

In Utqiagvik, Temperatures Are Warmer, and The Ice Is Changing. What Does That Mean for Whalers?

By Ravenna Koenig May 8, 2019



Members of Gordon Brower's whaling crew scan the horizon for bowhead whales, April 21, 2019. (Photo by Ravenna Koenig/Alaska's Energy Desk)

On the North Slope of Alaska, the Iñupiat tradition of hunting bowhead whales has an ancestry over 1,500 years old. Today in Utqiagvik there are two annual hunts when the whales pass by on their migration. The fall hunt has historically been done on open water, and the spring hunt from the ice that attaches to the coast each winter.

But as temperatures have risen in the Arctic, the ice that serves as the platform for spring whaling has changed dramatically. And even though whalers in Utqiagvik say that they're adapting to that change, some also say the ice is less stable than it used to be — and more dangerous.

Whaling captain Gordon Brower's camp at the edge of the ice looks very similar to how his father's looked when Brower first started going out whaling with him back in the late 1960s: a sealskin boat perched at the edge of the ice, along with a simple canvas windbreak and a wooden sledge covered in caribou skins that serves as a makeshift bench.

Around the boat, a handful of whalers, including Brower's brother, nephews and grandson, joke and talk as they watch the open water — waiting for the arcing backs of bowhead whales to come close enough for them to chase.

Though parts of this traditional hunt are the same as when Brower was a kid, there are some big differences. Chief among them: the ice.

For starters, the extent of the ice that attaches to the coast is shorter than it used to be. Walk a few dozen paces back from the ice's edge, and you can see the buildings of downtown Utqiagvik. "I guarantee you, somebody's looking at us with binoculars," said Brower, laughing.



Gordon Brower, second from left, has been whaling since he was a kid in the late 1960s. Iñupiat whalers still use many of the same tools in their spring hunt, including the sealskin boat, or umiak, pictured here on April 21, 2019. (Photo by Ravenna Koenig/Alaska's Energy Desk)

He said that even a decade and a half ago, the ice could extend 10 or 15 miles out from shore. Nowadays it's usually more like a mile or two.

At least part of that has to do with the fact that Utqiagvik's winters have gotten milder. "Certainly the weather has been very different about creating ice," said Brower. "Not the very long, sustained 40 below, 30 below type weather."

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The view of downtown Utqiagvik, from a spot close to where Gordon Brower's crew set up at the ice's edge, April 21, 2019. (Photo by Ravenna Koenig/Alaska's Energy Desk)

Brower is talking about pressure ridges: the mountains of this landscape created by the colliding plates of the ice. They not only rise into the air above the ice, they also go down below the water. If they go down far enough, they act like anchors, holding the ice in place on the ocean floor. The thick ice of the past made bigger pressure ridges, Brower said, which meant bigger anchors and safer ice.

"I think it was a little more stable, and there was a little bit more assurance that the ice you were on was not going to disintegrate on you that easy," said Brower. "Today you gotta think about it. And be more prepared and be more vigilant about your surrounding."

Poorly-grounded ice can lead to what's called a "breakout event" — a phenomenon where a piece of ice (potentially one that people are camped on) breaks free and starts floating away. Sometimes without the people on it even knowing it's happening.

This past year, the temperatures in Utqiagvik in the fall and early winter when the ice was forming were some of the warmest on record. And in early February, something really abnormal happened: At least 10 miles of shorefast ice in front of Utqiagvik broke away, including in places that are typically very well-grounded.

Few people were going out on the ice at that time, and no one was hurt. But Brower said that if the ice wasn't grounded well enough then, it gives him pause about trusting it now.

"So it's kind of, like, iffy still," he said. "If you had a good west wind and the water table came up, it can dislodge it and move it around."



A small pressure ridge close to Gordon Brower's whaling camp, April 21, 2019. (Photo by Ravenna Koenig/Alaska's Energy Desk)

Talking to whalers in Utqiagvik, they point to different ways that the ice is changing and different ways that impacts what they do. Some talk about the ice being more susceptible to breakouts. Others say that it's harder now to find ice thick enough to pull whales up onto.

Some call the ice conditions more "dangerous" than they used to be and speak about it with concern. Others say it doesn't worry them; that they have the skills and knowledge to navigate the changes.

The thing you hear pretty much across the board is that whalers are finding ways to adapt. Those adaptations are things like being more alert to how the ice is moving, and being more cautious about places where it might be thin. But it also could include replacing the traditional skin boats with motor boats when ice conditions deteriorate, so that if there is a breakout event, whalers can get back to the safe ice more quickly.

I asked Brower's 35-year-old nephew if all this change — and potentially more in the years ahead — makes him worry about the future of whaling in this community. He said it doesn't.

"I'm always going to be out here hunting," he said. "The ice conditions could be here or could not be here, but we're going to find a way to hunt. ... Even if the ice wasn't here, we'd be waiting on the edge of the beach I guess for whales to show up."

Whalers in Utqiagvik describe whaling as their “life,” their “pride,” one of the things that brings their community together and connects them to their culture.

As long as there are bowhead whales swimming off the coast of Utqiagvik in the spring, many hunters say they will find a way to get to them, no matter what happens to the ice.

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