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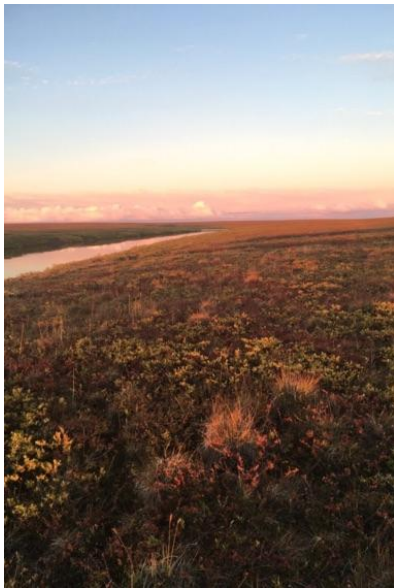


Tribal Climate Champions: Spotlight on the Village of Wainwright

January 10, 2018

The National Indian Health Board (NIHB) funds three Tribal climate health projects as part of the [Climate Ready Tribes Project](#) with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). NIHB is currently highlighting each of these Tribes and their climate health efforts through email spotlights.

Today's spotlight highlights work in Alaska, the largest and one of the least populated states in the US. The Village of Wainwright (VOW) is located in the northern Alaskan Arctic, on the shores of the Chukchi Sea. It is situated within a region commonly referred to as the North Slope, which begins in the interior just north of the Brooks Range and stretches down to the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas.



Village of Wainwright, upriver

Wainwright is approximately 70 miles southwest of the hub city of Barrow and three miles northeast of the Kuk River estuary. The Kuk is a 35-mile-long stream that discharges to the Chukchi via the Wainwright Inlet. Wainwright is itself situated on a wave-eroded coastal bluff of a narrow peninsula that separates the Wainwright Inlet from the Chukchi Sea. Wainwright received its contemporary moniker from the Inlet, which was given its English name in 1826 by Captain F.W. Beechey in honor of his officer, Lt. John Wainwright (North Slope Borough, 2014).

There are no roads to Wainwright. Transportation to Wainwright is available by scheduled and chartered air service from Barrow. A gravel airstrip is owned and operated by the North Slope Borough. Freight arrives by cargo plane and barge. Wainwright has potential shallow marine service 60 to 70 days per year. Barge traffic comes once a year from Seattle and the same barge stops again on its journey back from Prudhoe Bay in the late summer (North Slope Borough, 2014).

According to the 2010 census, the village has a population size of 546 with 94% of residents self-identifying as Iñupiat. The indigenous Iñupiat people have lived on Alaska's northern shores for centuries and they describe their ties to this region as existing since *aipaani*, time immemorial. Iñupiaq residents of Wainwright have traditionally called themselves the Ulġuniġamiut, the people of Ulġuniġ, which is the area's original name in the Iñupiaq language (Nelson, 1969). The people of Wainwright trace their lineage to two groups of Iñupiat who amicably maintained overlapping territories in this region. The Utuqqaġmiut were originally an inland people that mainly hunted caribou along the Utuqqaq River and migrated seasonally to the coast in order to trade and hunt for sea mammals. The Kuugmiut are generally thought to have been predominantly coastal people who lived along the Kuk River and its tributaries (Ivie & Schneider, 1988).

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Aerial view of the Village of Wainwright

While historic sites scattered around the Wainwright Inlet confirm the area as a popular seasonal camping spot used by these early peoples, the contemporary location of the city was set by the 1904 construction of the village's first formal schoolhouse. The necessary building materials were carried North by boat so that the school's location was itself largely "dictated by ice conditions and convenience. The vessel's captain unloaded at a favorable looking site" (Milan cited in Bodfish, 1991, p. 264).

As of the 2010 census, 93% of Wainwright households reported that they still participate in the local subsistence economy with more than 2/3 of households indicating that they acquire at least 50% of their diet from hunting, fishing and gathering. Commonly hunted species include bowhead whales, geese, ducks, beluga whales, *ugruk* (bearded seals), walrus, caribou, and smelt, all of which are hunted at different times throughout the seasonal subsistence cycle. The traditional land use area of the people of Wainwright extends far beyond the confines of the village proper. This wider area is where key subsistence resources



Wainwright spring whale

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Wainwright whale camp 2017

have generally been harvested and where family traditional uses occur. Traditional subsistence lifeways remain vital to the community and this diet and lifestyle is seen as being essential to the residents' cultural, emotional, and nutritional wellbeing.

Climate change is a serious threat to this traditional way of life. The Arctic is currently warming twice as fast as the global average and the Iñupiat of Alaska's North Slope are now facing the stark reality that their ancestral territory has essentially become 'ground zero' for climate change in the United States (Reiss, 2012). Community members have expressed a strong desire to continue their subsistence hunting practices despite the significant dangers associated with these activities due to increasingly unpredictable environmental conditions. Hunter safety has therefore been identified as a key issue within Wainwright that must be addressed in order to support the fundamental goal of maintaining a subsistence way of life in a changing Arctic environment (Christie, Hollmen, Huntington & Lovvorn, 2017).

Traditional subsistence foods are healthy and cost-effective and also provide cultural and emotional benefits. Like most rural Alaskan villages, there are few

opportunities for full time employment within Wainwright and losing access to traditional subsistence foods can significantly impact a family's ability to meet their nutritional needs. The range of groceries in Wainwright is generally quite limited and many of the options are expensive and often include unhealthy, highly processed foods. Native foods also embody a connection to the land and to ancestors so that they are seen as "not only sustenance, but also a source of pure spirituality and mental health" (Vickery & Hunter, 2014). These types of foods are often locally referred to as 'Eskimo Soul Food.'

The project's goal is to increase the Village of Wainwright's capacity to address the relationship between negative health outcomes and unseasonable weather patterns resulting from climate change. Prior research in other areas of Alaska have found there to be a significant association between unusual environmental conditions and self-reported injury and mortality during remote travel (Driscoll et al., 2016). The project therefore seeks to specifically address climate-change related injuries in Wainwright that occur on land, ice, or sea to promote the health and safety of subsistence hunters and to develop strategies that either prevent accidents or enhance the chance for safe rescue. The project plan also strengthens the adaptation and resilience efforts of Wainwright residents by building the necessary relationships between the Tribe and other institutions that facilitate

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successful and responsive planning for adverse health effects from regional climatic change. This endeavor represents a key collaboration between the Village of Wainwright, the University of Alaska's Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies, and Wainwright Search & Rescue. These relationships are fundamental to the Tribe's abilities to act as a strong advocate for the overall well-being of its people and to build a healthy future for the community of Wainwright in the face of ongoing climatic change.

Project activities are focused on two main objectives: 1) promoting the use of location technology through an inReach check-out program that provides these units free of charge to all Wainwright hunters and travelers and 2) increasing community understanding of this technology by designing and implementing workshops that offer hands-on training with these inReach devices and that also cover best practices for remote travel and safety. *Note: inReach units can be used to call for emergency assistance or access communication in remote areas. Learn more about inReach devices [here](#).

In terms of data analysis, North Slope Borough patient encounter forms and NOAA weather data are being used to determine whether a correlation between unintentional injuries and unseasonable weather holds true within the Wainwright area. Wainwright Search & Rescue Mission Records, Safety Workshop audio recordings, and inReach check-out forms are being evaluated in order to measure changes in the frequency of community member use of location technology, dialog on the use of location technology, dialog on safe subsistence travel practices, and unintentional injuries associated with unseasonable weather. Favorable health outcomes to this project would be fewer injuries related to outdoor subsistence activities and remote travel. Success in this project will be viewed as the increased knowledge and use of location technology within the community and an increase in informed risk behavior, meaning that community members are more likely to have the tools they need to stay safe while engaging in traditional subsistence activities.

The project is currently underway and is entering a second year after excellent work during the first project period. Future activities expected to occur include expanding community workshops to schools, redesigning and implementing community promotion, continuing to collect and analyze data, and characterizing and continuing to support a centuries old culture of safety that imbues local whaling practices as hunters now grapple with rapidly shifting weather and ice conditions.

Alana Shaw leads this project as the Environmental Coordinator at the Village of Wainwright (VOW) Tribal offices. She holds a PhD in Integrative Conservation and Geography



Chukchi Sea, part of Arctic Ocean, as viewed from Village of Wainwright

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from the University of Georgia. She also has a Graduate Certificate in Native American Studies, a MS in Natural Resources, and a BS in Environmental Science and Policy. She has experience conducting qualitative research, writing grant proposals, and managing research grants and has recently worked to develop the VOW's EPA-Tribal Environmental Plan.

Photo Credits: The first four images in this blast were sent to NIHB from Alana Shaw, Environmental Coordinator at Wainwright. Final image is from NIHB staff. Images may be clipped from originals.