of Inuit culture.

More than two decades ago, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association and the Makivik Corporation of Nunavik urged the Canadian government to open a public inquiry into the killing of qimmiit between 1950 and 1975.

In 2005, after years of requests, the federal government capitulated and ordered the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to launch a thorough self-investigation. A year later, the RCMP's final report concluded there was no organized sled dog slaughter but rather the killing of some dogs for reasons of public health and safety. Out of disappointment and disbelief, the Qikiqtani Truth

Commission was born from a need to set the historical record straight.

For the next seven years, the Inuit-led and sponsored inquiry painstakingly gathered historical documents and conducted interviews with more than 345 witnesses — including Oyukuluk — to document this period defined by an onslaught of colonial acts in the Arctic, among them the killing of dogs but also forced relocations, residential schools and the establishment of permanent settlements.

**"OF COURSE, I WON'T GET TO LIVE EXACTLY LIKE THEM, BUT AT LEAST I'LL GET TO UNDERSTAND WHERE I COME FROM."**

A year after Oyukuluk's dogs were killed, he found himself building houses in the community they had been relocated to. He said it felt like they had no choice but to relocate. "They had notified us that if we don't get education that we would never get a job," said Oyukuluk through a translator during his Qikiqtani Truth Commission testimony in 2008 "This is when our life started to go downhill."

Over the next 30 years, Oyukuluk would go on to start his own business, eventually rebuild his dog team and, in the winter of 1999 join four others from Ikpiarjuk to plan a dogsled race to celebrate the upcoming creation of Nunavut. The North Baffi Quest, as it was called, would



be open only to teams of Inuit sled dogs, the would-be official animal of the new territory.

The rules were simple: there was no registration fee, anyone could race, qamutiit must be between 12 and 14 feet long, dog teams needed to consist of no fewer than 10 and no more than 12 dogs, and teams needed to use a traditional fan hitch to secure the dogs to the qamutiik.

The race, which was intended to be a one-off, was so popular that the organizers met with the participants, who suggested it become an annual event with rotating routes. The Nunavut Quest was born.



**THE PATH AHEAD** on Day 3 was obscured by a wall of wind and snow. Near-whiteout conditions had replaced the sun that had brightened the first two days of the race. The race was postponed for the day.

With no teardown or setup, the pace of the camp slowed to a crawl. A group of youth seized the moment to fly a kite through the swirls of wind, an optimistic but short-lived endeavour. Others used the hiatus to stop at the tents with generators to catch up, warm up and charge their phones. For many, this is the essence of the Quest: an opportunity to see friends and family. Similar opportunities present themselves in the time spent before and after the race, among people from neighbouring communities that may be only a 45-minute flight apart but, given

limited airline schedules, might involve a flight through the territory's capital at a cost of more than \$3,000

In a clearing between tents, a group of qimuksiqtiit and support team members huddled around a snowmobile that had sprung a coolant leak; among them was Uyarak, who watched them carefully pour ground pepper into the

**"I WANTED TO OWN [A TEAM] JUST TO  
KEEP THE TRADITIONAL VALUES OF  
HAVING DOG TEAMS ALIVE IN WAYS  
THAT WE'RE FORGETTING."**

coolant, a quick fix for a tiny leak. While the Nunavut Quest, like any race, is an opportunity to earn bragging rights, for Uyarak, it's much more.

"The bigger part for me is to get together with all the guys who are mushers and Elders and organizers who will be telling stories of how they used to have dog teams and how they used to live," he says.

"Of course, I won't get to live exactly like them, but at least I'll get to understand where I come from."

Whether racing or just out for a day trip, Uyarak admits he thinks about the events of the 1950s, '60s and '70s pretty often. "I remind myself it's a part of our past," he says.



**Clockwise from right** : Children play during downtime at Camp 2; Terry Uyarak is hoisted on his qamutiik after crossing the final finish line; a team of qimmiit rest as their qimuksiqti celebrates.

It wasn't until August 19, 2019 that Carolyn Bennett, then Canada's minister of Crown-Indigenous relations and northern affairs, took to a podium inside Iqaluit's Frobisher Inn and apologized to the Qikiqtani Inuit for the two-and-a-half decades of colonial policies and practices that profoundly changed their way of life. It was testimonies like Moses Oyukuluk's, and hundreds of others as part of the Qikiqtani Truth Commission, that ultimately culminated in the federal government's formal 2019 apology on that grey August day.

As part of the apology, Qikiqtani Inuit Association received \$20 million, with nearly \$3 million of that going to qimmiit revitalization work, including \$100,000 each year, for the next six years, earmarked for the Nunavut Quest.

Like the territory it helped usher in, the Quest has grown and changed over the last two decades. Four rules have turned into 23, and the event has become both a celebration of traditional dogsledding and an outlet for its revitalization.



**A THICK, WHITE CURTAIN** of snow on Day 10 obscured Uyarak's view as he raced toward two waving blurs on the horizon. As the distance closed and the curtain lifted, the red, white, yellow and blue of the Nunavut flag became clearer, as did the Canadian flag opposite it. He was there, the finish line, glulik, home.

In that moment, Uyarak was overcome with emotion. There, waiting beyond the flags, were cousins, uncles, aunts and his wife, children and father. It was an event he wished his mom, who had passed away the previous year, could see. "She would be very happy to see me arriving," he says.

As he pulled in, a mass of children sprinted toward him, just as they had done several times already for other racers. The second wave of greetings came from the fluorescent-sign-ielding crowd, a mixture of friends, family and Iglulikmiut enjoying the festivities. As always, it was followed by the ceremonious lifting of the qamutiik and racer. This flurry of celebration typically lasts only a few minutes before the racer is free to spend a bit more time with loved ones, potentially light a celebratory smoke and then work on getting the ice-crusted dogs chained up for the night.

It would be another day before the official results were announced, giving the racers and support teams time to regale friends and family with stories from the past week. Among those was a retelling of the four days of weather delays and the resulting day that racers loaded





up their dogs onto their qamutiit and moved camps by snowmobile to make up for lost time.

By 6 p.m. the next day, the lot in front of the community centre was littered with snowmobiles, and the hall was packed with competitors, their families, race official and Iglulikmiut of all ages. The night proceeded with the usual pomp and circumstance: speeches, certificates and of course the announcing of official times, a cumulative total of all the legs, in reverse order. One by one, the racers were called up, their results starting with a time of 45 hours, 28 minutes and 20 seconds, then whittled down to the winner.

Uyarak had completed the 500 kilometres in 30 hours, 23 minutes and 20 seconds, garnering a fourth-place finish, a one-spot improvement over his earlier Quest results

and plenty to be happy about. He was preceded by Lee Inuarak of Pond Inlet and David Oyukuluk, who finished first on day one. Reigning champion Jonah Qaunaq won his third Quest in a row with a time of 28 hours, 43 minutes and 55 seconds.

Sometime before the audience filed out, flowers were cleaned and a long night of square dancing began, it was announced that the 2023 race would begin in Iglulik and end in Ikpiarjuk. Uyarak says if he's healthy and his dogs are healthy, he'll do it. Plus, he will have a new dog, a post-race gift from Moses Oyukuluk, who knew Uyarak's mother while they were both in a southern hospital. He'll also have the advantage of not travelling to the start community by dog team before the race begins.



After 10 days of racing, Terry Uyarak embraces his daughter at the finish as the snow falls. He takes his children on dogsled trips in the spring, when it's not too cold, using the outings to pass along his knowledge to the next generation.

Uyarak would again like to come in the top five this year, but more than anything, it's about spending time on the qamutiik with his dogs.

"I wanted to own [a team] just to keep the traditional values of having dog teams alive in ways that we're forgetting," said Uyarak of why he decided to take on his first six dogs. "So I give that lesson to my children one day, or to my peers."

Although his children's ages limit them to dogsled trips in the spring when the sun is bright and the temperatures are warm, that hasn't stopped Uyarak from already passing on what he knows to the next generation.

Now 36, he is over a decade older than the median age of Nunavut's population, the youngest in Canada and one that is ripe with passion. "If we continue to show our

support, I think it could be a big thing here," says Uyarak. Seeing young Nunavummiut start their own teams and come to qimuksiqtiit like himself with questions "reminds me of when I started," he says.

But as he has experienced, the process for up-and-coming qimuksiqtiit comes with a steep and sometimes disappointing learning curve — a lesson that a young musher learned the hard way during the first night of the 2022 race when a wandering dog chewed through his team's harnesses, scattering them across the sea ice. It was a blow that forced him to drop out.

In the midst of an event where the clock is everything, Uyarak passed along a simple but deeply meaningful message to the young racer: "There will be time." ❄️



## Pujjuut Kusugak

A small grouping of cabins in I&uuqtuuq is a place of peace for Kusugak and his extended family

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Pujjuut Kusugak provided Inuktitut-language colour commentary and analysis of basketball at the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics. He previously covered hockey at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the 2023 Arctic Winter Games in northern Alberta.

My cabin is right along the coast, in I&uuqtuuq, within an inlet across from my community of Rankin Inlet. It's about 25 minutes away by boat in the summer or 90 minutes by ATV if it's too windy to travel on the water. In the springtime, when we go by snowmobile, it's maybe 45 minutes. Being out on the land is relaxing. We're fishing, egg picking or berry picking. Or we go goose hunting or caribou hunting. These activities are really not work. That's our time off; that's our free time. In the late spring, it's caribou meat-drying season. We have meat-drying racks there that my grandfather built 30 years ago, and they're still standing.

My father built the cabin 37 years ago. We were the first cabin in the area for our family — my parents, me and my three sisters. Then my grandparents built a cabin, and an aunt an uncle, then another aunt and uncle. Then I built one. My cousin and sister-in-law built one. Right now, we have five cabins wi hin that small area. My nephew calls it the village!

The word we use to capture the feeling of this place is kajjaarnuq. I think the closest word to capture that idea in English is "serene." It's peaceful. It's beautiful. Kajjaarnuq has so many meanings that you put together in English, but in Inuktitut it's just one word that has all these feelings. The cabin is a place of peace for me. For many of us within the family, it's our happy place. It's where we're able to teach our traditions to our children. It helps with our language and passing on our culture. It's a healing place. It's amazing for our well-being. 🍷

—as told to Sarah Brown

**WHITE MAGIC**

Katherine Takpannie captures the beauty of a field of Arctic cotton, the fluffy heads nodding in the breeze of a summer's day. The artist took the photo while out with her mother at Apex Hill, near Iqaluit. This is the land where Takpannie's mother was born and raised.



See more of Katherine Takpannie's work at  
[www.katherinetakpannie.ca/home](http://www.katherinetakpannie.ca/home)



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