

Nunamin Illihakvia

Learning from the Land



Ulukhaktok Community Corporation (UCC), Ulukhaktok, NWT, Canada
July 2014

Final Activity Report for Health Canada
Health Canada's Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program
for Northern First Nations and Inuit Communities 2013-2014

FRONT COVER: Kelly Nigiyok and Roland Notaina looking for aglus (seal breathing holes) on the sea ice near Ulukhaktok

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The Nunamin Illihakvia/ Learning from the Land program (2013-2014) aimed to support the transmission of Inuit traditional knowledge, skill sets and values that are important for a healthy lifestyle, physically, mentally, and culturally. Specifically, this pilot project brought together younger generation Inuit with experienced hunters, sewers, and Elders in Ulukhaktok to learn how to travel on the sea ice and hunt seals in the winter, how to prepare seal skins for sewing, and how to sew traditional seal skin clothing. Having such knowledge and skills provides younger community members with the opportunity to engage in productive activities that continue to have value economically and socially. The program sought to revive participation in winter seal hunting and traditional sewing skills, to strengthen health **and** food security during a time of rapid climatic and societal change.

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Program description

Hunting, sharing, and consuming country foods are important to Ulukhaktomuit for food security and are fundamental to culture, identity, and wellbeing. In recent years, climatic change, including changes in sea ice and extreme weather events, has exacerbated existing stressors on subsistence activities such as increasing costs associated with hunting, the collapse of international fur markets, and time constraints of waged employment and formal education. Shifting patterns of food consumption away from traditional foods to a greater reliance on store-foods has been documented in Ulukhaktok and elsewhere in the Arctic, with implications for food security, health and wellbeing.

As traditional modes of knowledge transmission for winter hunting and related activities come under stress, the Nunamin Illihakvia project responded to a pressing need in the community to establish an Inuit-led cultural education program to promote our culture and traditions among younger generation community members while our Elders are with us.



Patrick Akhiatak, Kelly Nigiyok, Roland Notaina and Donald Inuktalik out hunting

Objectives

1. Facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills among experienced hunters, Elders and younger generation Inuit for how to make seal hunting equipment, how to travel on the sea ice under changing climatic conditions, and how to hunt seals in the winter;
2. Involve younger generation Inuit in butchering and sharing seal meat in the community following traditional food sharing networks;
3. teach traditional seal skin preparation and sewing skills;
4. conduct Inuit-led interviews with Elders, hunters and sewers to evaluate the project and to better understand relationship between seal hunting and health in the context of a changing climate; and
5. develop multi-media research and learning tools that promote Inuit knowledge and skills related to seal hunting, seal skin preparation and sewing skills and their importance to Inuit health.

The short-term goal of Nunamin Illihakvia was to revive participation in winter seal hunting, and seal skin sewing, and strengthen the health of our community in a changing climate. In the long term we aim to develop Nunamin Illihakvia as an Inuit-led cultural school to help document, preserve and promote Inuit traditional knowledge and skills that are important for a healthy lifestyle, physically, mentally, and culturally in a time of rapid climate and societal change.

Program activities and outputs

- › 60+ participants took part in sealskin sewing classes, equipment making, and hunting trips with the guidance of Elders and experienced instructors
- › 6 equipment projects completed: harpoon, ice chisel, snow knife, butchering knife, open water boat and paddles, sleds
- › 8 hunting trips on the sea ice conducted under the instruction of experienced hunters in spring 2014
- › Seal harvested on project hunting trips shared with Elders and community members
- › 4 sewing projects completed: seal skin hat, kihimayok shoes (water-proof shoes made from bearded seal), puhitaaq (sunburst for a parka), and sealskin parkas
- › 7 younger-generation research and media production assistants documented program activities
- › Youth-hosted Innuinaqtun language radio show hosted once per week
- › Two community feasts hosted, i) introduce the project in September 2013, and ii) wrap up and celebrate participants' accomplishments in March 2014, which was attended by approximately 200 people (half of Ulukhaktok's population of ~400)
- › Inuit Day sharing celebration held Nov. 7th to update community about program activities
- › 2 videos about the project produced (promotional video produced Sept. 2013 and short documentary produced in March 2014 with footage from local media assistants)
- › Photo book that tells the story of the project through images
- › Media interviews about the project conducted with CBC News North, CBC Northbeat
- › Nunamin Illihakvia featured in Tusaayaksat and Inuktitut magazines
- › Community representative and researchers together presented on the program at the International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (March 2014), and researcher partners presented at ArcticNet (December 2013)



Kelly Nigiyok and David Roy Ekpakohak waiting for a seal at an aglu (seal breathing hole)

“Even before they got the seal, they were like ‘we’ve never done this before,’ and they’re telling me ‘this is so cool,’ and ‘this is what we did,’ and you know, they were excited about it, you could see them being excited about it.”

Project coordinator



Lisa Alikamik with her sunburst (ruff for a parka)



Sealskin kihimayok shoes

“I tell them [the young people] hunting is not just for fun, it’s a way of life, keeps you alive, and just makes you become a better person, how you harvest your animals and you start sharing with people.”

Hunting instructor



Elder Walter Olifie teaching Eric Kagyut how to braid rope for a harpoon



Elder David Kuptana surveying the sea ice on a program seal hunting trip

“To go out on the land or on the ice, that is, it’s a very healing process. Just going out. Even to sew, to get your mind and yourself busy at doing something productive, positive. Those are just wellness in itself. To feel proud of something you accomplished.”

Project coordinator

Program Evaluation

25 semi-structured interviews (5 pilot and 20 evaluation interviews) were conducted with a sample of program participants (Table 1) in September 2013 and March 2014. The aim of the evaluation interviews was to document feedback from participants on their experiences in Nunamin Illihakvia including what benefits the program had and what improvements could be made.

Table 1: Evaluation interviews

RESPONDENTS		
Sewing participants	6 (all female)	30%
Equipment and hunting participants	6 (all male)	30%
Elders (instructors)	4 (2 male, 2 female)	20%
Coordinators*	4 (1 male, 3 female)	20%
Total	20	100%

*Includes two program coordinators due to mid-program switch, sewing coordinator, equipment coordinator

INTERVIEW STRATIFICATION		
Criteria	Number of respondents (#)	Number of respondents (%)
Male	9	45%
Female	11	55%
Total	20	100%

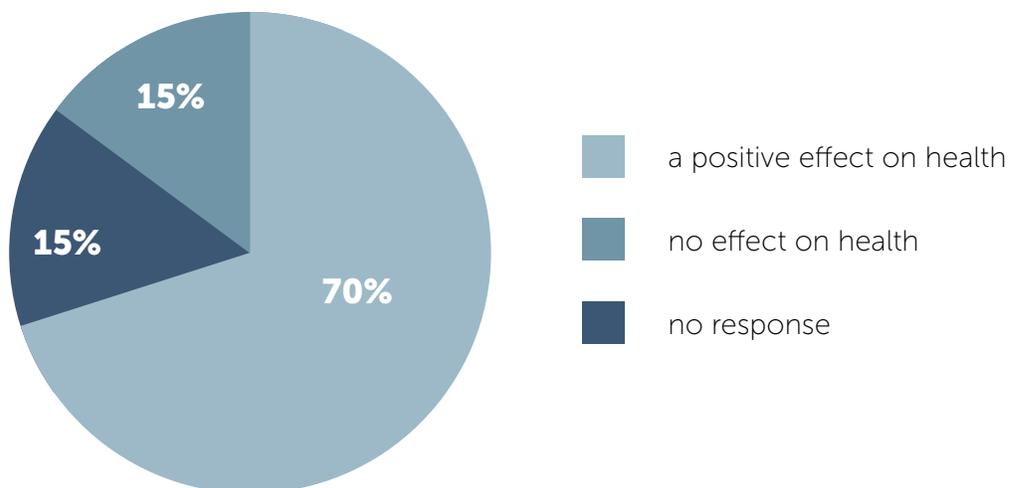


Results

Highlights

- › 100 % of participants and instructors said they would participate again
- › 100% of participants and instructors said the program should continue
- › 70% of participants reported that participating had a positive impact on their health (in response to the question "Do you think participating in this program has impacted your health or wellbeing in any way?")

% respondents reporting health impacts of participating in Nunamin Illihakvia



Program participants, coordinators, and skills teachers identified a wide range of benefits from the Nunamin Illihakvia program:

- › Sense of pride and capability in oneself, especially by being recognized by Elders and other community members for new skills
- › New friends and increased sense of social support
- › Intergenerational contact and new relationships with Elders/instructors
- › Sense of wellbeing, reduced stress and reduced “winter blues” during 24 hour darkness
- › Having access to a healthy environment and positive atmosphere to fill the time instead of turning to unhealthy activities
- › Sense of strengthened cultural identity (Inuk pride)
- › Sense of collective healing from factors that have compromised knowledge transmission, including residential schooling and the rapid collapse of the sealskin market
- › Cultural revitalization, such as bringing out old stories and conserving endangered skills (such as completing a sewing project that only 4 remaining Elders in town still knew how to make) and ensuring skills can be passed on to the next generation
- › Language revitalization (including bringing out “sleeping words” specific to winter hunting that are rarely used in day to day life and that are at risk of being lost)
- › Skills for safe travel on sea ice that are especially important in changing climatic conditions (thinner ice, windstorms)
- › Skills to enable young hunters to provide fresh country food during winter months, which keeps people healthier and stronger
- › Increased physical activity
- › Gaining more than hard skills: learning patience, working through difficulties and frustrations, gaining a mindset to think multiple steps ahead in sewing or making equipment, developing mental toughness required to hunt in winter conditions
- › Instructors’ and Elders’ sense of pride in students as they learn and succeed, and pride in seeing traditional skills, equipment, and clothing used again
- › Sharing success with community by distributing meat from hunting trips, making sewing and equipment projects for others or assisting others with theirs
- › Increasing income opportunities, for example by using new sewing skills to apply for SEED (Support for Entrepreneur Economic Development) funding to make and sell crafts, and gaining new skills required for coordinating projects and/or conducting research
- › Pride in community and sense that Ulukhaktok is demonstrating leadership that other communities can follow



Ladies sewing group making kids' sealskin parkas

"I go home stressed out at the end of the day, and when I know I'm gonna go and hang out with the ladies [at sewing class], it feels like all the stress is all gone, and I focus on my project and I hang out with the ladies and we talk and chat and it's been great!"

Sewing participant

"I'm happy I took the young people out. It makes me feel light inside again. It's like, you open up."

Hunting instructor



Sewing participants prepare wolf skin for puhitaqs (sunburst ruffs for parka)



Allen Pogotak hunting bearded seal on the sea ice

"Hunting is the best medicine out on the land. If you go out on the land, it get you really your energy back... you see this nice country, nice place, nice view, and you see animals... you go back home, you feel good."

Hunting instructor



Hunting seal

“It’s awesome for our youth. Cause there’s this project, and they don’t own a machine or a sled and they get to go out.”

Equipment making and hunting participant



Travelling on the sea ice

Who benefited?

Many respondents said the program benefitted everyone involved, including participants who gained skills, Elders who were proud and happy to see knowledge passed on, coordinators who gained employment, children who gained new winter clothing, and community members who weren’t participants but who attended classes simply to visit and enjoy the atmosphere. Others also suggested the program particularly benefitted those who did not have immediate family members who could teach them, such as younger men who did not have fathers or uncles to take them out; single mothers with young children who lack the time to go sit with relatives and learn and benefited from the structure of a program, or who want to teach their children skills for hunting that they were never taught; and people who lacked equipment or could not afford materials to pursue such projects on their own.



Kids wearing their new sealskin parkas at feast celebrating end for project

“It’s brought our community together... just the traditional knowledge is being shared between generations and it’s being passed on, so it’s very successful in my eyes.”

Project coordinator

Suggestions for improvement

- › Expand the program so that all interested people can participate (if necessary, reduce the number of projects so more people could participate in each)
- › Having a dedicated building with more space and storage for projects (instead of using self-government office and school shop)
- › Increase the length of the program to make it year round to allow time for practicing skills more and across seasonal variation
- › Strengthen Inuinnaqtun language promotion component
- › Expand role for Elders as advisors (for example, as mentors for program coordinators) and work more closely with Elders’ committee
- › Clarify participant selection criteria (e.g. only those who do not already know how) to prevent tensions and to ensure that those who did not have the skills take priority
- › Prioritize skills and knowledge that are in danger of not being passed on
- › Ensure program continues to reinforce these skills next year, even while expanding to new themes



Kelly Nigiwok making paddles for an open water boat



Lily Alanak with her completed puhitaa (sunburst ruff for parka)

"I mean, you can see the ladies, their skills, their finished product. That in itself is a success. The young guys with more confidence in saying 'yes, I can do this', that's a success. And them being happy about it, and [having] confidence in themselves to try something different. That is success. To see the community come out and say, 'yes, this is good'."

Project coordinator

Measuring success

Participants were asked what to look for to gauge program success. Respondents most frequently suggested that success could be gauged by seeing people use their tools and wear their new clothing proudly, hearing people talk about the project and share experiences or finished work in persona and on social media, and by seeing participants use the skills they have gained (e.g. to start new sewing projects, or to go out hunting on their own or by asking experienced hunters to take them along). Respondents shared that by these metrics, the program was indeed showing signs of success, with a high degree of visibility and publicity, and some participants (especially from sewing classes) continuing to develop their skills independently of the program. Many participants interviewed also suggested that success would really only show if participants can ultimately pass on the knowledge they have learned, and if this effort continues.

Acknowledgments

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Project partners

Olokhaktomuit Hunters and Trappers Committee (OHTC)

Helen Kalvak Elihakvik (School)

Hamlet of Ulukhaktok (Recreation Department)

Ulukhaktok Elders Committee

Ulukhaktok Youth Council

Ulukhaktok Art Centre

Ulukhaktok District Education Authority (DEA)

Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre

University of the Sunshine Coast (Sustainability Research Centre)

University of Guelph (Department of Geography)

McGill University (Climate Change Adaptation Research Group)

Project coordinators: Susan Kaodlak, Laverna Klengenberg

Temporary project coordinator: Phylicia Kagyut

Sewing coordinators: Donna Akhiatak, Lily Alanak

Inuinnaqtun radio coordinator: Emily Kudlak

Hunting trip coordinator: Patrick Akhiatak

Equipment making teachers: David Kuptana, Isaac Inuktalik, Adam Kudlak, Ross Klengenberg, Walter Olifie

Sewing teachers: Winnie Akhiatak, Annie Inuktalik, Kate Inuktalik, Mary Kudlak, Kapuk (Mabel) Nigiyok, Haluk (Margaret) Notaina

Elder advisors: Winnie Akhiatak, Robert Kuptana, Joanne Ogina, Walter Olifie

Research team: Tristan Pearce (Nakimayak), Ellie Stephenson

Film: Lesya Nakoneczny, Rowan Schindler, Lisa Alikamik

Photography: Alex Akhiatak, Donna Akhaitak, Patrick Akhiatak, Brittany Akoakhion, Lily Alanak, Lisa Alikamik, Katrina Brieschk, Carmella Klengenberg, Adam Kudlak, Koral Kudlak, Logan Memogana, Stephanie Nigiyok

Radio announcers: Manok Kudlak, Jerry Jr. Akoaksion



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