

# ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut

August 28, 2011, Issue 4



Kugaaruk inhabitants line the shore south of the hamlet to watch as a bowhead whale (far left) is brought ashore.

## Whale Tales by Aine Misek

AUGUST 21 — Excitement coursed through Kugaaruk Sunday morning as word spread: the community's bowhead whale hunters had met with success. The hunters towing the giant mammal were expected to land on a beach just south of town at 4:30 p.m. After pulling the entire night, they were in the home stretch.

As late afternoon approached, a steady stream of inhabitants traveled down the gravel road, which passes the hamlet's dump (jokingly referred to as "Walmart") and waste water system, to the beach where the bones of Kugaaruk's last bowhead whale whiten.

Kugaaruk's subsistence bowhead whale hunt is a big event and it doesn't happen every year. Hunting licenses, given on a tightly regulated basis, are awarded to communities through a lottery. Only three communities: Iqaluit (the capital of Nunavut located on Baffin Island), Coral Harbour and Kugaaruk received licenses this year.

For decades, bowhead hunting was completely banned but as the whale's population stabilized and grew, Inuit hunts were permitted, allowing a new generation of Nunavummiut hunters to experience a revered tradition.

Iqaluit hunters killed their community's first bowhead in more than a century on Aug 15; it weighed more than an estimated 70 tonnes (154,324 pounds) and measured 14 meters (nearly 46 feet). No word yet on whether the Coral Harbour hunt is underway. The hunters have a window of about two months before the licenses expire.

Kugaaruk's 2011 whale measured almost 9 meters (29 feet); we haven't heard any weight estimates. While on the smaller side for a bowhead, which can grow to lengths of 45 to 60 feet by adulthood and weigh 150,000 to 200,000 pounds, it still equalled a community feast.

Bowheads, the best adapted of all large whales to Arctic waters, can have a layer of blubber up to 1.6 feet

thick. Kugaaruk's whale had a layer about 10 inches thick, according to John's estimate. The whale skin and blubber, called muktuk (pronounced "muktaw" locally), is usually eaten raw.

The outermost layer of skin, which has the consistency of fruit rollups when fresh, was peeled off and eaten by some of the children, John said. "When dry, it has the texture of Miss Vickie's chips." One observer commented that the whale looked like it had been manufactured by Goodyear; it had a very rubbery appearance and texture.



Some of Kugaaruk's elders lead the crowd in song and prayers of thanks for the community's successful bowhead whale hunt.



Inuit hunters tow a 29-foot bowhead whale ashore. Kugaaruk was one of three Nunavut communities to receive a tag for the 2011 season.

WHALE TALES CON'T. — The hunters arrived a little early, but we were there on time, having received a ride from one of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers and his wife on their two ATVs.

After greeting the hunters with cheers and applause, everyone circled around several elders who led the people in an Inuktitut Christian hymn and words of thanks. Many were grinning from ear to ear.

Surprisingly, the town's residents then tried to pull the whale ashore using a one-inch yellow nylon rope, which broke and sent the men and boys flying into the frost-shattered granite.

A second attempt was made and between the two tries, the whale did move slightly. Cheering broke out but then the wait for the bulldozer began ... and



TOP: A Caterpillar D7G pulls Kugaaruk's bowhead whale ashore Sunday evening. LEFT: Mari pats the whale's rubbery side. RIGHT: The community's hunting license requires specific measurements be taken, including the length of the bowhead's baleen, the fringed plates that sift the whale's food from the water.

stretched into early evening as we received word that the keys had been misplaced.

The Caterpillar D7G also made two attempts to pull the massive carcass ashore. The doubled rope broke on the Cat's first try, but the second attempt with the now quadrupled rope worked.

Immediately the crowd swarmed around the whale, which was lying on its side, baleen – the fringed plates that grow from the upper jaw and strain food from the water – protruding skyward like a giant fan. The hamlet's children eagerly climbed atop the carcass with smiles of delight.

Official measurements, including the total length, girth and baleen length, are required to fulfill license requirements; therefore, butchering didn't begin until around 7 p.m. John stayed behind to watch the process while Mari and I rode home with the RCMP officer's wife.

The whale's remains will be divided among the community's residents, the reward of a successful hunt.



## Hail the Narwhal

by John Misek

Thank you Jack! On our second day in Kugaaruk we ran into Jack, his brothers and father taking a narwhal tusk out of a skull beside their home. We weren't in the market ... then. Following our family's two-week "cool-down period" before a major purchase, we jumped on the seven-foot-seven marvel.

The Inuit have hunted narwhal in this area since before recorded history. Today, hunting continues using traditional spears (a rifle ensures the animal doesn't escape wounded after it is speared) and all parts of the animal are used. The skin and blubber (called muktuk) are consumed in great quantities by the Inuit while the less edible meat and bones are fed to dogs. The ivory tusks were once used for items now replaced by steel, such as knives and spears. Because of the utility of steel, the ivory tusks are now sold to support local hunters and their families. Thank you Jack!

The Canadian narwhal hunt is government regulated to ensure the population's stability.



**Ups & Downs** August 20-26, 2011

Maximum = 16.5°C/61.7°F Minimum = 4.2°C/39.6°F

Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut

## For More Information

- **Bowhead Whales** NOAA Fisheries Service <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/bowheadwhale.htm> Fisheries and Oceans Canada <http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/species-especies/species-especies/bowheadwhale-baleineboreale2-eng.htm>
- **Narwhals** National Geographic <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/narwhal/> Narwhal Tusk Discoveries <http://narwhal.org>