

Nunamin Illihakvia

Nurturing Capacity Across the North



Ulukhaktok Community Corporation (UCC), Ulukhaktok, NWT, Canada
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Final Activity Report - Northern Forum
Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program North of 60°N

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FRONT COVER: Northern Forum participants Shaylene Lundrigan, Desmond Nasogaluak, and Dale Panoktalok on Queen's Bay near Ulukhaktok during an afternoon focused on winter seal hunting.

Project description

The *Nunamin Illihakvia: Nurturing Capacity Across the North* project (2019-2020) focused on nurturing capacity within Ulukhaktok to continue *Nunamin Illihakvia* programming into the future and assist other Inuvialuit communities to apply for funding to support their own cultural learning programs. The specific objectives of the project were to involve participants from other communities in *Nunamin Illihakvia* activities through a Northern Forum and provide them with guidance in how to apply for funding to support their own cultural learning programs. The Northern Forum brought together nine Inuvialuit participants from four communities: Aklavik, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour, and Tuktoyaktuk. Participants from Inuvik were invited but unable to attend. The Northern Forum took place in Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories, from February 18th 2020 to March 1st 2020. This report documents the events and activities that took place during the Northern Forum.

The *Nunamin Illihakvia* project is administered by the Ulukhaktok Community Corporation (UCC) with support from the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC), Helen Kalvak Elihakvik (school), and Dr. Tristan Pearce. Funding for *Nunamin Illihakvia* comes from the Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program (CCHAP), a program within the First Nations Inuit Health Branch of Indigenous Services Canada. The CCHAP supports Inuit and First Nation communities in mitigating and adapting to the health impacts of climate change.





Elder Robert Kuptana enjoys a warm drink on Queen's Bay

"I think it's very good medicine, because the land, it is our homeland. We are healed when we know about the things that our forefathers have done in their time. Scientists and biologists, they don't know the things that our forefathers knew about... These are the kinds of things that we pass on to our younger people."

Robert Kuptana



Trapper Tony Alanak shows Kyle Wolki how to remove arctic fox from a trap

"Hopefully we'll have our own Nunamin Illihakvia soon".

Shaylene Lundrigan



Angus Green carefully sews his seal skin mitts during a sewing class

"What I've learned is that in a lot of areas, it shows that we are losing our culture. You come to Ulukhaktok and it's there. Right in front of you. It seems to me that it's one community that has not lost their culture and even though it's fading in other communities it would be good to get it back".

Donna Keogak



Desmond Nasogaluak tries his hand at drum dancing with the Central Drummers and Dancers group

Northern Forum

The participants arrived by way of chartered flight on Tuesday February 18th: Curtis Illasiak and Clarence Kowana from Aklavik, Angus Green and Janeen Ruben from Paulatuk, Donna Keogak and Kyle Wolki from Sachs Harbour, and Shaylene Lundrigan, Desmond Nasogaluak, and Dale Panoktalok from Tuktoyaktuk. Participants didn't know each other well, even if they had come from the same community. A typical day during the Northern Forum included an afternoon activity and an evening activity, with evening activities tending to be regular community events as a result of the well-established *Nunamin Illihakvia* project. The Northern Forum opened unofficially with a Games Night in the Kayutak Community Centre, home of the Ulukhaktok Community Corporation. Participants gathered to play a variety of classic board games and traditional Inuit games.



Northern Forum participants play games with community memrbs in the boardroom of the Kayutak Centre

The official opening of the Forum was the next day when participants met in the Community Hall to introduce themselves and review past projects funded by CCHAP. Most participants were timid and soft-spoken, yet friendly and open-minded. Many were keen on



Northern Forum participants construct fish jiggers (aullatiit) in preparation for the fishing trip

learning more about the funding application for CCHAP. The evening event on this same day was Arctic Sports in the Community Hall. Arctic sports including high kicking and the knuckle hop were demonstrated by Ulukhaktok community member and hunter mentor Tony Alanak and practiced by a few brave participants. The Arctic Sports event reoccurred on Wednesday and Friday evenings.

The next day began with “On the Land Readiness” training with the Ulukhaktok Search and Rescue team. Following training, the participants went to the workshop in the local school, Helen Kalvak Elihakvik, to construct fish jiggers (*aullatiit* in Inuinuqtun) in preparation for the ice fishing trip on Monday February 24th. Hunter mentor Tony Alanak and his father George Alanak provided safety equipment and demonstrated how to build the jiggers. Several participants did not have experience with workshop tools and benefitted from one-on-one assistance.



Janeen Ruben showing off her newly-constructed aullatiit

In the evening, the group attended their first sewing class at the Kayutak Centre. The two-hour class is an intimate gathering of Ulukhaktok Elders who teach sewing skills and work on their own sewing projects. Participants had the opportunity to learn from the Elders and sew their own pair of animal skin mitts or gloves. Several participants had time to craft a second pair during their stay in Ulukhaktok as participants regularly sewed during their free time. More than one male participant had never sewn before and were exceptionally yet humbly proud of their completed work. The Elders grew very fond of the large influx of dedicated and enthusiastic sewers and many commented that the Northern Forum participants would be greatly missed upon their departure. Sewing classes took place every Monday and Thursday evening, but sewing was ongoing throughout the Northern Forum. The individual sewing projects were often a topic of discussion among participants as well as between participants and Ulukhaktokmuit. Some participants immediately donned their new mittens or gloves upon completion.



Elders Mary Kudlak and Mary Akoaksion assist Desmond Nasogaluak with his seal skin mitts



Curtis Illasiak uses an ulu, a semi-circular Inuit knife, to cut fur for gloves during a sewing class

On Friday afternoon, participants participated in the one-hour Tuhungnarvik Radio Show which happens weekly at 1:00 PM. Elder Robert Kuptana partners with Crystal Kuneyuna to host the show that contributes to the community's effort to revitalize Inuinnaqtun. Inuinnaqtun "Words of the Week" are chosen and community members can call in to translate the words and be entered into a draw for prizes. Local announcements are read in between music in both Inuinnaqtun and English. On the second Friday of the Northern Forum, visiting participants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves live during the show.

During the Northern Forum, participants had the opportunity to work with Sarah Flisikowski, a graduate student supervised by Dr. Tristan Pearce, to learn how to prepare applications for the CHHAP. A funding workshop took place on February 21st. Sarah was provided with a laptop and projector and was able to go through the CHHAP website and *Nunamin Illihakvia's* successful application. Participants were arranged in a circle formation so as to promote sharing and relationship-building. They were prompted to brainstorm what "health" and "being healthy" meant to them, as well as what traditional or on-the-land activities might benefit from revitalization in their communities. The goal of the workshop was to inspire participants to confidently champion cultural learning programs in their own communities. Some participants did not have strong written communication skills, so they listened rather than taking notes. Participants from smaller communities expressed that there was a lack of capacity in their communities to manage and administer a cultural learning program funded by CCHAP.



Crystal Kuneyuna and Robert Kuptana co-hosting the one-hour Tuhungnarvik Radio Show



Northern Forum participants attend a funding workshop

On February 22nd and 23rd, the Northern Forum focused on winter seal hunting. Participants were loaded onto sleds and guided by Ulukhaktokmuit Elders and hunters onto Queen's Bay. The weather was sunny and tranquil, and although no seals were harvested, participants enjoyed being out on the ice. Several participants mentioned that they had never hunted seals before and that this experience was the highlight of the Northern Forum. In the evening on the 22nd, the Ulukhaktok Western Drummers and Dancers (UWDD) presented a special workshop at the Community Hall where they demonstrated and taught drum dance songs. The event was open to the community and was attended by over 40 community members. Invitational or freestyle dances welcomed those unfamiliar with drum dancing to join the UWDD on the dance floor. Participants were extremely hesitant to dance and most observed from the seating arranged around the room.



Heading onto Queen's Bay to learn about winter seal hunting



Northern Forum participants learn how to locate a seal's breathing hole (aglu)

The fishing trip on February 24th was one of the most memorable experiences of the Northern Forum for several participants. Participants boarded sleds towed by skidoos to travel to *Okpilik*, a freshwater lake just outside of the community. Participants brought with them the jiggers they constructed and were provided with holes in the ice to fish through. The ice was remarkably clear and the air, intensely dry and fresh. Two lake trout were caught by two male participants, both from the same community. They later had their fish wrapped up to take home with them. A tent equipped with a portable stove was erected to allow participants to defrost, eat soup and bannock, and converse. Once the sun began to set, the tent was disassembled, and participants returned to the sleds for a sunset cruise back to the community.



Clarence Kowana with a lake trout at Okpilik

Other unique activities during the second week of the Northern Forum included: preparing dried caribou meat (*mipku*), a workshop with the Central Drummers and Dancers, igloo building with Elder Robert Kuptana on King's Bay, sliding on the hills along King's Bay, and an arctic fox trapping excursion lead by Tony Alanak.



The final day of the Northern Forum was Sunday March 1st. The Forum concluded with a community feast, including speeches and a performance by the Central Drummers and Dancers group. The feast welcomed over 100 community members to the Community Hall. Elder Kate Inuktalik, as the oldest Elder in the room, was asked to deliver a prayer in Inuinnaqtun to officially begin the feast. The participants were invited to eat first, followed by the Elders, and then the rest of the community members in attendance. After the meal, Colin Okheena, UCC Chairperson and Project Lead, began the presentations and gave Sarah Flisikowski the opportunity to introduce herself and the participants. Each participant was asked to give a short speech or introduction. Several struggled to address such a large crowd but nonetheless persevered and expressed kind thanks and personal experiences from the Forum. The participants were applauded after speaking and many received encouraging laughs and playful heckles from newfound family and friends.



Northern Forum participant Curtis Illasiak addresses the audience at the community feast



Northern Forum participants and those involved with Nunamin Illihakvia gather for a group photo



Program Evaluation

Prior to the participants' departure from Ulukhaktok, graduate student Sarah Flisikowski conducted 6 semi-structured interviews with the program participants and some *Nunamin Illihakvia* Elders to learn how the Northern Forum had impacted them. The interviews were held at the home of Elders Robert and Agnes Kuptana. They were conversational in style and included individual group conversations. Some reoccurring themes that participants discussed included: fostering healthy communities; the loss of culture, traditional knowledge, and language; and the impact of the Northern Forum.

Results

Fostering Healthy Communities

Participants were first asked what health meant to them. Responses ranged from “eating traditional foods and being happy” to “being able to live an active, full life”. Elder Agnes Kuptana provided a temporal perspective in her answer.

“To me, health is like... I grew up out on the land, born and raised in an igloo. Health is very important to me because in those years as I was growing up, we would eat our traditional food such as caribou, seal, bearded seal, *ikaluk* means fish, whale, you name it. Cod fish, whatever we can get. Geese, birds. Those are our traditional food, which are very healthy. Back then in my time, you rarely see people that are sick. It’s not like today’s new living.”

Agnes’ answer implies that today’s lifestyles and diets aren’t as traditional or healthy as when she was growing up. Robert Kuptana, her husband, grew up spending winters in Minto Inlet, living off the ocean and the land, and hardly ever eating store-bought food. He discussed the current state of hunting and autonomy in regard to traditional foods.

“Government put out the communities and hamlets and so nobody has to go hunt anymore, hardly! It was not important anymore to do the things that they used to do. Most people... live off of mostly store-bought food. A lot of the times too there’s few people that do full-time hunting, and also because everything is so expensive. To get some caribou or reindeer or muqtuq, fish, you have to use gas, so [hunters] would sell [harvested animals] to one another or sell them to different communities.”

Climate change was directly and indirectly mentioned as a factor that affects traditional livelihoods. Donna Keogak from Sachs Harbour is a mother of six children. She’s always lived in Sachs Harbour and lives “a traditional lifestyle every spring and summer”. The only time she’s “in town, really, is in the winter”, emphasizing her autonomy and enjoyment of being out on the land. Donna Keogak alluded to a decrease in ice- or water-based traditional activities: “We do a lot of on-the-land activities but... over the past few years the weather has been very bad”.

In the funding workshop on February 21st, similar answers were given regarding “health” and “being healthy”. The brainstorming portion of the funding workshop resulted in a discussion of health and environmental changes being observed in communities in their communities, including language loss, increased wintertime reliance on store-bought food, and intensifying land erosion.

Loss of Culture, Knowledge, and Language

When participants were asked to share what they had learned from the Northern Forum, Donna Keogak gave an insightful response regarding culture.

“What I’ve learned is that in a lot of areas, it shows that we are losing our culture. You come to Ulukhaktok and it’s there. Right in front of you. It seems to me that it’s one community that has not lost their culture and even though it’s fading in other communities it would be good to get it back”.

Shaylene appreciated that the Northern Forum brought her back to her culture and her roots: “something I’m going to keep forever now... so I’m very thankful for that”. Shaylene described herself as Inuvialuit, growing up in Tuktoyaktok. Although she spent time living in Southern Canada, she’s back in the North “to stay”, and said: “it’s a good life up North”. She said that her favourite activity during the Forum was igloo building, lead by Robert Kuptana, adding: “I learned from the best, so, I’m confident I could do one on my own now”. Janeen Ruben from Paulatuk was overcome by emotion when she shared a conversation that she had with her young daughter over the phone. Janeen told her daughter about having helped build an igloo, and her daughter asked if they could build one together at home. These are just two examples of participants learning a new skill and looking forward to practicing on their own and teaching others.

In response to the question, “do you have a favourite part of the last couple weeks?”, Curtis Illasiak, a soft-spoken and talented sewer said: “I suppose the sewing was a big part of it, but I really liked going out on the land.” He later expressed having immensely enjoyed the program and learning what it meant to live off the land.

“There’s so much I learned... It’s a really great program. I really honestly didn’t expect so much out of it. I had high expectations, but this program is so amazing... It just blew all those expectations away. But I think mostly it taught me how you live off the land.”

One aspect of *Nunamin Illihakvia* that became clear during the Northern Forum was that the program is designed to help the community retain traditional skills and knowledge and is immensely successful in doing so. Kyle Wolki, a young man of few words from Sachs Harbour, learned “about the program and how much it benefits the community. And all about the traditional practices they do every day”. Despite mention of culture, knowledge, and language loss during the Northern Forum, this quote emphasizes that traditional practices are alive and well in communities like Ulukhaktok.

Elder Agnes Kuptana, a fluent Inuinnaqtun speaker, was the most vocal about the loss of language in her community. She speaks the language daily and spoke very highly of the Tuhungnarvik Radio Show. Inuinnaqtun classes are taught at the local school, but Agnes doesn’t think they are sufficient for the community’s youth.

“The younger kids go more than the older ones. The older ones have learned [Inuinnaqtun] and when they come... to Grade 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, it starts to slowly go. So it is really important [to] carry on all through grades. To me”.

Agnes also expressed the importance of hands-on language learning to promote Inuinnaqtun retention.

“It’s very important that we try and keep... from the Elders stories...how they used to live out on the land, doing things that such as seal hooking, fishing, trapping, sewing, learning how to do hides (softening, preparing, cutting), and teaching them. It’s nice that you can... do it in the language so that they can remember the language as well. It’s very, very important to us”.

Robert Kuptana is also an Inuinnaqtun advocate, and commented on the diminishing vocabulary in the community. He said that “there’s... a lot of words that we don’t hear anymore nowadays because when we were nomadic people, we used them every day, but nowadays you don’t hardly hear it and a lot of that we also have forgotten”.

Many participants established that Elders are the ultimate knowledge holders. The difficulty is that Elders who pass on, carry their traditional knowledge and skills with them. Robert Kuptana acknowledged that he and other Elders are getting old and are the “last of the nomadic people”. He is thankful for the opportunities that *Nunamin Illihakvia* has provided him to pass on traditional knowledge so it is not forgotten, as well as the nomadic way of life to future leaders, “who will be taking over the nomadic way of life in their time”. He cautioned that knowledge transmission must be continual and described a spiritual element of knowledge transmission.

“I think it’s very good medicine, because the land, it is our homeland. We are healed when we know about the things that our forefathers have done in their time... Scientists and biologists, they don’t know the things that our forefathers knew about... These are the kinds of things that we pass on to our younger people.”

Robert’s reflection on traditional knowledge as medicine is profound. This statement suggests that cultural and traditional knowledge is a powerful healing force in a time of rapid social and environmental change in the Arctic.

Impact of the Northern Forum

Participants began calling one another “family” towards the end of the Northern Forum. They had collectively experienced a lot of newness and would now be returning home to their individual communities to share what they had experienced in Ulukhaktok. Elder Agnes Kuptana was pleased by the progression she witnessed in the participants during the Forum.

“They have done a lot. They come from different communities. Probably they were silent coming this way, because they did not really know each other, but when they come here, getting together and working together with the Elders and the community... The elders taking part and helping... You see them like one big family.”

Participants seemed to be optimistic that their communities could apply for funding and design a cultural learning program. Some were keener than others, potentially due to requirements of their jobs which provided them with the opportunity to attend the Northern Forum. Curtis shared: “I already have lots of people coming to me with ideas... to apply for the funding, I did come on behalf of my job, so it was a really great experience to do that... There’s so much we’re going to do already. I can’t wait. It’s so exciting”. Kyle plans to work towards a collaborative cultural learning program: “I’m interested in getting a program in my hometown and getting everyone to work with each other and sharing knowledge. The youth and the Elders working together... well pretty much the whole community”. Donna reflected the warmth and generosity shown by Ulukhaktokmuit: “I would love to host something like what we had here. Something similar... A lot of people have never experienced what we see in the community and I would love to show them.” Shaylene summarized the attitude of the group of participants in saying: “Hopefully we’ll have our own *Nunamin Illihakvia* soon”.

Conclusion

Nunamin Illihakvia is a well-established and cherished program in Ulukhaktok that continues to benefit many in the community. The Northern Forum brought representatives from other ISR communities to Ulukhaktok to participate in *Nunamin Illihakvia* programs and learn about the Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program (CCHAP). Participants gave overwhelmingly positive feedback on the Northern Forum and *Nunamin Illihakvia* activities and were eager to share their experience with their own communities. The Northern Forum gave participants from other communities the chance to experience *Nunamin Illihakvia* and gain inspiration to lead similar initiatives in their communities.

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A spectacular sunset after the departure of the Northern Forum participants



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