

Contribution No. 25-07-004

Project title:

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and perspectives of narwhal management

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Summary:

The Kurtairojuark Hunters and Trappers Association (KHTA) initially planned to conduct a one-day workshop to research local perspectives on narwhal management from HTA members, hunters, and community members in Kugaaruk. However, the project grew into a four-week effort which included one-on-one interviews with people in the community. This research collected Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) data & perspectives of traditional methods used on narwhal & the understanding of the current narwhal management system.

Ten community members took part in the interviews. One community researcher was hired to conduct the interviews with support from interpreters & KRWB staff. Community members/hunters shared their knowledge on traditional hunting methods used, the history of narwhal management plan(s), how well they understood the current plan, important areas for narwhal around Kugaaruk/Argviligruaq area & and how possible changes to the current management plan may affect the community—both positively and negatively.

Project Objectives

The objectives for this project were to determine:

1. Traditional knowledge and hunting practices used by community members/hunters
2. Changes in Narwhal population & behaviour within the Kugaaruk/Argviligruaq area, changes in narwhal ecology
3. Gathering community knowledge on the current Narwhal management plan and tag system
4. The economic importance of narwhal products (ivory, blubber being shared/sold)
5. The current threats or perceived health of narwhal population in the Kugaaruk/Argviligruaq area

The information collected by these interviews will be used to assist the KHTA & KRWB to work with co-management partners (e.g., Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. [NTI] and Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada [DFO]) with determining current needs and changes required (if any) for an updated management plan (narwhal Integrated Fisheries Management Plan).

Materials & Methods

We conducted individual interviews with community members, which enabled us to hear from more diverse and individual voices, perspectives, and knowledge in a more intimate setting rather than a workshop or group meeting. Interviews/surveys were conducted by a locally hired Community Researcher, with the support of local interpreters who facilitated conversations in Inuktitut for monolingual Elders and community members, who preferred to speak in Inuktitut. KRWB staff also monitored and supported the interviews/surveys remotely over Zoom, using Otter.ai transcription software to record and transcribe the sessions.

-Survey and interview questions for this research were collaboratively developed by KRWB and KHTA staff, with additional input from the KHTA board. Although the Integrated Fisheries Management Plan (IFMP) Working Group was not directly involved in this project, its ongoing work provided important contextual background that informed the project development process.

Initial drafts of the interview questions were prepared by KRWB staff, drawing on their extensive engagement in narwhal co-management forums. These included KRWB's participation in the Narwhal Working Group and in discussions surrounding proposed amendments to narwhal management frameworks by co-management partners. The questions were designed to reflect broader management contexts while remaining invested in local priorities.

The survey focused on thematically relevant topics intended to support KHTA and Kitikmeot regional decision-making within a co-management framework. In particular, the questions aimed to:

- Assess how proposed or ongoing decisions before co-management boards may affect narwhal harvesters
- Elicit insights aligned with harvesters' IQ, including their priorities, knowledge, recommendations, and concerns
- Provide awareness among harvesters about the roles and activities of KHTA, KRWB, and other co-management partners/organizations
- Initiate the documentation and archiving of Inuit knowledge on narwhal ecology and Inuit-narwhal relationships.

The interviews were therefore both a tool for knowledge gathering and an opportunity for engagement, learning, and capacity-building within the broader context of Inuit-led wildlife co-management.

Results

We completed interviews with 10 community members (9 men and 1 woman) from 10 February to 31 March 2025: 5 interviews were in English and 5 were interpreted by 2 interpreters. Interviews focused broadly on narwhal hunting, management, and traditional knowledge.

Interviewees shared their experiences with narwhal hunting, including when they caught their first narwhal and who taught them. Most community members learned from family members and emphasized the importance of passing down traditional knowledge to younger generations. Community members also shared specific information about when and where they harvest narwhal on individual maps.

Interviewees also shared information on narwhal ecology; specifically, they noted changes in narwhal sightings and behaviour over the course of their lifetime and the drivers of these changes. The introduction of narwhal quotas and the tag system and impacts on the community was discussed extensively, as well as the value of narwhal to community members. Interviewees also shared their experience and knowledge about assessing health of narwhal and factors contributing to health, along with stressors.

Discussion/Management Implications

The interviews revealed several community concerns and recommendations that could be used to guide KHTA in representing their community in future discussions and submissions regarding narwhal management. The interviews also successfully documented community voices. Maps, audiofiles, and transcripts are now available for future reference at KHTA's discretion. As Kugaaruk is the most active narwhal hunting community in the region, these interviews provided valuable insights for historical and changing relationships with narwhal in the region. The current narwhal management plan from 2013 is outdated for review, making this documentation effort timely and proactive.

Reporting to communities/resource users:

Project activities were reported to all KRWB and HTO staff and regular updates were provided to boards throughout the year. Project reports will be made to KRWB during their annual general meeting in November 2025.

The KHTA will provide physical copies of the project report to interviewees and make online copies available through social media or provide a link to the report once published on NWMB's website. The report will also be presented to HTA members during the KHTA's 2025 annual general meeting in early 2026.