

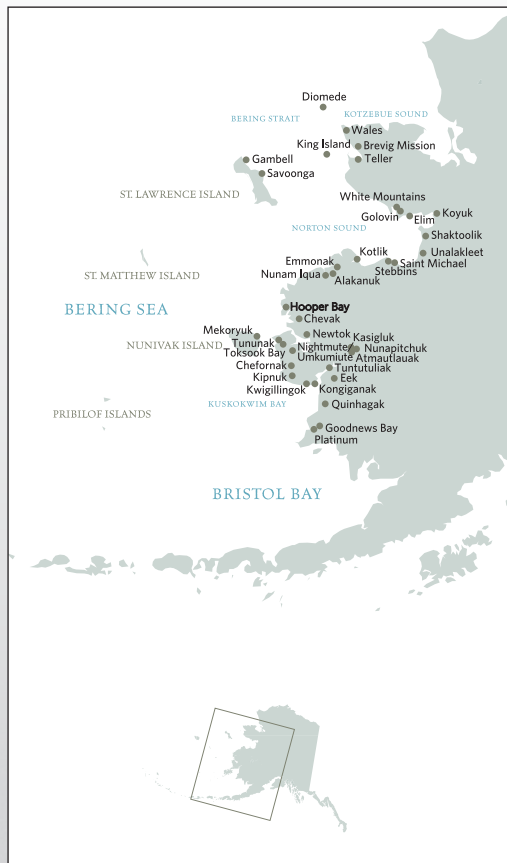
Northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait

Food Security

For thousands of years the coastal Yupik and Inupiaq peoples of the northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait have relied on marine mammals, seabirds, fish, shellfish, and other marine-based resources for food. Hunting and fishing bind people to the sea, and tie families and communities together through the sharing of food and passing of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next.



Bering Sea Elders Group



Bering Sea Elders Group

Bering Sea Elders Group is an association of elders appointed by 39 participating tribes from the Kuskokwim Bay to the Bering Strait. Our mission is to speak and work together as one voice to protect and respect our traditional ways of life, the ocean web of life that supports the resources we rely on, and our children's future. The Elders Group serves as a messenger to our children, tribal councils, and government decision-makers.

This report was made possible thanks to current and past efforts of elders and hunters, who have shared their words and perspectives to help others understand the way of life of indigenous peoples in the northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait region.



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James Barker

Harvesting healthy, wild resources from ancestral hunting grounds is a component of food security, together with other inter-dependent social and cultural dimensions, including the right to apply indigenous knowledge systems and play a central role in decisions that form marine policy in the region.¹ Villages in the northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait region also depend on local small-scale commercial fisheries for salmon, crab, herring, and halibut. Income from fishing contributes to a limited cash economy, and enables hunters and fishermen to own boats and equipment. Seasonal work associated with commercial fisheries blends with traditional patterns of hunting and fishing, and also requires local knowledge and place-based expertise.

I'm here today because my forefathers depended on marine mammals. That's the source of food that we have. Everything my body needs is in the food chain. Fish, seals, walrus...it's good for you.... So here in the cold climate, eating marine mammal matches our body needs.

~ Clement Ungott – Gambell²

What we eat is seafood out of the ocean. Auklets feed out of the sea. Seals, walrus, crabs, bullhead, blue cods, and the birds are eating off of the sea. So that everything that we eat depends on the sea for their food too as well as ourselves here on the island. The sea is our food warehouse.

~ From Diomed Island Names, Places and Stories³

Yuungnaqsaraq – our way of being (Central Yup'ik)
Kiyaghneq – way of life (St. Lawrence Island Yupik)
Inuuniagniqput – the way we live as people (Inupiaq)

Cultural Values and Way of Life

For the Yupik and Inupiaq peoples, traditional practices are based on respect for what the ocean provides. Respectful actions are rewarded by hunting success; disrespectful actions have negative consequences. Traditional instructions focus on avoiding waste of natural resources provided by the Creator, sharing food with the community, and listening to the elders who acquired wisdom over a long life and keen observation of the world. Today, while technology has changed, knowing one's family relations, sharing food from successful hunts, not wasting the catch, and listening to elders' advice remain a cultural foundation. Respect for the natural world and caring for resources are the basis for continued opportunity to thrive off the ocean and land.

This sharing of food has always been a part of our value system. We believe that if we do not share with others, the food that is given us by our Creator will no longer be available. The more we give away, the more will come back.

~ From "Atlas Qissunaq" – Chevak Traditional Council⁴

When one goes down to the ocean and brings back a sea mammal, his wife divides it all up and, when done, calls all her neighbors out there to come take enough for a meal. She gives it all away. That is how coastal people are. Food and everything that can be divided is given to those one thinks about. They say that it will be replaced by more. They say because of the overwhelming gratitude they felt, they push the animals toward the hunter.

~ Frank Andrew, Sr. – Kwigillingok⁶

I take some snow and when I catch a bearded seal, I'll melt it, and put it in the mouth and the hand of the seal for its spirit to come to me again. Because whatever remains that I have I put it back in the water so that his spirit can go back to the spirit world and also come back to me.

~ John Pingayak – Chevak⁵

Ever since I was born, we grew on walrus mainly. That is a large part of our consumption, seals also and other sea mammals, birds. But with walrus, everybody born is expected to learn along, just like learning in school. They are taught and it used to be where all the younger men would get together and talk about what they did today, how it was, how dangerous it was and what the current was to get to the walrus. So it was our elders, our fathers and mothers first, and the whole community would teach each other.

~ Phillip Ahkinga – Diomed⁷

Shared Vision

Coastal tribes share a vision for the northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait, guided by the enduring right of Yupik and Inupiaq peoples to hunt and fish in traditional territory, the importance of safeguarding ocean resources that provide for the way of life, and the need for self-determination in the management of resources and habitat.

We listened to our elders. Our elders told us, 'Take care to respect everything, help one another, work together.' We have a strong culture, passed down from generations to today.

~ Michael Hunt, Sr. – Kotlik⁸

Traditional Knowledge

Seasonal patterns and practices for hunting, fishing, gathering, and the preservation of food are connected to knowledge passed down through generations based on direct experience and observation. In addition to this knowledge, successful hunting and fishing harvest by tribal members from the Kuskokwim Bay to the Bering Strait requires access to large areas of the ocean to account for year-to-year variability in ocean and ice conditions and the movement of species.⁹ For example, in some years, walrus hunters on St. Lawrence Island travel in small boats up to 100 miles offshore.¹⁰

The northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait support one of the largest marine migrations on Earth.¹¹ Elders reflect on the whole region as important to health and life as Yupik and Inupiaq peoples.¹² The whole ecosystem is needed to generate the resource abundance that provides for food security in all its nutritional, cultural, generational, and governance dimensions.

Seal and maklaks [bearded seals] here are almost the same as walrus. My grandfather used to call it 'katawhsaqa' – which means 'pouring out,' referring to all the things that come to us with the ice. Ice moves in here with all these animals.

~ Chester Noongwook – Savoonga¹³

The important part is the migration patterns and the habitats. We don't want them to be disturbed regardless of how far they are from our hunting area.

~ Elders (after group discussion in Yupik) – Gambell¹⁴

The Inuit Circumpolar Council defines food security as a complex web with physical, social, and cultural components:

Alaskan Inuit food security is the natural right of all Inuit to be part of the ecosystem, to access food and to care-take, protect and respect all of life, land, water and air. It allows for all Inuit to obtain, process, store and consume sufficient amounts of healthy and nutritious preferred food – foods physically and spiritually craved and needed from the land, air and water, which provide for families and future generations through the practice of Inuit customs and spirituality, languages, knowledge, policies, management practices and self-governance. It includes the responsibility and ability to pass on knowledge to younger generations, the taste of traditional foods rooted in place and season, knowledge of how to safely obtain and prepare traditional foods for medicinal use, clothing, housing, nutrients and, overall, how to be within one's environment. Understanding that food is a lifeline and a connection between the past and today's self and cultural identity, Inuit food security is characterized by environmental health and is made up of six interconnecting dimensions: Availability, Inuit Culture, Decision-Making Power and Management, Health & Wellness, Stability and Accessibility.

~ ICC, Alaskan Inuit Food Security Conceptual Framework¹⁵

Tools for Management in a Changing Climate

The northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait region is vulnerable to ecological transformation and uncertainty due to climate change. Indigenous people have been observing changes, many of which are known to local experts before research scientists. Local observations add important dimensions to what scientists usually measure, and can inform directions in new research.

We don't get ice as early as October any more. It's later now and it goes away, from what I see the past few years, a lot sooner. And the pattern of the ice affects with our subsistence. How it comes in, is it young, is it old. Sometimes it's hard for them to go and get seals due to our ice conditions....

~ Frances Ozenna – Diomedé¹⁶

The tuaq [shore-fast ice] used to be very thick, and it froze as much as six miles from shore. Nowadays our ocean doesn't freeze far from shore, and our tuaq and rivers become unsuitable for hunting because they are too thin and dangerous.

~ John Phillip – Kongiganak¹⁷

To prepare for the future, a **stronger role for tribal governance in decision-making** and a **precautionary approach to fisheries management** are important tools for addressing two ecological and cultural concerns shared by communities in the northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait region:

Concerns About Increasing Ship Traffic

Rapid loss of summer sea ice the Arctic Ocean is opening a new global shipping route through the region, heightening the risk of collisions or groundings and oil spills. Other concerns include noise disturbance to marine mammals, contaminated discharges, conflict with hunters and fishermen, and danger to small boats. Diomedé, King Island, St. Lawrence Island, and Nunivak Island, as well as mainland villages along the shipping route, are vulnerable.

The narrow 53-mile Bering Strait is the only passage between the Arctic and Pacific oceans. Currents, sea ice and migrations of marine mammals and birds funnel through the Bering Strait, but it is a bottleneck to increasing ship traffic.

This spring there were container ships passing through the migrating route for walrus and interfering with our 'Eskimo sonar' – the way we stick an oar in the water and listen for the walrus. All you could hear is the engine. Ships were too close this spring.

~ Norman Menadelook – Teller¹⁸

Concerns About Bottom Trawl Fishing

The ecosystem's response to climate change will affect commercially valuable fish species and fisheries in uncertain ways. Maintaining management decisions that prevent the movement of bottom trawl fisheries into northern waters (where this fleet has not historically operated) is widely supported for the preservation of culture, food security, and ecosystem resilience.

The knowledge of the elders about how to live with the ocean and the land was given to us by our ancestors with instructions not to keep it for ourselves, but to pass it on to our children so that they may continue to prosper and continue our way of being.

~ From Bering Sea Elders Group – Resolution Expressing Our Mission adopted Nov. 3, 2011

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Thank you

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