



# “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

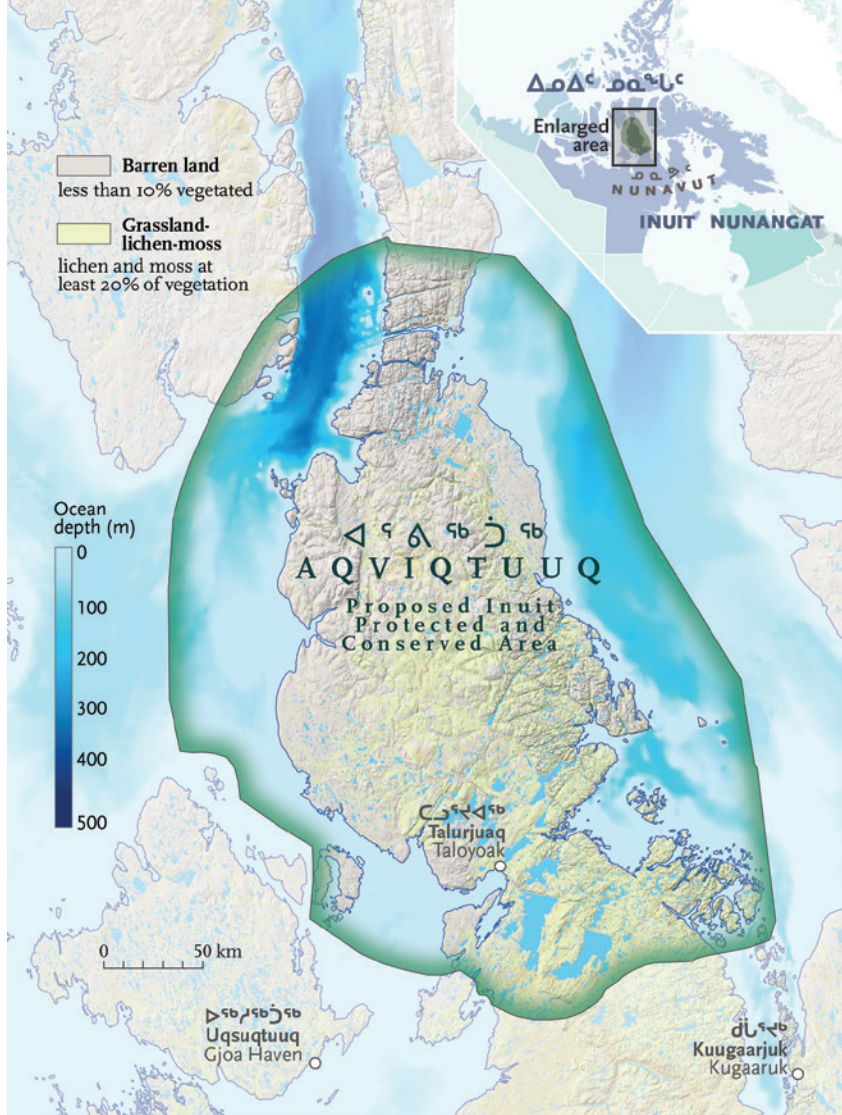


sonars at various points along the coast of James Ross Strait to monitor whale activity. And while the tools of the hunt have evolved, the result was the same: one bowhead whale, expertly dispatched, and about 50,000 kilograms of food, fuel and crafting materials to help sustain the whole community for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

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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

**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.

the decision to turn to the World Wildlife Fund.

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 was awarded \$451,000 by the 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. Their 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 expenditure 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

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pressure on Aqviqtuuq's caribou. With the extra supply of meat, the TUA 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 community is aiming to have it completed this fall), the TUA

**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.

believes the facility will generate \$1.9 million in annual revenue, with the money 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.



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.

Federal funding for the Guardians project came through in 2022, another milestone the TUA has 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, has estimated 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 school-house 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 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 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. His 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 Canada's minister for environment and climate change Steven Guilbeault, it was a trip to remember.

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

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. ❁