



Inuvialuit Beluga Whaling:  
**Preparing  
for the Year**





*To this day, whaling is one of the most important times of the year for our family, and for others within the community.*

Myrna Pokiak, Inuvialuit teacher

## Inuvialuit and Belugas

The Inuvialuit are the indigenous people of the western Canadian Arctic. Inuvialuit have the right, under the 1984 Inuvialuit Final Agreement, to hunt beluga whales for subsistence purposes in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, subject to conservation.

Inuvialuit families carry out an annual beluga whale hunt every summer when the belugas return to the Mackenzie River Estuary.



## Getting Ready for Whales



Driftwood is plentiful along the coast and near the Mackenzie River Estuary. This firewood is used for heating and to cook and smoke food, including whale meat.



Preparing for the hunt begins long before the hunters go out onto the ocean.

Family activities include gathering firewood, cleaning storage containers, putting harpoons together, and sharpening knives and ulus.



Smokehouses are used to prepare and preserve food, including fish and whale meat. Small pieces of driftwood are used to light the fire and large pieces of wood are used for the smoking process.

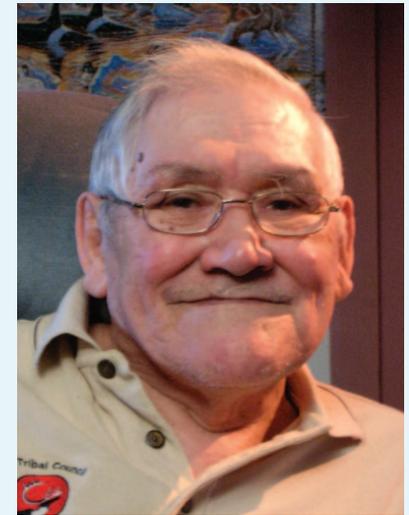


Dora Raddi hangs whitefish in her smokehouse before it is time to prepare whales. Most women wear old parka covers to keep mosquitoes away in the summer.

# Hunting Through Time



In the past, beluga whale harvests provided enough food for Inuvialuit families to survive through the winter in camps.



*Whaling has been going on in the Western Arctic for many hundreds of years, maybe thousands, according to our stories, which were passed on orally from generation to generation.*

Billy Day, Inuvialuit elder  
(1930 - 2008)



*In the beginning,  
whaling for beluga was  
done with kayaks ...*

Billy Day, Inuvialuit elder  
(1930 - 2008)



## Hunting with Kayaks

Kayaks are light, manoeuvrable watercraft.  
They had frames made from driftwood, and skin covers.



*When (the whales) came in the kayaks would form a  
line and very quietly start out ... When they started, one  
kayak in front would motion them to keep the kayaks  
in line. He would scold them, that leader. "Your food is  
important. Stay in line. This is your food for the winter."*

Felix Nuyaviak, Inuvialuit elder



### **Hunting with Whaleboats**

Starting in the late 1800s, American whalers started to use the Beaufort Sea to hunt for bowhead whales. They used small wooden boats, known as 'whaleboats', powered by sail to chase bowhead whales. Inuvialuit soon began using whaleboats for their beluga whale hunts.



### **Hunting with Schooners**

By the 1920s, trapping and trading furs provided many Inuvialuit with a source of income to buy large motor powered boats. These boats, called schooners, allowed hunters to travel further from shore and to hunt in more difficult weather conditions.



## Hunting with Motorboats

Today, Inuvialuit hunters use modern boats and motors. Hunters can travel to the hunt from their homes in places like Tuktoyaktuk, although many people still prefer to camp out “on the land.”



A harpoon, with float attached to the line, is used first to prevent the beluga from sinking after it is shot with a rifle. Whales are then towed beside the boat back to shore for processing.

# Maktak and Whale Meat



In recent years, the annual beluga harvest ranges from 90-100 belugas. Inuvialuit families usually harvest 1 to 2 belugas for food to last them through the winter.

If additional whales are harvested, they are usually traded with families from other arctic communities for fish and geese.



*Whale hunting for us is essential!  
It is preparation for the winter, family gathering, hard work and most of all fun!*

Jacob Pokiak



Maktak is the three inner layers of the skin and a layer of blubber (fat). It is still the most widely used part of belugas.



Slabs of maktak are cut into long pieces and are hung over poles to drain water and oil.

Today, maktak is often cooked, but elders say that their ancestors only ate it raw.



After the maktak hangs for a few days, squares are cut off and placed in a cooking pot.



Cooked maktak is cooled on pieces of cardboard. A thick layer of blubber helps preserve the maktak.

A typical snack includes freshly cooked maktak with HP Sauce, along with smoked tea.



Beluga meat (niqivialuk) is cut off of the carcass, sliced into strips, and hung over a smoky fire to dry.

The dried meat (kilitaq) is still a favourite food of many Inuvialuit.



Once the meat has dried, it is cut into small pieces and stored in the whale's oil.



Uqsuq is oil from the thick layer of fat beneath a beluga's skin.

It was used for many things:

- to age blubber,
- preserve whale meat,
- as a liniment or earache remedy, and
- as bug repellent for dogs.

## Food Storage



Strips of blubber are placed in buckets and left to dissolve into oil. The oil gains a smoked and aged flavor and is used to store aged raw maktak, dried meat, and dried fish.



Today, most families store food in cardboard boxes, plastic bags, and plastic pails that are placed into store-bought deep freezers.



In Tuktoyaktuk, some families also use the community icehouse built deep within the permafrost. There are 19 rooms for families that wish to use the icehouse for food storage.



Meals often include dried whale meat soaked in uqsuk as well as frozen caribou meat and maktak.



*Whale hunting is important because of the nutritional value our bodies get from this type of food. The entire process is a lot of work but when you are done preparing the food it gives you a sense of having accomplished something that very few people get to experience.*

James Pokiak

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Pages 10-14	Pokiak family
Page 15	Pokiak family Tessa Macintosh