

Renewable Resources of the Beaufort Sea for Our Children: Perspectives from an Inuvialuit Elder

BILLY DAY¹

My name is Billy Day. I was born at Tom Cod Bay, along the Arctic Coast, a few years ago. I was born in a schooner called the *Moose River*, which was owned by my dad and Taylor Pokiak.

My mom was born and raised at Kittigazuit, the largest community of Inuvialuit along the Beaufort Coast at the time. She was adopted by Alualuk and his wife and was married at Kittigazuit to her first husband. They lived between Kittigazuit and the Delta until her first husband passed away. Then she went back to her adoptive parents, who lived near Aklavik.

My dad came from a very different background. He was born and raised in a small town in Missouri, USA, and came to Aklavik in the early 1920s. My dad learned very quickly about how important our environment and animals were from his father-in-law, Alualuk, whom he called “Aluwalo.”

My dad always wanted to visit British Columbia with us, but my mom was always afraid that she might die and be buried in a strange place—especially after being born and raised and living all of her life in a wonderful land she called home. My mom passed away in 1943. In 1944, my dad and I went to Vancouver and found a little farm that we could afford at Pitt Meadows, which at the time was 25 miles from the outskirts of Vancouver. By March I was very tired of the rain and heat and wanted to go home. I arrived back in Aklavik on March 14, 1945. The same day, I bought two dogs and went out to our camp on the Schooner Channel and started trapping muskrats. My dad also came back in 1946 to live the remainder of his life, mostly at our camp.

I went to work for the government in 1961 and left in 1975 to go back on the land. I have one camp between Inuvik and Aklavik, where we spend fall, winter, and spring hunting and fishing. I also have a whaling camp near the mouth of the Mackenzie River at a place called Nalgugiak. I do a fair amount of traveling, but my home is here in the North.

All my sons and daughters and sons-in-law are carrying on the tradition and are teaching their children the ways of living off the land. My two youngest sons and many of our grandchildren spend a fair amount of time at both my camps.

The land, the animals, the waters, the whales, and the fish were very important to our ancestors and still are to us. Even during negotiations for our land claim-settlement, our elders told us that the land and waters had looked after them for centuries and would look after us for many more if we looked after our environment.

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 as the Inuvialuit had no writing system. The way whaling is done has changed four times over the past century.

In the beginning, whaling for beluga was done with kayaks, which leads me to believe that maybe the Inuvialuit invented the kayak. Many years ago, there was a large community of Inuvialuit at Kittigazuit near the mouth of the Mackenzie River on the Beaufort Sea. My mother was born and raised there in the 1800s. Our ancestors used kayaks at Kittigazuit. I spent many hours with a great friend of mine, Felix Nuyaviak, who was born in the 1800s and saw whaling with kayaks.

Kittigazuit is the really high point on the Beaufort Sea. That is where people kept a lookout for belugas when the whales started coming into Kugmallit Bay. The hunt would be planned for some time in July, when the beluga whales were in Kugmallit Bay and when the weather was right, because this might be the only chance for the people to get their winter supply of muktuk, oil, and dry meat from the beluga.

When the belugas were nearing the spot for the planned drive, the lookout would give the signal, and scores of kayaks would leave to surround the beluga. The hunters were armed only with harpoons and spears. They would paddle quietly out until everyone was in position and when the leader gave the signal, everyone would start paddling and making lots of noise and the drive would be on. The drive would be when the tide was going out so that the water would be at its shallowest. The hunters would drive the belugas into shallow water and then start spearing the whales in the blowhole, killing them instantly. Any whales not taken would escape when the tide came in. The hunters have been known to take as many as three hundred belugas at one time, as the hunt would be shared by the whole community for their winter supplies of food.

The hunters would all have a short piece of willow with a hole through the middle. They would cut a hole in the whale and blow air into it, so that the whale would float up. Then they would be able to tow the whales back to shore. Many whales were taken, because it was uncertain if they would get another chance. The winter supply would be taken in one hunt if possible. Felix Nuyaviak once told me that when he was too young to go on a hunt, he watched his father tow in five whales at one time with his kayak.

When the hunters returned, the real work began. This involved all the people in the community, for the whales

¹ Fisheries Joint Management Committee, Box 2120, Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada, X0E 0T0

had to be cut up right away so that no part of the whale would spoil. First the muktuk and blubber would all be taken off and put on logs to dry so that the top part could easily be cut off, as there should never be any blood mixed in with the oil. All the meat would also be taken off and put on logs so that the blood could drip out. Then the meat was cut into thin slabs and hung up to dry.

When all this was done, some of the muktuk, the flippers, and the flukes would be stored for safekeeping in icehouses that were dug into the permafrost. Even the heads would be stored. Most of the meat was dried. Sometimes a deep hole was dug in the sand for storage. While some of the people would be busy with storing these parts of the whale, others would be taking the rest of the whale apart. Every part of the whale was used: even the lungs were dried. The stomach and throat would be taken out, cleaned, and then blown up to dry for use as containers. The stomachs were used to store many things, such as berries, roots, dried meat, dried fish, and muktuk put in oil to preserve. The throat was used for the same foods, but being smaller, it was more used when the hunters were traveling. The heart, liver, and kidneys were all taken out and were the first parts to be eaten.

Individual hunting of the beluga was not encouraged, but it was done at times if the need was there. When an individual went out with a kayak, he would find a whale in shallow water and then would get in the whale's wake and stay right on top of the whale until he could harpoon it. The harpoon had a float and a large plate attached. This would really slow down the whale so that the hunter could spear it in the blowhole.

The second phase of whaling was done with the whale boats left or traded to the Inuvialuit after the great hunt of the bowhead in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when our bowhead population was almost completely destroyed by American whalers. Fortunately, the Inuvialuit of the western Arctic did not depend on bowheads, because of the abundance of the beluga. What we called "whale boats" were actually lifeboats from the whaling ships that came to Herschel Island in the last part of the 1800s and early 1900s. They were sometimes traded to Inuvialuit for meat and fish to feed the crews when they wintered at Herschel Island. One boat was traded for what was thought to be gold nuggets, which turned out to be fool's gold. At this time, there was no more need for large numbers of whales. There had been a large influx of people from the south, who brought along with them many diseases for which there were no medications. The majority of the Inuvialuit died.

When the Inuvialuit started using the whale boats, they were using sails. It was very difficult with the whale boat and sail, as the wind did not always cooperate. The boats of course had a large pair of oars, which the hunters sometimes had to use. Most people by that time had guns to shoot the whales, but by using sails they could still get right up to the whale and harpoon before they shot and then let the whale tow them until they could shoot to kill it. It

was then a long, tedious journey back to land if the wind was not blowing from the proper direction.

Some of the whales were chosen to have the whole outer part taken off—in other words, they skinned the whole whale. Then they would take all the blubber off and stake the leather out to dry for making waterproof clothing and rope. Before being staked out, the leather part would be put on a big log, and all the blubber would be scraped off.

Once all the meat was cut and hung on racks to dry, the work on the muktuk would begin. The slabs of muktuk would be taken and put on wooden tables, and the dried skin and pieces of meat would be cut off and put away for dog food. A part of the blubber would be cut off, leaving about an inch on the muktuk. Then, the muktuk would be cut into about ten-inch squares left attached to one another, cleaned in water, and hung for a couple of days for all the water and any blood to drain out.

All the blubber that was taken off would be cut into strips and put into containers so that the oil would come out. It was used to preserve the muktuk, some of the dry meat, and also dried fish.

When the muktuk was ready, some of it would be cooked and some of it would be put in oil (raw), buried in the sand, or put on permafrost to eat raw (it would have to be kept in a cool place and out of the sun). The containers would of course be the whale stomachs and throats. Even some of the intestines were used. They would be turned inside out, cleaned and cooked, and put in oil to preserve.

The oil was used for many things, such as dip for eating meat and fish and fuel for the lamps. The ribs from the whale were taken and hung to dry for winter dog food. All that was left of the whale when they were finished was the backbone and some of the innards.

In the third phase of whaling came inboard engines and schooners, and some people put small engines in their whaling boats. No one had big engines; therefore, the boats were slow, and when the whales came in, we had to wait and let them get as close as possible so we could catch them before they got into deep waters. Many times we had to shoot to try and slow them down so that we could harpoon them, but the problem of getting the whale back to shore after it was killed was not a problem anymore. During this time, the hunts were still organized. There was a camp leader, and the lookout would call the leader and let him know when the beluga were in the right spot, regardless of what time of day or night it was. In the 1940s and 1950s, the elders owned most of the schooners, so therefore they were the whaling captains.

The camp leader would tell all the hunters to get ready, and everyone would leave at the same time. The schooner that traveled the fastest would get on the outside of the whales and then would go back and forth to keep the whales from going back into deep water. When everyone caught up, they would all start hunting at the same time. Because the whales were too fast for the boats, the hunters would have to shoot the whale to slow it down before they could harpoon it. If we ever sank a whale before we could

harpoon it, my father-in-law would throw a rock out with a float attached and we would anchor the boat. We had to stay until we found the whale, regardless of how many whales were around us.

As soon as the hunters got their whale or whales, they would hoist a flag so the people at home would know that they had a successful hunt and would be prepared to start cutting up the whales. Up to the early 1950s, it seems it was the custom for the Inuvialuit of the Delta that only the men went out to hunt, not the women. When the hunters returned with the whales, the men would pull them up on the beach and then the women would do the rest.

The schooners would never take more than two whales at one time, I was told, because they did not want to take more than the women could take care of. In 1959, we were out on a hunt with my father-in-law Tom Kalinek on his schooner the *Only Way*. After we got our two whales, and there were a lot of whales all around us, I asked if we could get one more. He said if we, the hunters, would work with the women, he would agree. So we got our third whale, and the men had to work when they got back from the hunt.

There were a lot of people from the Mackenzie Delta at East Whitefish during the mid 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when there were a lot of schooners. The schooner owners would take with them from three to five families, depending on the size of their boat, and possibly 50 to 60 dogs.

There are a number of places that the people would go for whaling each summer: East Whitefish Station (Nalguriak), Kendall Island (Ukeevik), West Whitefish (Neakonnak), and Shingle Point (Tapkak). The people from Tuktoyaktuk would also go whaling right from home.

The fourth phase of whaling is the one that we are in now. We hunt whales with smaller aluminum boats with large outboard motors, rifles, and harpoons. Each community's Hunters and Trappers Committee has guidelines for what equipment should be carried and how to hunt. Hunters are not supposed to hunt alone, and in some camps a lead hunter is still designated. The recommended method of hunting is to first harpoon the whale and then shoot it. We have hunt monitors to count the number of whales and to take samples for scientific studies.

I have talked mostly about whales, but we have many species of fish along the Beaufort Coast and on our rivers and lakes as well—fish that our people have depended on for centuries, such as arctic char, broad whitefish, cony (inconnu), and herring, which are second to none.

I believe that we need some protected areas, at least on a seasonal basis. I am not sure whether permanent protected areas are the best choice for either the Inuvialuit or all the people around us, with the changes that are going on with the environment. But I am sure that we need to protect our resources.