

People of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

While many people may think of the Arctic as an inhospitable region, it has been populated for thousands of years. Home to some of the world's harshest conditions, temperatures in the Arctic often dip below -30 to -40 degrees in the winter when the sun stays below the horizon for months. The people who inhabit this unique ecosystem have adapted over thousands of years in order to both survive and thrive in these harsh conditions. Different cultures may be found in the various regions of the Arctic, from Lapps in Finland and Norway to the Chuckchi and Koyaki in Siberia. In North America, our Arctic is populated by both the Inupiaq and Gwich'in. While both adventure seekers and residents travel within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, there are two permanent villages whose livelihoods are tied to the Arctic Refuge and have been for thousands of years: Kaktovik and Arctic Village.

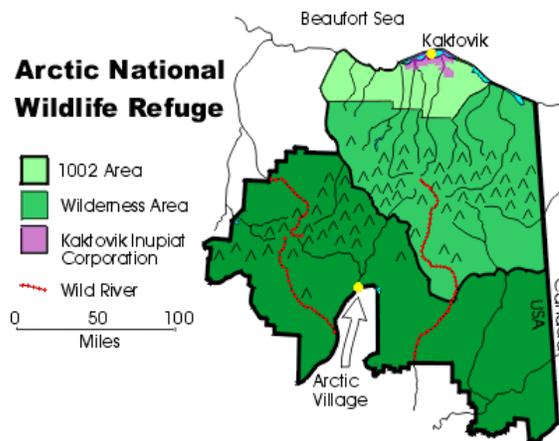
The Villages

Kaktovik

Kaktovik is an Inupiaq village of approximately 250 current residents located within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge along the Beaufort Sea. The area had long been important for the Inupiaq as a traditional summer fishing and hunting location. This location became a seasonal camp for commercial whalers in the late 1800s, which transitioned into a permanent village.

Arctic Village

Arctic Village is a Gwich'in village located just outside the southern border of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, along the Chandalar River. Wooded hills and river flatlands make up the area that is home to just over 150 people. Archeological evidence indicates that the Arctic Village area may have been settled as early as 4500 BC. Around 500 AD, the Gwich'in people



By the Numbers

- Kaktovik is located **855 miles** from the capital city of Juneau. **CLASSROOM ACTION:** have your students figure out how far they are from their state's capital.
- Arctic Village has a population of **150 residents**. **CLASSROOM ACTION:** have your students research the population of their town and calculate how many arctic villages it would take to fill their town.
- Members of the Porcupine caribou herd, which give birth on the Coastal Plain of the Refuge and are relied upon by the Gwich'in people for food and clothing, can travel over **3,000 miles** during their annual migration. **CLASSROOM ACTION:** students can plan trips to conceptualize the distance of 3,000 miles

began using the area for seasonal hunting and fishing camps, and the current permanent village was settled around 1900.

The People

Inupiaq

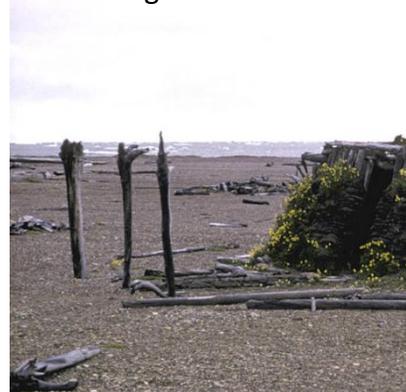
The Inupiaq and Siberian Yupik (or St. Lawrence Island Yupik) of Northern Arctic Alaska live in a region that stretches across the North Slope, to the northern Canadian border and beyond. Their territory also includes most of the Brooks Range, a 700-mile mountain range that extends from northern Alaska into Canada. The Inupiaq are known for their traditional whaling culture. In the region, the diet is based largely on active subsistence hunting and traditional use of foods such as bowhead and beluga whale, bearded seal, walrus, polar bear, duck and other marine mammals to provide substantial portions of the traditional diet.

Housing

Due to their heavy reliance on migratory animals for subsistence, the Inupiat established various semi-temporary hunting camps which could be used year after year. Inupiaq homes were traditionally made from the materials available on the tundra. Because they were north of the tree line, they used earth, animal bones, hides and stones to construct their homes in lieu of trees. These homes were often dug into the ground to provide insulation from the extreme cold as well as shelter from the wind. Today, the Inupiat do not travel between their various hunting camps and the once temporary sites have become permanent villages. The advancement of transportation over the last hundred years has also allowed a greater variety of building materials to be brought in resulting in familiar housing structures.



Church in Kaktovik (courtesy of Fish & Wildlife Service)



Traditional sod and stone house (courtesy of Fish & Wildlife Service)

Gwich'in

The Athabascan Indians live in interior Alaska and western parts of Canada and have the largest land base of any other Alaska Native group. There are 11 different languages spoken by Athabascans. These groups include the Gwich'in (with about 7500 members), Koyukon, Ahtna, Tanaina, Han, Upper Tanana, Tanana, Tanacross, Deg Hit'an and Holikachuck.

Moose, caribou, beaver and salmon are the core of the subsistence hunting and fishing traditions of the Athabascan people. These resources have provided food, clothes and shelter. Additionally, the Athabascan people gather a variety of seasonal berries, plants and birch bark which provide additional food, medicines and other resources such as dyes and materials for basket making.

The Gwich'in population is located in northeastern Alaska, the northern Yukon and Northwest Territories of Canada. Known as 'The Caribou People,' the culture and life of the Gwich'in has been based around the Porcupine caribou herd for thousands of years. The Gwich'in peoples have relied upon the caribou for food, shelter, clothing, tools and medicine. So intertwined with the Porcupine Caribou herd, the Gwich'in have named the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge "Izhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" which translates to 'The Sacred Place Where Life Begins.' The Coastal Plain is the destination of the Porcupine Caribou herd, which migrates to the Coastal Plain each year to birth and raise their young. Not only does the life of the caribou begin on the Coastal Plain, but it is also where the life of the Gwich'in nation is supported. The lives and heritage of the Gwich'in are directly tied to the caribou herds – much like the Plains Indians relied on the buffalo. Without a healthy caribou population, the Gwich'in culture would struggle to survive.

An Overview of Native Cultures in Alaska

