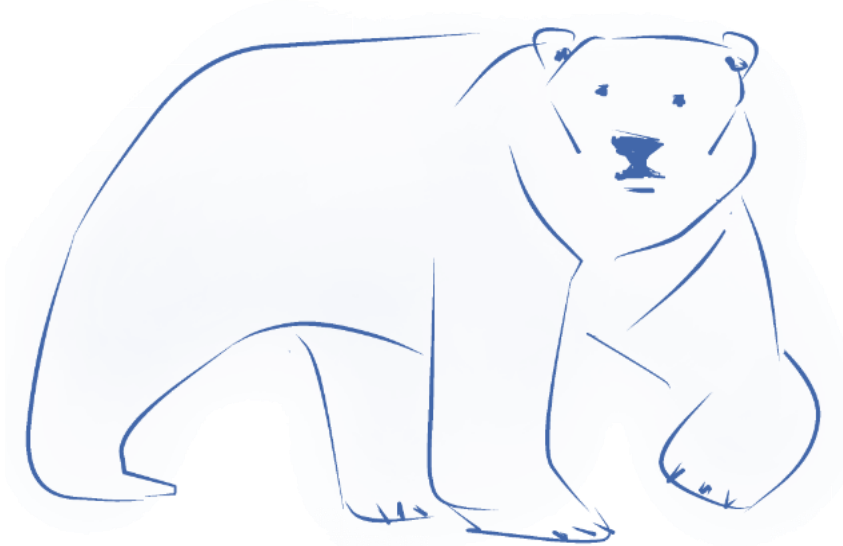




Nunavut Inuit Qaujimagatugangit on the health of the Davis Strait polar bear population

Final project report – 2022



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All information and knowledge within this report are the product of a collaborative effort among government and community-based researchers, the Mayukalik Hunters and Trappers Organization, the Pangnirtung Hunters and Trappers Organization, the Amarak Hunters and Trappers Organization and 35 contributing authors.

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* * *

We dedicate this report to the memory of Markus Dyck who respected the Inuit way of life and worked tirelessly to help conserve polar bears in the Canadian Arctic.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nanuq (polar bear; *Ursus maritimus*) is a key species of the Arctic ecosystem and is culturally important to Inuit. Nunavut Inuit have accumulated and developed a vast knowledge about polar bears through extensive observation of their environment and harvesting activities. Understanding the health status –including abundance– of polar bear populations is critical for effective polar bear management. In Nunavut, sustainable polar bears harvest quotas are established using both Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ; Inuit traditional knowledge) and Western scientific information.

This project aimed at gathering and documenting Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit on polar bear health around the communities of Kimmirut, Pangnirtung and Iqaluit, Nunavut, to support management decisions and strategies for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation. This collaborative research project was conducted as a partnership between the Government of Canada (Environment and Climate Change Canada and Polar Knowledge Canada), the Government of Nunavut (Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment), and local Hunters and Trappers Organizations (HTOs) from the communities of Pangnirtung and Kimmirut in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut (Figure A), with support from the Amarak Hunters and Trappers Organization.

We documented Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit related to polar bear cultural importance, harvesting practices, health, ecology, and management through a series of individual and group interviews and participatory exercises conducted in 2019 with 35 Inuit participants from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. Individual interviews were performed in both communities. Group interviews –which allowed obtaining quantitative information– were performed in Kimmirut only, with a total of 15 participants (including seven who were also interviewed individually and eight new participants) divided into four groups: three groups included male polar bear harvesters and one included women specialized in polar bear hide processing. Group interviews planned in Pangnirtung were cancelled due to limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fall 2021, preliminary results were presented to participants for their validation and feedback, which was incorporated in this report. Overall, project contributors included 24 men and 11 women ranging in age from their early 40s to early 80s. Polar bear experts interviewed included Kimmirutmiut and Pangnirtungmiut who had experience harvesting and butchering polar bears (generally men), processing and cleaning polar bear hides (generally women), or otherwise significant experience on the land. Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit shared by participants over the course of this study was acquired through their direct individual experiences with polar bear harvesting, butchering and hide processing, as well as through their experience living and travelling on the land. Some of this knowledge was also obtained from other hunters, Elders and community members. Direct ecological observations reported by participants were made within a 420-kilometer radius from their community, and earliest direct observations reported dated back to the 1940s (see ‘range of direct observations’ represented in Figure A).

Here we summarize the knowledge that was shared by Inuit project contributors during interviews, and relevant to the assessment of polar bear health from an IQ perspective. In this study, polar bear health was considered broadly and holistically at the individual, population and ecosystem levels. We assessed polar bear health considering multiple parameters, such as abundance and demography, habitat condition and distribution, diet and prey availability, body condition and human-polar bear interactions, in addition to mortality and disease.

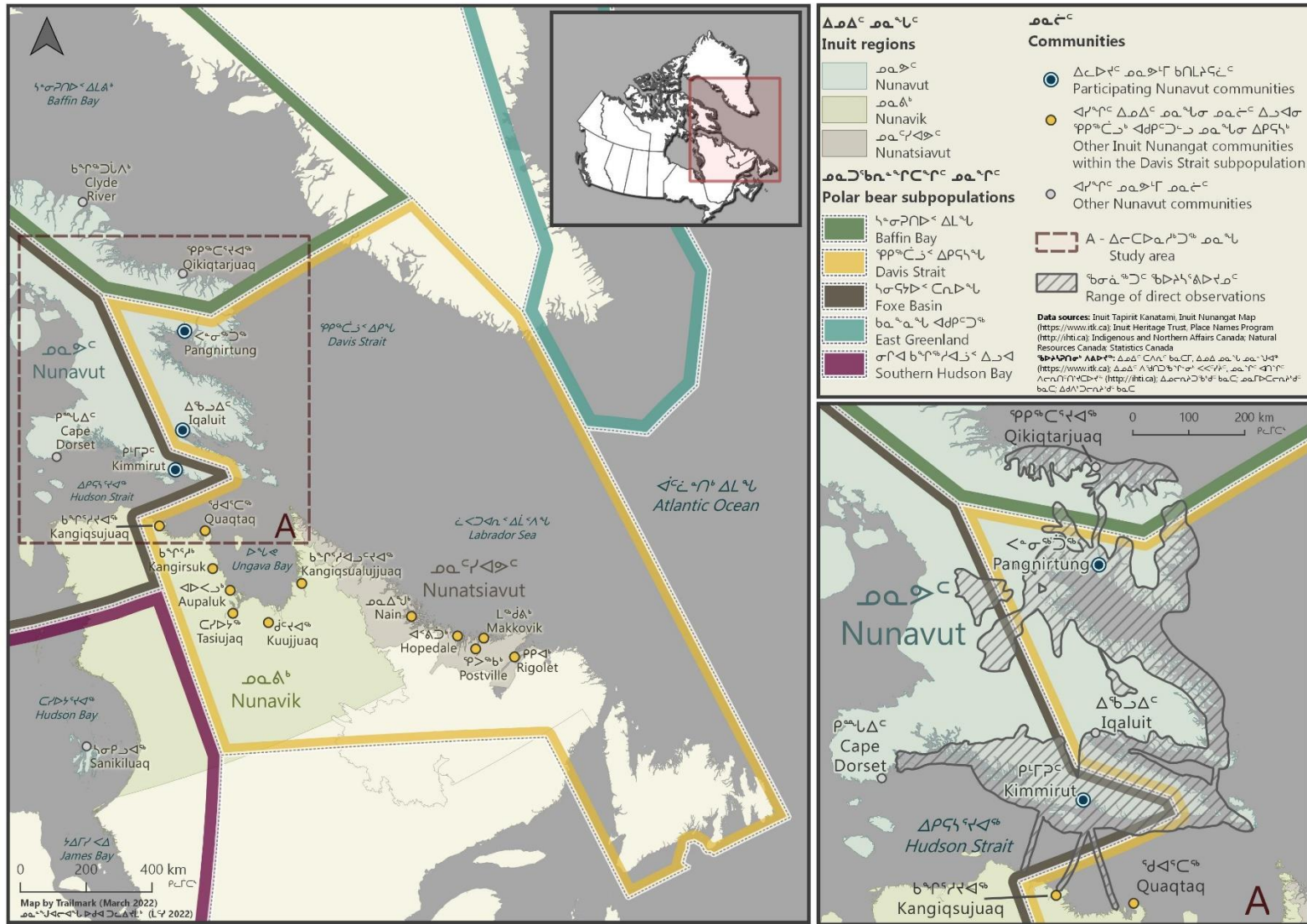


Figure A. Study area within the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit. In the legend, ‘range of direct observations’ (dashed area in map A) refers to the geographic extent of the ecological observations made by participants interviewed as part of this study.

Given that Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit includes multiple dimensions (cultural values, practices, ethics, worldviews, as well as ecological observations) which cannot be dissociated from one another, Inuit observations related to polar bear ecology and health are presented alongside knowledge related to the cultural and economic importance of polar bears, and Inuit perspectives on polar bear management and stewardship. Particular attention was given to topics that could inform ongoing and future polar bear research, monitoring efforts, and management decisions.

Importance of polar bears to Nunavut Inuit

Interview contributors shared a strong sense of the importance of polar bears to Inuit culture, identity and traditions, and discussed their past and ongoing relationships with polar bears. *Nanuq* was described as a mighty, intelligent and resilient animal that must be both respected and feared. Participants explained that Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit emphasizes the importance of harvesting only what one needs, not playing with bears, sharing polar bear meat, and avoiding waste.

Prior to the introduction of the quota system in the 1960s, Inuit hunters could harvest any polar bear at any time of the year, including family groups (female with cubs) and denning female bears. Particularly around Pangnirtung, harvesting denning females was practiced along the east coast of the Cumberland Peninsula. In the past, polar bear meat and fat were shared among families and used as food for sled dogs, while polar bear hides were used for clothing, as mattresses and for trade. The establishment of harvesting quotas and the development of a cash economy associated with the selling of polar bear hides contributed to significant changes in polar bear harvesting practices in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. Harvesting polar bears transitioned from being sporadic and mainly opportunistic to being seasonal, sex-selective (biased towards the harvest of big adult males or *angujuaq*) and limited by harvest quotas. Contributors from both communities explained that family groups and denning female bears are not harvested anymore.

Today, polar bears are harvested mainly for their meat and hide. Polar bears are a source of country food but also a source of income through the selling of hides and guided sport hunts. In Kimmirut and Pangnirtung, polar bear hides are generally sold or used for clothing, mattresses and blankets. However, many participants commented that the economic value of polar bear hides has declined in recent years, which has created a disincentive to harvest polar bears.

Polar bear hunters from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung reported that the months of March and April are best for harvesting bears because it allows obtaining hides of greater economic value (i.e., thicker, whiter and bigger hides). At that time of year, big male polar bears that mostly live in the pelagic environment are more accessible to harvesters as they come close to the coast to mate and hunt denning ringed seals. In both communities, polar bear hunting is mainly conducted by men, although some women also engage in polar bear hunts. Polar bears are generally butchered by hunters immediately after harvest and stomach contents are routinely inspected. Polar bear hide and meat are brought back to the community, while the organs are left at the kill site. Polar bear meat is shared among community members and the hide is thoroughly cleaned, stretched and dried –mainly by women– prior to being sold or used. Preparing polar bear hides is a work intensive process that women often conduct collaboratively.

Participants from both communities talked about the importance of maintaining polar bear harvest into the future to preserve Inuit ways of life. Polar bear harvesting was reported to contribute to community well-being as it connects Inuit to the land and cultural traditions.

Polar bear ecology and health

Contributors shared their knowledge of polar bear ecology and health, including observations and perspectives on: polar bear abundance and demography; habitat and distribution; diet and prey availability; body condition and general health; diseases and mortality; human-polar bear interactions; and the future of polar bears.

Abundance and demography

In both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung, all interview contributors (n=35) reported a general increase in polar bear abundance observed across their area of observation over their lifetime. In Kimmirut, group interview participants indicated that the polar bear population had increased by an average of approximately 73% (range: 70-75, n=3¹) since the 1970s and 14% (range: 2-25, n=3) since 2005 within their area of observation (Figure B). We note that trend observations documented through group interviews seem to reflect a 'true' increase in the relative abundance of polar bears in the Kimmirut area and not an 'apparent' increase resulting from spatial and temporal changes in land use by participants and/or temporal changes in geographical distribution of polar bears within participants' range of direct observations.

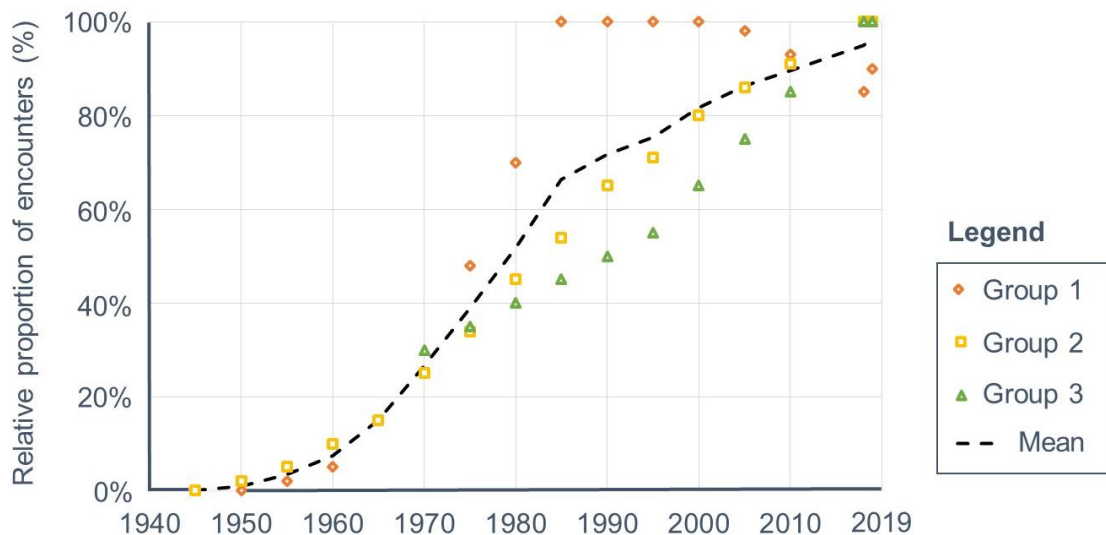


Figure B. Relative proportion of polar bear observations/encounters between 1945 and 2019 as observed by Kimmirut contributors during group interviews. This information can be used as a proxy for polar bear relative abundance in the Kimmirut area. Information presented is based on interviews with three groups of polar bear hunters from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Data points were obtained from drawing and proportional piling exercises; each group of participants reached consensus on the relative proportion of bears they had observed over time. The dashed black line is the mean value.

Nearly all interview contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut reported observing more cubs, females, and/or females with cubs (family groups) over time. In addition, participants from both communities did not report any notable changes in cub productivity and survival and/or family

¹ Throughout the executive summary, when numerical information generated from group interviews is provided we indicate the number of group interviews 'n' from which the information was obtained through participatory exercises. In the context of this summary, n=3 therefore refers to three group interviews organized in Kimmirut in which a total of eight polar bear harvesters participated.

group size over time². For example, in Kimmirut the relative proportion of cubs-of-the-year (COY) and yearlings per female had been constant from the 1990s onward, with two COYs/female and two yearlings/female most frequently observed (83% [range: 74-99, n=3] and 75% [range: 45-95, n=3] of the times, respectively)³. Contributors from both communities noted that female polar bears generally have one or two cubs, and three on rare occasions. They also stated that, over their lifetime of observations on the land, in general females with two cubs were most frequently observed.

Contributors referred to four key indicators which conjointly pointed to an increase in polar bear abundance over time: (1) encountering more bears while travelling on the land, particularly family groups and young or juvenile polar bears; (2) observing more polar bear tracks while travelling on the land; (3) increasing risks of conflicts between humans and polar bears and/or polar posing a greater safety concern today compared to the past; and (4) hunting trips being now shorter in duration and/or hunters no longer needing to travel as far to harvest polar bears. Participants also explained that observed changes in polar bear abundance could be linked to: harvest quotas and sex-selective harvest restrictions; polar bear prey availability; sea ice conditions; and changes in weather and climate. In Kimmirut, recent observations (likely made within the past 10 years) of polar bears that seem “smaller in size” were also reported. While contributors did not directly link these observations with the immigration of polar bears with a different phenotype (smaller size) from adjacent subpopulations into the Kimmirut area, we believe this possible explanation should be considered.

Many contributors highlighted that the observed increase in polar bear abundance has had significant impacts on their life on the land and in communities. Nowadays, Kimmirutmiut and Pangnirtungmiut have to be alert and prepared to encounter polar bears anywhere they go.

Distribution and habitat

Contributors shared detailed observations on the evolution of polar bear distribution over time within their areas of observation. In Kimmirut, group interview results suggested that the distribution of polar bears has not substantially changed since the 1960s with higher numbers of polar bears (about 70-80% of the total) observed along the shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula (from York Sound to Barrier Inlet) and in Markham Bay. Therefore, in the Kimmirut area the probability of polar bear encounters has increased with time –from the 1960s to 2019– mainly as a function of increased polar bear numbers rather than as a result of shifts in polar bear distribution. Around Pangnirtung, individual interview results indicated that polar bears have progressively expanded their range –rather than shifting it– into central and upper Cumberland Sound, closer to the community, since around the 1990s. These observations also point to a ‘true’ increase in polar bear abundance in the Pangnirtung area rather than an apparent increase resulting from a shifting distribution within participants’ area of observation.

Many participants from both communities also described a progressive increase in the number of bears observed within or close to their community starting from around the 2000s. They identified

² In this study, cub productivity (number of polar bears cubs produced in a population) and cub survival (number of polar bears cubs that survive the first year) were estimated using the indicators ‘COY litter size’ (number of COYs per female) and ‘yearling litter size’ (number of yearlings per female) assessed over the same time periods.

³ For polar bears in the Pangnirtung area, this information was not documented as group interviews were not performed in Pangnirtung; however, notable changes in the number of yearlings observed over time did not emerge from individual interviews.

three potential causes that could explain why more polar bears are observed in or near communities: (1) an increase in polar bear abundance (and particularly an increasing number of juveniles that are more inquisitive and still learning how to hunt effectively); (2) polar bears being attracted by the smell of food in communities and at the dump and/or by the smell of carcasses from harvested animals near communities; and (3) changes in sea ice conditions leading to polar bears spending more time on the land and in coastal areas near communities. While any type of polar bear could be seen near or within communities, more inquisitive juveniles –which also tend to be more aggressive than adults– and sometimes mothers with cubs were the types of polar bears mostly observed around communities.

Contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut indicated that polar bears can be encountered on the sea ice, in open water and on the land, depending on the season and prey availability. Many described the presence of sea ice, abundant preys, low anthropogenic disturbance, as well as the presence of both male and female polar bears and bears from different age categories (including young and mature individuals) as characteristics of a ‘good’ polar bear habitat that can sustain a healthy polar bear population. Participants noted seasonal polar bear distribution patterns that were mainly driven by sea ice dynamics and seal availability.

While contributors emphasized the importance of sea ice for polar bears, many reported changes in sea ice quantity and quality observed over recent decades. Changes observed included: thinner sea ice, bigger polynyas, changes in floe edge location (closer to coast), as well as earlier sea ice break-up in and later freeze-up. However, several contributors from both communities mentioned that while sea ice changes may have an effect on polar bears –notably because polar bears use sea ice to hunt seals– *nanuq* is highly adaptable to habitat and sea ice changes.

Lastly, contributors identified known polar bear denning areas and discussed polar bear denning behaviour and habitat. Some participants had directly observed polar bears dens over their lifetime and identified specific polar bear denning areas around Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. One participant from Pangnirtung noted a shift in maternity den location due to melting glaciers.

Diet and prey availability

Contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut described the broad diet of polar bears and identified mainly ringed seal (*natsiq*) and their pups, as well as other types of seals (including bearded seal, harp seal, harbour seal and their pups) to be the main polar bear preys. According to group interview contributors from Kimmirut, seals accounted for 75% (range: 64-90, n=3) of the overall polar bear diet. Additional polar bear preys consistently mentioned were: walrus; ducks and bird eggs; whales (including belugas, narwhals and beached bowhead whales); fish (mainly Arctic char); seaweeds; and plants and berries. Preys or items occasionally mentioned as part of polar bear diet included: other polar bears; anthropogenic waste and man-made items; caribou; dogs; and Arctic foxes. Participants also described how polar bear diet varies throughout the year depending on prey availability, and highlighted seasonality in use of resources. Several contributors from both communities highlighted that *nanuq* is a highly adaptable and opportunistic predator. Many reported that polar bears are effective hunters on sea ice but also on the land and in open water. Contributors from both communities noted that polar bears feeding on anthropogenic waste and other man-made items was a recent phenomenon. Several participants had either directly observed or heard reports of cannibalism from other community members although such observations were overall rare. Some also indicated that more bears were feeding in duck colonies nowadays compared to the past, although this phenomenon was described as a function of the increased number of polar bears rather than as the result of a shift in polar bear diet (polar bears have been known for long time to feed in duck colonies).

Contributors commented on changes in seal abundance and health over their lifetime. In both communities, all participants who commented on ringed seal abundance reported a major decline in ringed seal occurring over the last few decades. For example, contributors reported an 80% (range: 80-80, n=2) decline in ringed seal abundance in the Kimmirut area occurring between the 1960 and 2019. Over the same timeframe, harp seal sightings had increased by approximately 60% (range: 43-75, n=2), while the number of bearded seals remained constant around Kimmirut (Figure C).

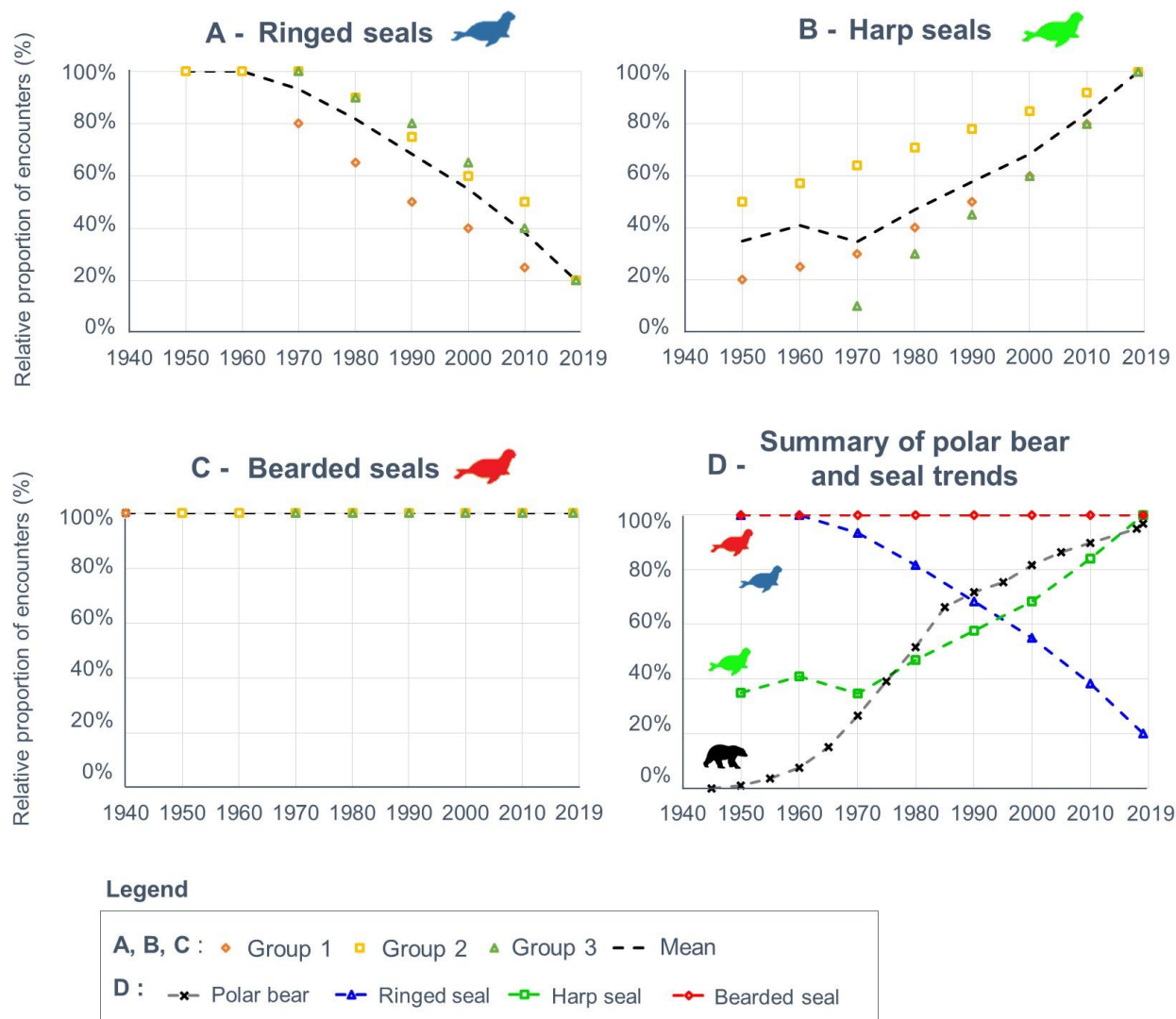


Figure C. Relative proportion of ringed seal (A), harp seal (B) and bearded seal (C) observations/encounters between 1940 and 2019 and summary of polar bear and seal trends (D) as observed by Kimmirut contributors during group interviews. This information can be used as a proxy for relative seal abundance in the Kimmirut area. Information presented is based on interviews with three groups of polar bear hunters from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Data points were obtained from proportional piling exercises; each group of participants reached consensus on the relative proportion of seals they had observed over time for each species. The dashed black line is the mean value. Polar bear trends presented in (D) are the same as those presented in more detail in Figure B.

Contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut offered various explanations as to why they thought ringed seals had declined in recent decades around their community, including: increase in polar bear predation (especially around ringed seals denning areas during the pupping season); increase in local community harvest; ringed seal emigration into other areas (either following preys or due to displacement by other species); increase in maritime transport; lack of sea ice; warmer ocean waters; increase in fox predation; and changing winds. While some participants had not seen any changes in seal health over time, others noted that ringed seal are now skinner and described abnormalities observed in ringed seal fur over the last 20 years, including fur loss or alopecia and molting lasting longer than usual. Alopecia was also observed in bearded seals in the Kimmirut area.

Despite the observed decline in ringed seal abundance and reported changes in seal health, contributors generally indicated that polar bears have broad diets and that they can adapt to changes in prey availability. Many noted that they were not concerned about polar bear persistence related to ringed seal availability. However, it was also acknowledged that if ringed seals –the main resource polar bears rely on throughout the year– remain scarce, polar bears could move to areas where ringed seals and other suitable preys are more abundant.

Body condition and general health

Contributors shared information about what they are looking for (indicators) to assess the health of individual polar bears. Polar bear health indicators discussed included: polar bear body condition (fatness); behaviour and movement; fur colour and condition; meat and fat colour, smell and taste; stomach contents; teeth condition; and appearance of internal organs. While participants reported assessing the health of individual polar bears holistically, employing multiple indicators, they also highlighted that body condition (fatness) was the indicator that most reflected the overall health of individual polar bears as it correlated with many other indicators. Participants assessed the health of individual polar bears both before harvesting (while observing live polar bears on the land) and after harvesting (during butchering, hide processing and consumption of harvested bears). Interestingly, contributors also reported using direct and indirect indicators (or metrics) for polar bear health assessment, particularly to determine the fatness of individual animals. Some of these indicators (e.g., degree of consumption of seal carcasses) may be useful as early warning signs of impending changes in polar bear health at the population level. Assessing the health status of individual polar bears was important to participants as it guided their polar bear harvesting and consumption decisions. Many noted that they preferred harvesting and consuming ‘healthy’ polar bears that provide good quality meat and hides.

Contributors from both communities also shared their observations of temporal changes in polar bear body condition and general health. During individual interviews held in Kimmirut, contributors shared multiple perspectives on changes in polar bear fatness (body condition) observed over time. A majority of contributors reported observing more polar bears in poorer body condition compared to the past with some of them interpreting this as a general decline in polar bear body condition over time within the Kimmirut area. However, some expressed the view that polar bear body condition had remained stable or were uncertain about any change in polar bear body condition over time. Group interviews indicated that the increased number of ‘skinny bears’ reported by individual interviewees were likely a function of the population increase rather than the result of a substantial change in polar bear body condition status over time. Overall, proportions of polar bears observed per body condition type have remained similar since the 1990s (Figure D). However, in more recent years (2016-2019 period) group interview results also suggested a minor shift in polar bear body condition from the ‘fat’ to the ‘average’ type compared

to levels measured in previous time periods (Figure D). Importantly, most polar bears being observed today in the Kimmirut area remain in 'good' body condition and 'healthy': 94% (range: 92-96, n=3) of polar bears observed by group interview contributors over the 2016-2019 period exhibited 'healthy' fat levels ('average', 'fat' or 'very fat' body condition) and 91% (range: 85-95, n=3) of polar bears observed over the same time period were described as overall 'healthy' (Figures D and E). Furthermore, group interview results indicated that these proportions have either remained stable or slightly declined since the 1990s (Figures D and E).

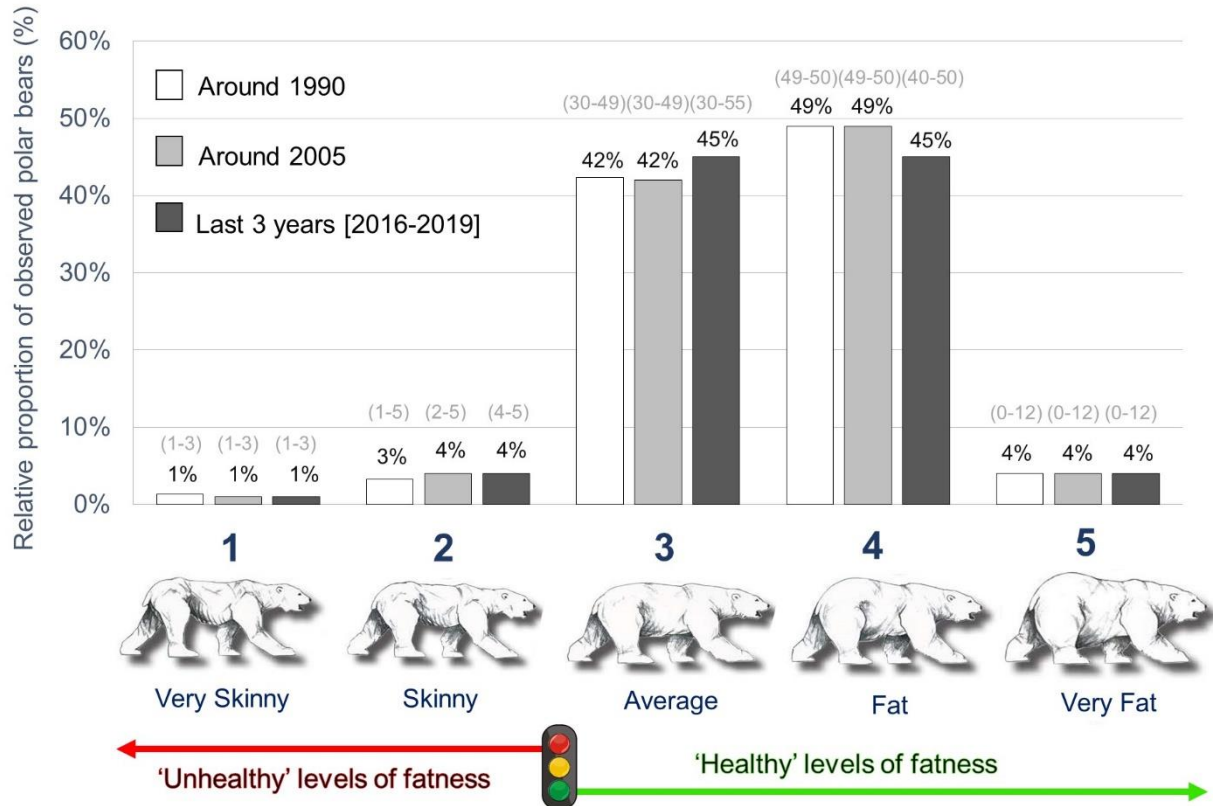


Figure D. Relative proportion of polar bears observed per body condition type (1 to 5 scale developed by Stirling et al. 2008) over three time periods (around 1990, around 2005, and last three years [2016 to 2019]) in the Kimmirut area. Percentages were derived from proportional piling exercises with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Mean values are presented over each bar with respective value ranges provided in brackets in light grey. Polar bear categories and drawings of body types are sourced from the Polar Bear Body Condition Index Card used by the Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment (Government of Nunavut, n.d.). All group interview contributors from Kimmirut indicated that polar bears exhibiting body condition types 1 and 2 were considered 'unhealthy' and that bears with body condition types 3, 4 and 5 were 'healthy' polar bears.

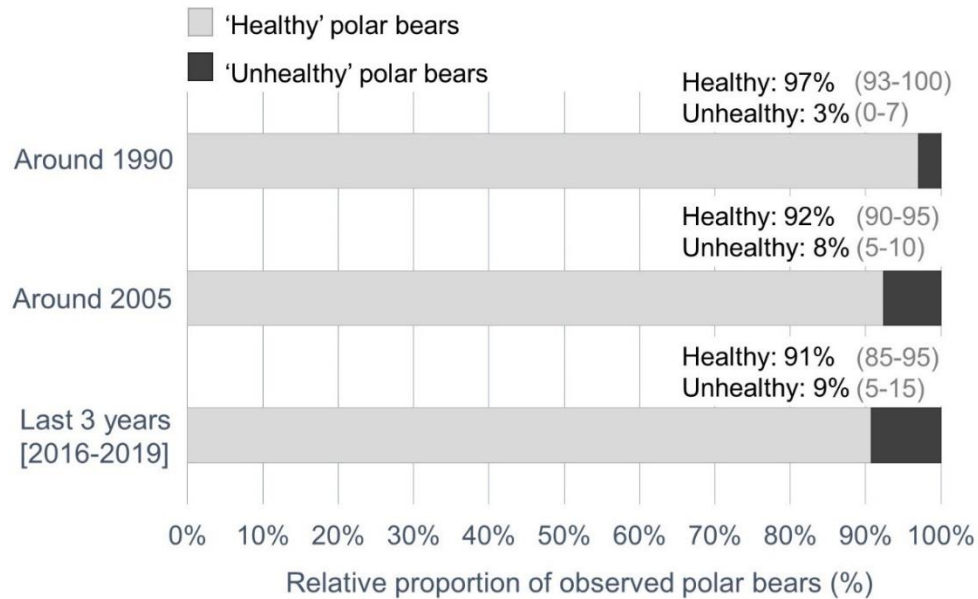


Figure E. Relative proportion of 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy' polar bears observed in the Kimmirut area over three time periods (around 1990, around 2005, and last three years [2016 to 2019]). Percentages were derived from proportional piling exercises with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Through discussion, each group reached consensus on the relative proportion of 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy' polar bears for each time period. Mean values are presented over each bar with respective value ranges provided in brackets in light grey.

In Pangnirtung, individual interview participants shared similar perspectives as individual interview contributors from Kimmirut. The majority of individual interviewees reported observing more polar bears in poorer body condition compared to the past with some of them interpreting this as a general decline in polar bear body condition over time within the Pangnirtung area, with earlier signs of change dating back to the 1980s but more consistently observed starting from the late 2000s. However, similarly to Kimmirut, some expressed the view that polar bear body condition had remained stable or were uncertain about any change in polar bear body condition over time. Among participants who had noticed a decline in polar bear body condition over time, some emphasized that many healthy and fat polar bears were observed today. When discussing overall polar bear health (considering polar bear fatness along with other health indicators), five contributors mentioned that polar bears observed around Pangnirtung were generally 'healthy' and three noted that bears are not as 'healthy' as they used to be. Based on individual interview results alone, we believe that changes in polar bear body condition and overall health status in the Pangnirtung area may follow a similar pattern to the one observed in Kimmirut. At the time interviews were conducted, a recent decline in polar bear body condition and overall health had been observed by some contributors; however, the magnitude of this decline may not have been substantial given that such observations were not unanimous. Group interviews would be required to clarify these uncertainties, including identifying the magnitude of changes in polar bear body condition and general health status in the Pangnirtung area.

Participants from both communities who had observed a decline in polar bear fatness over time mostly attributed this change to: an increase in polar bear abundance combined with a decline in ringed seal abundance leading to increased competition over preys; and changes in sea ice cover reducing polar bear access to seals.

Mortality, diseases and abnormalities

Contributors discussed polar bear non-hunting related mortality, disease and other abnormalities. Overall, participants considered these events to be rare or uncommon and offered detailed observations about what they saw, including where, when and type of animals involved.

In both communities, observations of polar bear mortality due to starvation or other natural causes were rare with five events observed around Kimmirut and 12 events around Pangnirtung. Mortalities suggestive of disease outbreaks were not reported. In fact, most participants had never directly observed mortality due to causes other than harvesting. Also, participants who recalled observing very skinny or starving polar bears noted that such observations were uncommon.

Similarly, conspicuous disease and sickness or signs of abnormalities were uncommon observations in polar bears with 16 contributors (n=8 in Kimmirut; n=8 in Pangnirtung) occasionally reporting: signs of fur loss or alopecia; limping or lame individuals; greenish lumps in the subcutaneous fat and in the meat; white spots in the liver; brown spots in subcutaneous fat; dull and soft claws; and/or posterior paralysis. Most contributors observed those as single events, and only five contributors had seen or heard of a few polar bears displaying a specific lesion/syndrome. Regarding observations of fur loss, wide areas of alopecia or thinning of the fur were only observed on the neck and shoulders (n=10) or on the side of the body (n=1). Gross appearance of the lesions was similar to signs of alopecia described in polar bears in southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska. Earliest observations of alopecia dated back to the 1980s in Pangnirtung and the 1990s in Kimmirut, while most recent ones were made in 2013-2015 in Pangnirtung and around 2010 in Kimmirut. Although these observations were sporadic, both female, male, adult and young polar bears were observed with alopecia. In some instances, hair loss was associated with poor body condition, but not always. Finally, ectoparasites were not observed on polar bear hides.

When invited to discuss other unusual observations, some participants also described hunting wounds and ice-related injuries, abnormal skin pigmentation and a three-legged polar bear. Others reported harvesting polar bears with lip tattoos and ear tags as abnormal events. In Kimmirut, one contributor had observed a polar bear with half-white and half-black fur, which he described as a hybrid bear. Lastly, seven contributors reported finding anthropogenic waste and/or plastics in the stomach of some harvested bears in recent years.

Human-polar bear interactions

Many participants from both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung described progressively more frequent human-polar bear interactions and encounters. They identified four main factors which could explain why human-polar bear interactions have increased in recent decades: an increase in polar bear abundance; greater distances traveled by community members today which increases their chances of encountering polar bears; more intensive use of coastal areas (where communities are located) by polar bears as a result of changing sea ice conditions; and change in polar bear behaviour. Several contributors from both communities indicated that polar bears nowadays tend to be less fearful and more aggressive towards humans than they were in the past, and reported increased damage to cabins, food caches and property caused by polar bears.

Importantly, all individual interview contributors (n=27) highlighted their concern for public safety resulting from increased human-polar bear encounters and more frequent bear aggressions. Many shared the view that polar bears posed a greater public safety concern today compared to the past and pointed to increasing risks of conflicts between humans and polar bears. Polar bears killed in defense of life and property were described as a recent phenomenon around both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut.

Participants also described how Pangnirtungmiut and Kimmirutmiut are now finding ways to adapt to increased polar bear presence by putting in place strategies to mitigate risks of dangerous interactions with polar bears and minimize damage to property. Some explained that, starting around the 2000s, residents from both communities have started to use more fixed cabins instead of tents when camping on the land. Some contributors emphasized the importance of teaching younger generations about how to coexist safely with polar bears.

Future of polar bears

Many participants indicated it was difficult to or would not comment on the future of polar bears explaining that one cannot predict the future. Participants who discussed what the future may look like for polar bears were not generally concerned about the ability of polar bears to adapt to changing environmental conditions associated with climate change. However, one contributor explained that while polar bears were highly adaptable, they may face difficulties finding suitable denning habitat if snow cover continues to decrease. Another noted that polar bear hide quality could be impacted in the future by changes in sea ice availability. Some also shared the view that a continued increase in polar bear abundance will pose an increasing threat to the safety of community members. Several contributors emphasized the importance of healthy polar bear populations for future generations and maintaining Inuit cultural traditions.

Management and stewardship

Contributors shared their perspectives and concerns related to polar bear management and stewardship. They also expressed their views on existing communications between polar bear researchers and Nunavummiut, and suggested ways to improve knowledge exchange and foster trust building between Nunavummiut, polar bear researchers and wildlife managers.

Public safety concerns

Concerns over public safety emerged strongly during interviews. When prompted to discuss their concerns about polar bear management, all individual interview contributors (n=27) highlighted that they were especially concerned about increasing polar bear aggressions and human-polar bear encounters that posed a threat to human safety.

Harvest quotas and hunting regulations

Contributors shared perspectives on harvest quotas and hunting regulations primarily in the context of their concerns over public safety. Some explained that harvest quotas and hunting regulations should better accommodate increasing human-polar bear interactions and associated safety concerns. Several participants from both communities expressed the view that polar bear harvesting quotas should be increased to address concerns over public safety.

Many contributors also shared the view that polar bears killed in defense of life and property should not be subtracted from community harvesting quotas, and some suggested that hides from polar bears harvested in self-defence be returned to hunters. Two contributors from Kimmirut suggested extending the current polar bear harvest season into the summer, when human-bear

interactions are likely. Some participants also expressed a desire to harvest polar bear cubs and suggested to increase the amount of females harvested⁴.

Many contributors from both communities also noted that current polar bear management practices differed from how Inuit would traditionally manage their interactions with polar bears. Some shared the view that Inuit should have greater control over polar bear harvest management in order to ensure public safety. Participants emphasized the importance of IQ in polar bear management and stewardship.

Communications

Many participants from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut expressed their interest in scientific research conducted on polar bears. However, while acknowledging communication efforts made by polar bear researchers to date, several participants from both communities stated that they would like to receive or have access to more information about scientific research conducted on polar bears. Some mentioned that they were particularly interested in obtaining scientific information on the health, abundance and distribution of polar bears.

Several contributors from both communities highlighted that polar bear research communication with community members could be improved. Perspectives shared by participants highlighted that improving polar bear research communication was particularly important given the presence of some community mistrust towards scientific research methods and polar bear researchers, and the existence of some divergences between scientific and Inuit observations. Participants emphasized that relationship building and creating opportunities for dialogue between science and IQ was key to improving knowledge exchange and fostering trust building between Nunavummiut and polar bear researchers.

Conclusion

This report explored the detailed historic and contemporary knowledge held by Inuit contributors about polar bear ecology and health, as well as the importance of *nanuq* to Nunavut Inuit, and Inuit perspectives on polar bear management and stewardship.

Overall, interview contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut reported that, within their area of observation, the local polar bear population is today generally healthy. Observations suggestive of a healthy polar bear population included: an increase in polar bear abundance systematically reported by participants over their lifetime, no change in cub productivity and survival over time, females with two cubs being most frequently observed, and rare reports of polar bear disease or non-hunting related mortality. However, in recent years, contributors pointed to some subtle changes –which could be early signs of change– in polar bear health, including a slight decline in polar bear fatness and overall health noted by some participants and occasional reports of hair loss (alopecia). Participants had also observed changes in polar bear prey availability and habitat condition over time, including changes in sea ice quality and quantity and a major decline in the abundance of ringed seals (the main polar bear prey) observed around both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung. At the time interviews were conducted, such changes were not reflected in observations related to cub productivity, which has remained stable according to contributors from both communities. Overall, participants from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut did not report any notable

⁴ In Nunavut, the polar bear harvest sex ratio was adjusted in 2019 from two males harvested for every female (2:1) to up to one female for every male (up to 1:1 system) –male and female polar bears can now be harvested in any proportion up to a maximum of 50% females (Government of Nunavut 2019). Interviews were conducted before this change was implemented.

changes in cub productivity and survival and/or family group size over time. Regular documentation of Inuit observations will be required to understand how polar bear population health, including body condition status and population demographics, evolve over time.

Importantly, throughout the project contributors emphasized that *nanuq* is a resilient and opportunistic predator that is highly adaptable to changes in prey availability and habitat conditions.

In addition, study results highlighted public safety concerns arising from increased human-polar bear interactions and encounters, and suggested that polar bear management today must find ways to address public safety concerns while ensuring that polar bears persist into the future and remain available for future generations.

Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit highlights the importance of maintaining respectful relationships between humans and polar bears and reminds us of our collective responsibility towards *nanuq* and future generations. We therefore hope this work can serve to inform polar bear management and decision-making, as well as ongoing and future community-based monitoring and research efforts in Nunavut and beyond.



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INTRODUCTION

Nanuq (polar bear; *Ursus maritimus*) is a key species of the Arctic ecosystem and plays an important role in Inuit culture. Understanding the health status –including abundance– of polar bear populations is critical for effective polar bear management. In Nunavut, sustainable polar bears harvest quotas are established using both Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (Inuit traditional knowledge) and Western scientific information (Government of Nunavut 2019). Under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, Inuit play an active role in polar bear co-management. Nunavut Inuit have accumulated a vast knowledge about polar bears through extensive observation of their environment and harvesting activities.

The *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit study on the health of the Davis Strait polar bear population* was a collaborative research project between the Government of Canada (Environment and Climate Change Canada and Polar Knowledge Canada), the Government of Nunavut (Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment), and local Hunters and Trappers Organizations (HTOs) from the communities of Pangnirtung, Kimmirut and Iqaluit in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut.

This project aimed at gathering Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit on the health of polar bears around the communities of Kimmirut, Pangnirtung and Iqaluit to support management decisions and strategies for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation. The communities of Kimmirut, Pangnirtung and Iqaluit are the three Nunavut communities located within or near the boundaries of the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit and, as such, have assigned harvesting quotas for that specific subpopulation (Figure 1).

Specific project objectives were:

- (1) to gather and document Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit from Nunavut Inuit on polar bear health, abundance and distribution for the Davis Strait polar bear population to support decision-making and co-management;
- (2) to compare, contrast and weave together Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and Western scientific knowledge available for the Davis Strait polar bear population and discuss implications for polar bear research, monitoring, and co-management; and
- (3) to enhance community capacity for polar bear and wildlife research and monitoring in Nunavut.

As part of this study, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit related to polar bear cultural importance, ecology, and management were documented through a series of individual and group interviews with 35 polar bear experts from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut.

The purpose of this report to communities and project partners is to summarize the knowledge that was shared by Inuit project contributors during interviews, and discuss implications for ongoing and future polar bear research, monitoring and co-management. We hope that this report can contribute to sharing the extensive and holistic knowledge held by Nunavummiut about polar bears and, in doing so, honour the unique relationship between Inuit and polar bears. Through this work, we wish to support the meaningful inclusion of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit in polar bear research, monitoring and co-management.

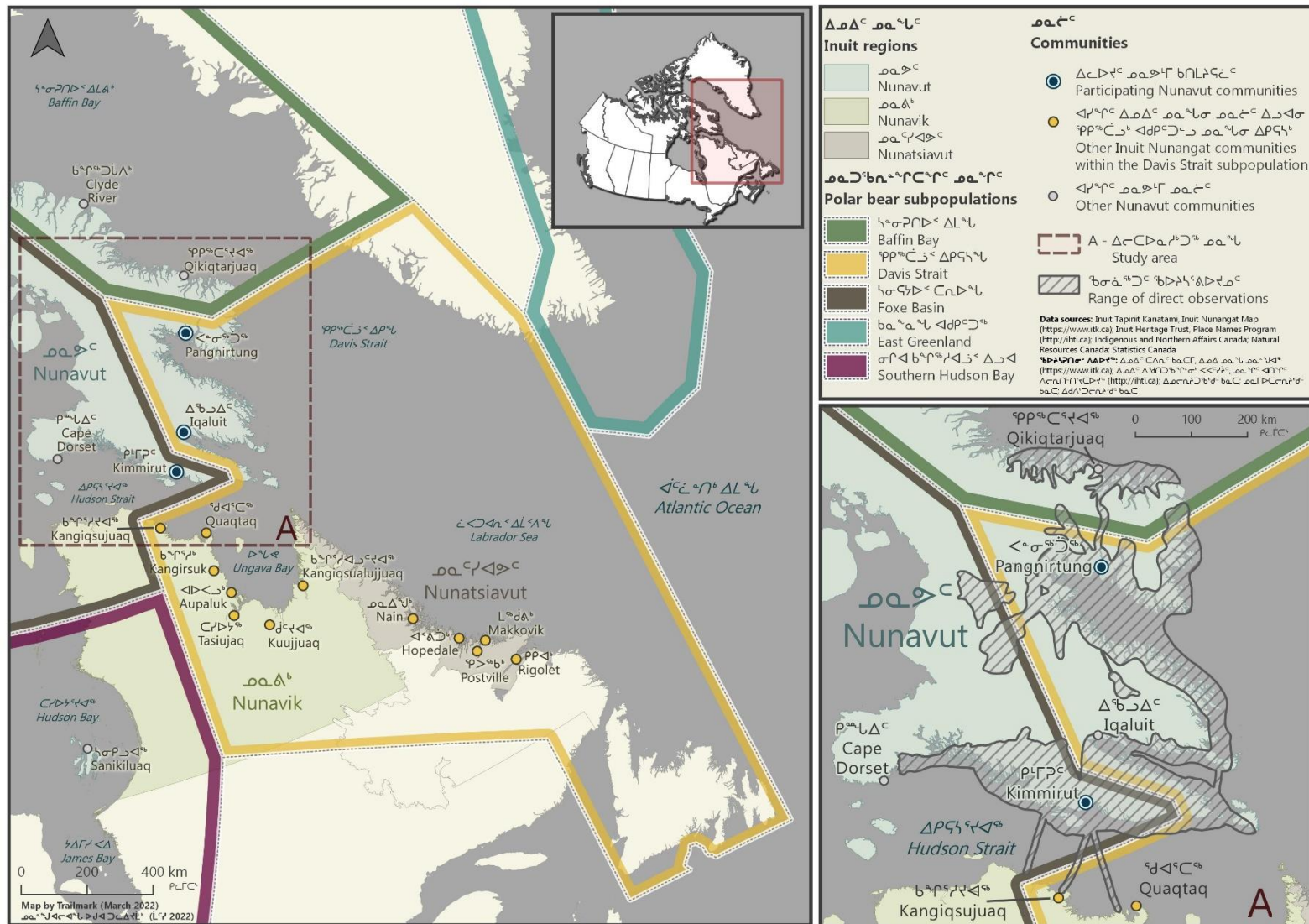


Figure 1. Study area (map A) within the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit. In the legend, ‘range of direct observations’ (dashed area in map A) refers to the geographic extent of the ecological observations made by participants interviewed in this study.

METHODS

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit

In Nunavut, Inuit traditional knowledge is referred to as Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ). IQ reflects Inuit extensive knowledge and experience passed from generation to generation (Wenzel 2004; Tester and Irniq 2008). It incorporates cultural values, practices, ethics, and worldviews, and has been recognized in co-management: “[IQ] is an ethical framework and detailed plan for having a good life. It is a way of thinking, connecting all aspects of life in a coherent way” (Karetak et al. 2017:3). IQ can be defined as “the Inuit way of doing things, and includes the past, present and future knowledge of Inuit society” (Tester and Irniq 2008:49). IQ includes ethical principles (*maligarjuat*; literally “big things that must be followed”). The four main *maligarjuat* are: (1) working for the common good; (2) living in respectful relationships with every person and thing that one encounters; (3) maintaining harmony and balance; and (4) planning and preparing for the future (Karetak et al. 2017:3).

In this report, we employ the term Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit to refer to Inuit knowledge and perspectives documented through this project, as well as to the principles that guided the research process.

Project team and approach

Our project team included: researchers from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), Polar Knowledge Canada (POLAR), and the Government of Nunavut (GN); community researchers from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung; HTO managers and board members from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut; and a consultant (see Appendix 2 for list of team members).

We employed a community-based participatory research approach to document Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit on polar bear health and management (Grimwood et al. 2012; Tomaselli et al. 2018). In this study, polar bear health was considered broadly and holistically at the individual, population and ecosystem levels (Patyk et al. 2015). We viewed polar bear health as resulting from interacting biological, social and environmental determinants that promote and maintain health as a capacity to cope with change over time (Stephen 2014). We therefore assessed polar bear health considering multiple parameters, such as population trends and demographics, body condition, behaviour, habitat condition, prey availability, in addition to mortality and disease.

Our project comprised four main phases (Figure 2). Throughout the research process, progress meetings between researchers and board members and managers of the Mayukalik (Kimmirut), Pangnirtung and Amarok (Iqaluit) HTOs were organized to establish project objectives and direction, share project updates, and ensure project co-development among partners.



Figure 2. Schematic of project phases and associated timeline.

Project planning

This project was initiated in fall 2016 when Markus Dyck (polar bear biologist, GN) met with HTO board members and managers in Kimmirut, Pangnirtung and Iqaluit to assess interest in this project and ask for HTO advice and support. Following these community visits, the Mayukalik (Kimmirut), Pangnirtung and Amarok (Iqaluit) HTOs all expressed their formal support to this study. In collaboration with project partners, Dominique Henri (researcher, ECCC), Matilde Tomaselli (researcher, POLAR) and Markus Dyck then proceeded to secure funding required to conduct the project.

In 2018, researchers worked together with the HTOs to establish project objectives and outline the role of the HTOs in implementing research and supporting activities taking place in communities. In November 2018, our project team conducted a second round of community visits (led by Matilde Tomaselli) to incorporate HTO guidance and feedback into project planning and design. Both the Pangnirtung HTO and the Mayukalik HTO agreed to organize interviews with polar bear experts in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, respectively; the Amarok HTO requested more time to formalize their participation in the project. A draft interview guide was provided to the HTOs and input from HTO board members was incorporated to produce a final interview guide.

In April 2019, a follow-up meeting was organized between Matilde Tomaselli and the Amarok HTO to discuss project implementation in Iqaluit. At the time, the HTO could not provide a definite response about its participation in organizing interviews. In early 2020, due to time and logistical constraints, researchers from the project team decided not to conduct interviews in Iqaluit for the time being and to keep the Amarok HTO informed about research results and progress given that the HTO had initially supported the project in 2016.

Gathering Inuit Qaujimaqatunqangit

Between March and December 2019, individual and group interviews were conducted in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung with a total of 35 Inuit participants identified as local ‘polar bear experts’; that is, persons recognized by their peers as knowledgeable about polar bears (Ferguson and Messier 1997).

Individual interviews were designed to gather a vast range of knowledge and observations on polar bears that spanned from their cultural importance to human-polar bear interactions, historic and contemporary observations related to polar bear health, and finally community concerns and management considerations. Individual interviews were followed by group interviews that were designed to validate and refine the information previously documented through individual interviews. Group interviews also aimed to collect additional quantitative information on polar bear health using targeted participatory exercises.

Polar bear experts interviewed included local residents who had experience harvesting polar bears (generally men), processing and cleaning polar bear hides (generally women), or otherwise significant experience on the land (e.g., park wardens, outfitters, harvesters, soapstone miners). Interview contributors included 21 Kimmirutmiut (seven women and 14 men) and 14 Pangnirtungmiut (four women and ten men) ranging in age from their early 40s to early 80s (see Appendix 1 for biographies). Eleven Elders were interviewed in Kimmirut and 13 in Pangnirtung.

In each community, polar bear experts were identified by the local HTO and community researchers (purposeful sampling) and by asking interview contributors to recommend other potential participants (snowball sampling; Patton 2005). We stopped recruiting participants when no new information was documented following a thematic saturation approach (Saunders et al. 2018).

All interviews were conducted by Matilde Tomaselli and facilitated by community researchers: Naomi Akavak and Pudloo Pitsiulak in Kimmirut; and Rosemary Kanayuk and Doreen Kanayuk in Pangnirtung. Matilde Tomaselli provided informal training to community researchers on qualitative research methods prior to performing interviews and throughout the process. Community researchers offered guidance on how to conduct research in their community.

Prior to interviews, we used invitation letters to explain project scope to participants. All contributors provided their consent to be interviewed, and specified how they wanted their information to be used and shared (see Appendix 3 for invitation letter and consent form). Participants who agreed to be interviewed could choose to remain anonymous; they could also decide if they wanted their information archived in the community for future use (heritage, education or research purposes).

All interviews were conducted in participants' language of choice (Inuktitut or English). Community researchers were present during all interviews to translate on an as-needed basis. Interview contributors were remunerated for their time at a rate set by the HTOs. Interviews lasted on average 2.5 hours. In Pangnirtung, all interviews were conducted at the HTO. In Kimmirut, interviews scheduled outside regular working hours were performed at the Mayukalik HTO; they were otherwise carried out in rooms made available by the Qaqqalik School.

Interviews were conducted in two stages. First, individual interviews were carried in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung in March and April 2019. Then, group interviews were conducted in Kimmirut only in November and December 2019. Our project team had planned to conduct group interviews in Pangnirtung in March 2020. Unfortunately, these group interviews had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions.

Individual interviews

Between March and April 2019, individual interviews were conducted in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung with a total of 27 Inuit polar bear experts; 13 contributors were interviewed in Kimmirut and 14 in Pangnirtung.

Individual interviews followed a semi-directed format, allowing for open and flexible conversations (Huntington 1998). During interviews, an interview guide comprising 44 questions was employed to support discussions (see Appendix 4). Community researchers translated the interview guide into the local Inuktitut dialect and worked to clarify questions and concepts as needed during

interviews. Interview questions were piloted once and jointly revised by Matilde Tomaselli and community researchers to improve clarity (Agee 2009).

We customized interviews to capitalize on the experience of participants who could add or skip topics depending on their expertise. General themes discussed included: (1) participant life history and land use; (2) experience with polar bear hunting, butchering and/or hide processing; (3) knowledge related to polar bear ecology and health; (4) perspectives on polar bear management and stewardship; and (5) concerns about polar bears. Under the polar bear ecology and health theme, we discussed topics that allowed a comprehensive exploration of polar bear health from an Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit perspective, including: polar bear distribution and abundance (historic and contemporary), cub productivity and survival, body condition (fatness), disease and mortality events, behaviour, diet, denning, habitat, as well as changes observed over time. Indicators employed by Inuit polar bear experts to assess polar bear health were also specifically discussed. Interviews were audio recorded with permission, and biogeographical information was collected on topographic maps using mapping conventions described in Tobias (2009). Maps were also used to determine the geographic range of direct observations of each contributor (such range comprised the areas and routes that contributors had regularly traveled through over their lifetime), as well as to support and contextualize their narratives by representing relevant observations spatially (e.g., polar bear distribution, sightings of dens, sightings of sick polar bears).

Group interviews

Group interviews were organized after we completed a preliminary analysis of individual interviews (see 'Analysis and validation' section below). Group interviews were conducted in Kimmirut in November and December 2019. A total of 15 participants took part in these interviews, including seven contributors who had been previously interviewed individually and eight new project participants. New participants were included in group interviews as a way to increase the quality and validity of our results. We divided participants into four different groups based on their age, level and type of experience with polar bears, and hunting area of preference when applicable. We also took into account whether each participant was comfortable to share their knowledge with other selected contributors and accommodated participant requests in this regard. Three groups were composed of polar bear hunters (men) and one group included women specialized in polar bear hide processing and cleaning. In some cases, groups met during multiple sessions over a two-week period in order to cover the full extent of the interview.

The objective of group interviews were twofold: (1) validate and further refine information summarized from individual interviews; and (2) gather quantitative information on polar bear relative abundance, distribution, demography, diet, health status and body condition (fatness). Group interviews were designed to capitalize on the specific expertise of participants. For example, women specialized in polar bear hide processing and cleaning were asked questions that allowed to share their extensive experience with polar bear hides; while polar bear hunters were asked questions that relied on their direct observations of polar bears on the land. Moreover, participatory exercises were designed using specific timescales and categories (e.g., when exploring demography and body condition status) informed by the scientific data available for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation so as to maximize complementarity and comparability of the quantitative information generated through this study.

Matilde Tomaselli led group interviews in Kimmirut with the assistance of Dominique Henri and community researchers (Naomi Akavak and Pudloo Pitsiulak). Group interview discussions were

guided by the use of a number of visual and interactive participatory exercises, including: mapping, temporal line, drawing, proportional piling and their combination (see Appendix 5 for more information about participatory exercises). These exercises were developed by adapting methods described by Tomaselli and colleagues (2018) and Mariner and Paskin (2000). Notes and pictures were taken with permission during group discussions.

Table 1. Themes discussed and associated participatory exercises employed during group interviews conducted in Kimmirut.

Themes	Associated participatory exercises
Participants' range of direct observations and travel intensity	Mapping exercises
Polar bear relative distribution	Proportional piling & mapping exercises
Polar bear relative abundance	Proportional piling, drawing & temporal line exercises
Seal relative abundance	Proportional piling, drawing & temporal line exercises
Polar bear cub productivity and survival	Proportional piling exercises with visual cues
Polar bear body condition (fatness)	Proportional piling exercises with visual cues
Polar bear general health	Proportional piling exercises
Polar bear diet	Proportional piling exercises & seasonal calendar with visual cues

Analysis and validation

Upon individual interview completion in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, Matilde Tomaselli, Pamela Wong (consultant, Trailmark Systems) and Dominique Henri selectively transcribed audio recordings and produced a detailed interview summary for each interview. Summaries covered all themes discussed and included representative quotes. Interview summaries were initially coded and analyzed independently by both Matilde Tomaselli and Dominique Henri. Dominique Henri finalized the coding of interview summaries using NVivo Pro 11 (Version 11, 2012) and completed their analysis using thematic content analysis (Creswell 2009).

Matilde Tomaselli analyzed group interview results based on field notes and the outcome of each exercise performed. Quantitative information generated during group interviews was analyzed using Excel. Descriptive statistics (i.e., means and value ranges, specifying minimum and maximum values) were used to summarize quantitative information.

The softwares QGIS 10.2 and ArcGIS 10.2 were used to transpose, visualize and analyze georeferenced information gathered during individual and group interviews. Heath maps representing travel intensity of contributors within their range of direct observations (Figure 7) and the distribution of polar bears (Figure 13) were generated using the kernel density estimation method.

Validation of preliminary results

In Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, preliminary results were reported to all study participants for validation. From September to December 2021, community researchers and HTO managers from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut led results validation in their respective community. Government researchers were unable to travel to communities in person to validate preliminary results due to

the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions. In both communities, a draft project report (available in both English and Inuktitut) was shared with all available interview contributors, as well as with HTO board members. Contributors were specifically invited to review and approve the quotes presented in this report. In Kimmirut, 15 out of 21 project contributors participated to results validation. In Pangnirtung, all 14 contributors were involved. Feedback and comments received were addressed and incorporated into our final analyses.

Limitations

Some potential limitations applicable to this study should be acknowledged. First, the information collected through interviews represented a partial sample of all knowledge held about polar bears in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. In addition, responses received during interviews might have been influenced by the level of familiarity of the interviewer with the local culture, the personality and gender of the interviewer, the lack of recall of specific factual information by interviewees, and some loss of information through the translation process. However, we felt that having community researchers facilitate interviews contributed to making interviewees feel comfortable sharing their knowledge, and ensured that interviews were conducted in a culturally appropriate manner following local protocols.

Ensuring quality and reliability of results

Over the course of this study, we implemented various strategies to ensure that our results were robust and trustworthy. Given that Inuit observations and perceptions are rooted in and directly influenced by land use over time, we ensured to capitalize on the experience and knowledge of contributors by conducting detailed individual life histories and mapping of land use over time and space, and adjusting our interview questions and methods accordingly. Additionally, we relied on 'triangulation' which is a process of verification that increases validity by incorporating several viewpoints and methods (Yeasmin and Rahman 2012). We implemented several triangulation techniques to increase the quality and reliability of our analyses. For example, the robustness of our findings was increased by adding new participants at the group interview stage and by combining individual and group interviews results on similar themes. We also produced detailed interview summaries that were independently analyzed by two researchers to increase the reliability of our interpretations. In addition, we consulted polar bear harvest data from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung available from the Government of Nunavut, as well as documentation available at local HTOs and from local Conservation Officers for additional context in which to ground our analyses. Lastly, the validation of preliminary and final results by interview contributors and HTO board members was key to ensure that our analyses were robust and reliable.

Results sharing

Our project team ensured that Inuit Qaujimagatunqangit documented through this project was shared back to participating communities. Prior to public release, this report was shared with all project partners and interview contributors. In Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, community researchers and HTO managers led report distribution and dissemination of project results in their respective community. In Iqaluit, researchers shared this report with the Amarok HTO.

School engagement

This project was presented in local high schools as a way to foster intergenerational knowledge sharing and enhance community engagement in polar bear research. In Kimmirut, community researcher Pudloo Pitsiulak, Elder Eliyah Padluq and researcher Matilde Tomaselli co-presented

the project to a group of high school students from the Qaqqalik School. In Pangnirtung, Rosemary Kanayuk and Doreen Kanayuk presented the project at the Attagoyuk High School. Rosemary and Doreen Kanayuk had both graduated from the Attagoyuk High School and were encouraged to elaborate on what it meant for them to be part of this project and what they learned throughout the process.

Ethics

This study was performed under the Social Research License N 01 028 18 issued by the Nunavut Innovation and Research Institute. It followed ethical guidelines for working with Inuit communities (ITK 2018; ITK and NRI 2007; Owljoot 2008), as well as guidelines from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for conducting research involving Indigenous peoples in Canada (2018).

Project partners established a research agreement outlining how project data would be stored, accessed and archived according to the Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP®) principles which support Indigenous data sovereignty (First Nation Information Governance Centre 2014). OCAP® is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (www.FNIGC.ca/OCAP). All project data were archived at the Pangnirtung and Mayukalik HTOs and can be accessed with permission by third parties for non-commercial purposes. Should any person or organization wish to access archived project data, they must first provide written justification to the Mayukalik and Pangnirtung HTOs, receive their approval, and agree to terms of use outlined by the HTOs.



COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Kimmirut

Kimmirut (62°53'N; 69°53'W) is located on Baffin Island's Meta Incognita on the northern shore of the Hudson Strait in the Qikiqtaaluk region of Nunavut (Figure 1). Kimmirut (formerly known as Lake Harbour) means "heel", and refers to a rocky outcrop across the harbour from the community. Archeological evidence shows that the vicinity of Kimmirut has been a site for human settlement for over 4,000 years. Since establishment of a whaling station in 1900, there has been continuous occupation of the community site. By 1909, the Anglican Church had set up a mission in the community. A Hudson Bay Company trading post was established in 1911, followed by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) detachment in 1927 (CNWTEDA, n.d.). Between the 1940s and the 1960s, the federal government began supplying healthcare and establishing a schooling and administrative presence, encouraging families living in camps to move into the community. Settlement of Inuit from surrounding camp locations intensified in the late 1960s following an epidemic that killed most of the dog population. As of 2016, Kimmirut population was 389 (93% Inuit; Statistics Canada 2017a). Today, Kimmirutmiut maintain a lifestyle connected to the seasonal harvest of wildlife. Carving, outfitting and guiding through the nearby Katinnilik Territorial Park also provide a significant contribution to the local economy.



Wildlife harvesting

Based on interviews with Kimmirut residents and discussions with community researchers and HTO board members and manager, we constructed a calendar of seasonal harvesting activities in which Kimmirutmiut engaged in throughout the year (Figure 3). This calendar provides further context to understand the type of harvesting activities undertaken in the community and the wildlife present around Kimmirut.

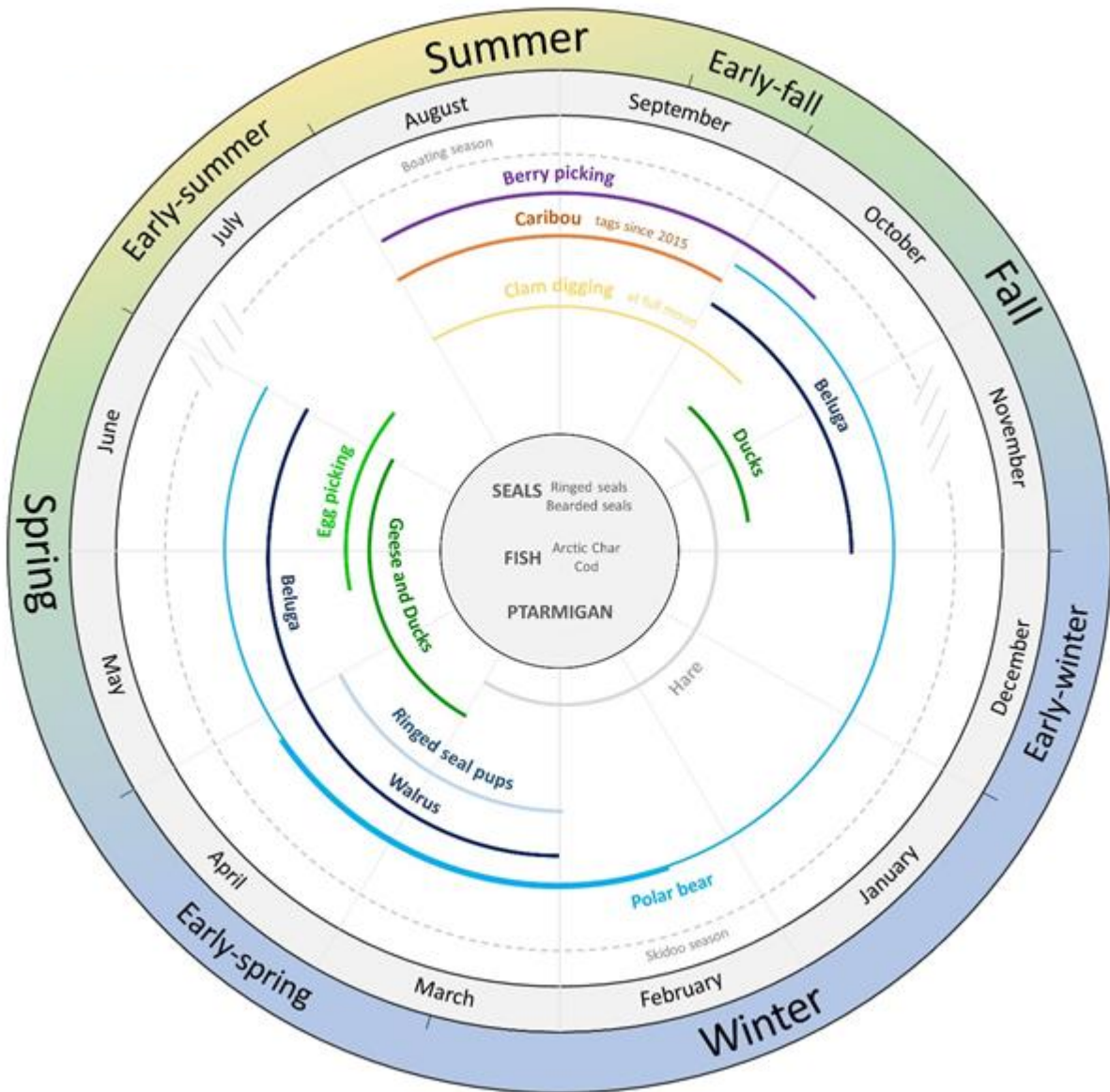


Figure 3. Seasonal harvesting activities in Kimmirut. Overview of harvesting activities that Kimmirutmiut engage in throughout the year and typical modes of transportations used seasonally. Four diagonal grey lines are used to identify usual sea ice break up and freeze up times in early spring and fall, respectively.

Polar bear harvesting

In Nunavut, polar bear harvest is subjected to a quota system (Government of Nunavut 2019). Local HTOs are responsible for establishing the timing and duration of the polar bear hunting season in each community⁹. In Kimmirut, polar bears from both the Davis Strait (DS) and the Foxe Basin (FB) subpopulations and management units are harvested (harvest quotas for 2018/2019 were nine polar bears for DS and 13 for FB; Figure 1). Generally, the polar bear hunting season opens in October each year and ends the following June. Polar bears are most commonly harvested between mid-February to mid-April (see thicker blue line on Figure 3) when fur quality

⁹ As per the Nunavut Wildlife Act (Government of Nunavut 2003), the polar bear harvest season in Nunavut is year-round (July 1-June 30) and local HTOs are responsible for establishing seasonal limitations for their respective communities.

is at its best and chances to harvest a large polar bear are greater. This time of year coincides with the ringed seal pupping season when polar bears hunt seal pups in their birth lairs.

In the past several years, the decreased economic value of polar bears hides has been a strong disincentive to hunt polar bears in Kimmirut. The last time the polar bear quota was fully used in this community was in 2013-2014. Since then, annual harvesting quotas have not been fully used and unused tags resulted in harvest credits. As of November 2019, Kimmirut had a total of 24 harvest credits for polar bears accumulated since 2013 (Kimmirut Conservation Officer, personal communication).

Pangnirtung

Pangnirtung (66°7'N, 65°55'W) is located on the Cumberland Peninsula on the southeastern shore of Pangnirtung Fjord and off the northeastern end of Cumberland Sound in the Qikiqtaaluk region of Nunavut (Figure 1). Community name derives from the Inuktitut word *panniqtuuq* (meaning 'place of the bull caribou') (Harper 2004).

Cumberland Sound has been home to Inuit for over 1,000 years, with seals, walrus, beluga whales, and bowhead whales frequenting the waters. Organized whaling activities have taken place in the area since 1818 (Laidler et al. 2008). A Hudson Bay Company (HBC) trading post was opened in Pangnirtung in 1921, followed shortly by a detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Kemp 1976). From the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, the federal government began establishing a schooling and administrative presence, encouraging families in outlying camps to move into the community (Harper 2004). Currently with a population of approximately 1,481 (94% Inuit) (Statistics Canada 2017b), Pangnirtung is known for its commercial turbot fishery, the nearby Auyuittuq National Park and its unique weaving artistry (Laidler et al. 2008).



Wildlife harvesting

Based on interviews with Pangnirtung residents and discussions with community researchers and HTO board members, we constructed a calendar of seasonal harvesting activities in which Pangnirtungmiut engaged in throughout the year (Figure 4).

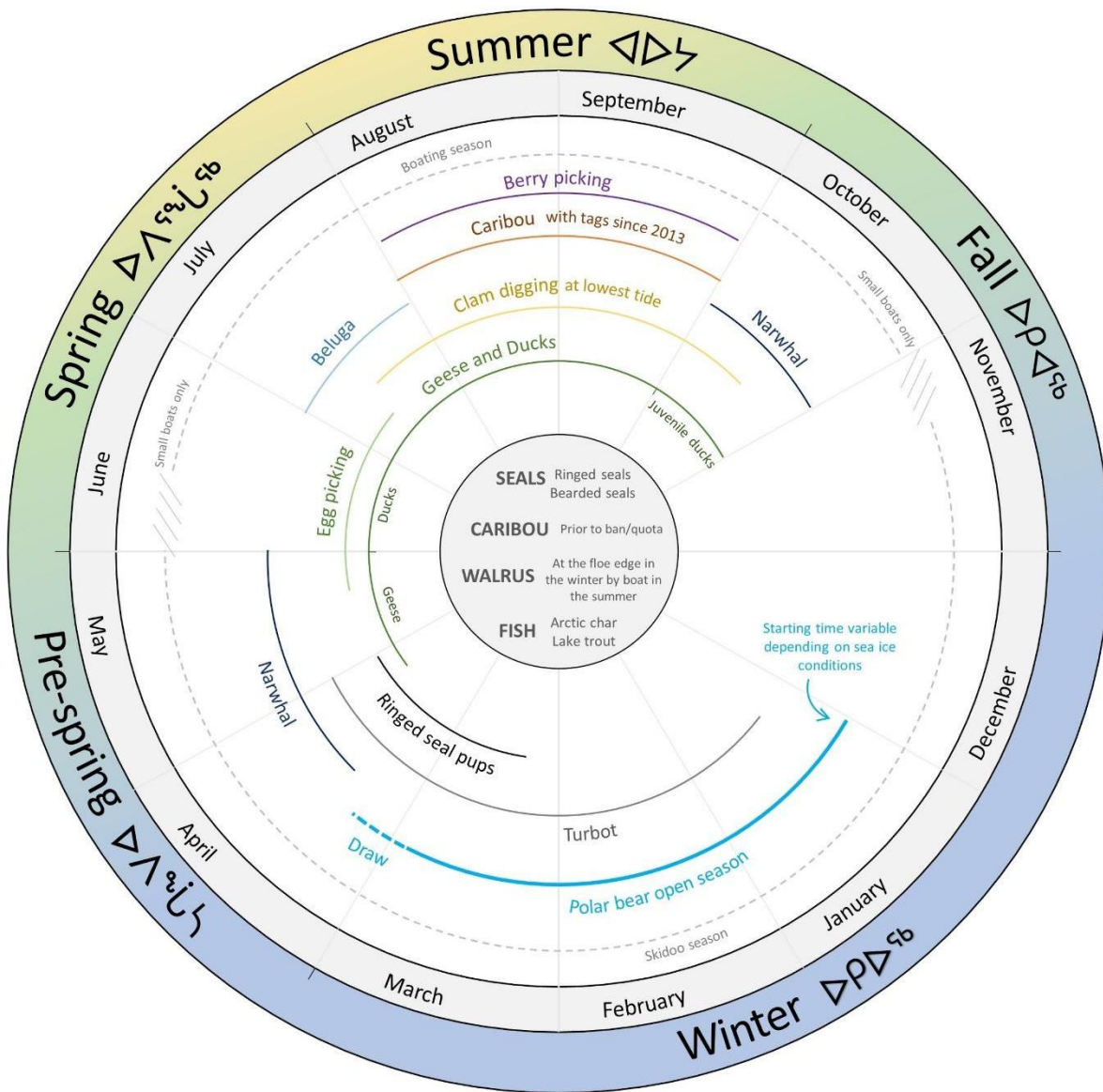


Figure 4. Seasonal harvesting activities in Pangnirtung. Overview of harvesting activities that Pangnirtungmiut engage in throughout the year and typical modes of transportations used seasonally. Four diagonal grey lines are used to identify usual sea ice break up and freeze up times in early spring and fall, respectively.

Polar bear harvesting

In Pangnirtung, polar bears from the Davis Strait subpopulation and management unity are harvested (harvest quota for 2018/2019 was 16 polar bears). The polar bear hunting season opens in January each year (timing may vary depending on sea ice conditions) and ends when all polar bear tags have been fully used, which generally happens by April.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We summarized below the knowledge that was shared by 35 Inuit polar bear experts from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung over the course of individual and groups interviews. Contributors shared diverse perspectives about the cultural importance of polar bears, polar bear ecology and health, and polar bear management.

Representative quotes from contributors are provided for each theme that was discussed during interviews. Some quotes were anonymized to reflect participant wishes. For certain themes, we indicated how many contributors made similar comments on a given topic (n). However, because interviews were semi-directed, not all themes were discussed by all participants. Therefore, failure to discuss a theme did not necessarily imply lack of agreement with and/or knowledge of the subject. With this consideration, numbers of interviewees reported below represent minimum numbers of individuals who shared similar views on specific topics. We also highlighted areas where contributors shared different views.

Interview results from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung are presented together, except when the knowledge shared was specific to a community. In these cases, perspectives from each community are presented separately. A glossary of Inuktitut polar bear terms is presented in Appendix 6.

Polar bear cultural importance, uses and practices

General importance

Interview contributors described their past and ongoing relationships with polar bears and shared a strong sense of the importance of polar bears to Inuit culture, identity and traditions, and their persistence for future generations. They also highlighted the economic importance of polar bears through the selling of hides. Participants explained that *nanuq* is a mighty and majestic animal. Polar bears are top predators that may be both respected and feared.

“Polar bears are very important to us, because they’re living with us...on this land of Nunavut and Baffin Island.” (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

“Polar bears are very important...This is the land of the polar bears. They are on top of the food chain, their meat is very good, their hide is worth money and it helps pay for food and other things.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“Polar bears are important to us because all the animals are very important to us. Polar bears provide us with meat and food, and it has been this way through all my life.” (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Polar bears are important to me. They are important for the future generations and they should be around for our young children.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

In Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, many participants explained that polar bears are intelligent and resilient animals that respond to how humans interact with and talk about them. Some participants highlighted that bears are “much like humans” and that they must be approached and talked about with respect.

“Polar bears live like humans and think like humans. They are very important to me because they are like humans.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“I have a lot of respect for polar bears. I don’t like to talk about polar bears...We have to be really respectful to them.” (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

“I was told that we should not ask to see a polar bear because they are near and they hear you and they might just show up when they are least expecting this. This has always been our tradition...I used to take tourists down to my cabin, and one time two tourists kept saying: “I want to see polar bears, I want to see polar bears.” And my son kept telling them: “Don’t say this. It is our tradition not to ask to see a polar bear because they are always around the corner when you are least expecting them.” So one of them said: “I don’t believe in that. I still want to see a polar bear.” And then during the night two polar bears got to our cabin and they got so close to these tourists that they didn’t want to see a polar bear ever again. Those two tourists learned their lesson.” (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Polar bears are very mighty and they could do anything...they could be vicious to humans, and because we are talking about them they are listening. I know this from long ago. I was told that they could listen. Just by mentioning them, they know that they are being talked about. I have learned this from the Elders.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

Some contributors explained that Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit emphasizes the importance of harvesting only what one needs, not playing with bears, and avoiding to waste polar bear meat.

“The traditional knowledge passed down to me from my family and Elders is don’t overkill, don’t leave the meat, don’t leave anything and don’t waste.” (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

“I was always told that they’re animals and that you cannot play with [polar bears], they’re very important.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

In Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, stories about polar bears have been passed down through generations.

“There was a man who was not a very good hunter and could not catch seals. He was eating the catch of other and he was always left with the smallest pieces. Once he got back to his camp with a small piece of seal and he saw a polar bear. The polar bear had a seal and a rabbit and he offered his catch to the man. From that moment onwards the man became a skillful hunter...This story was passed down from my grandfather.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“I heard an old story that somebody used to have a pet polar bear, they had killed the mother and kept the small pups. It is an old story but I believe it! The human raised the cub that turned into [an adult] polar bear.” (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

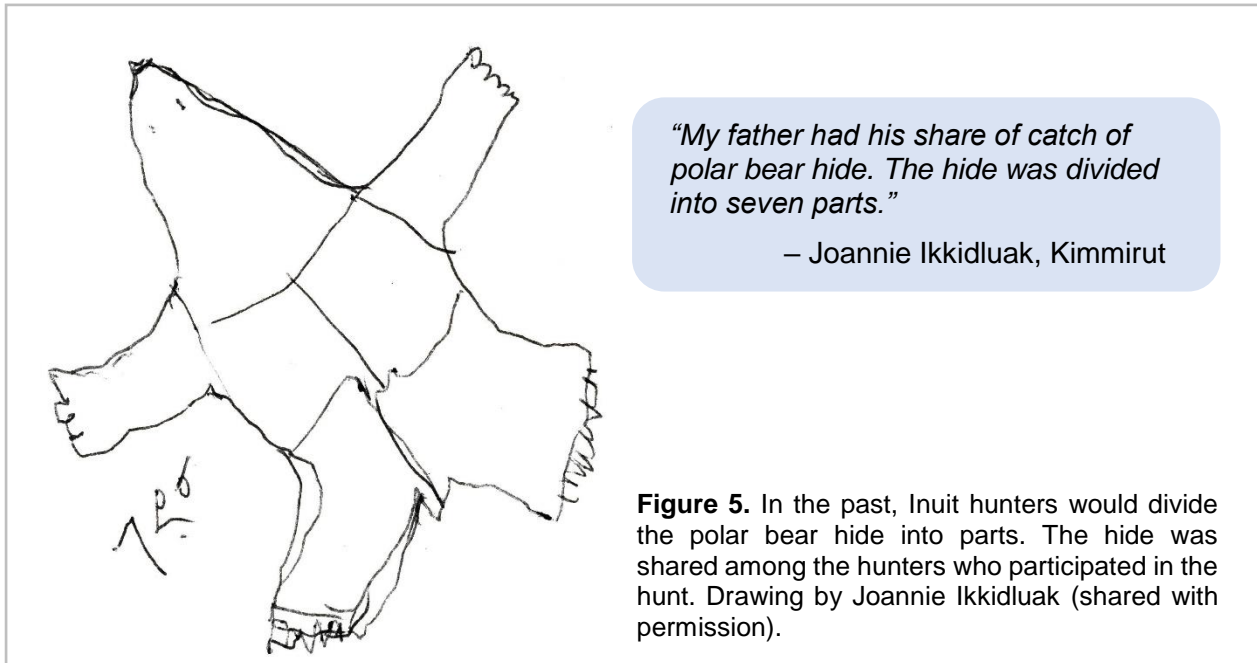
Finally, stories shared by participants from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung emphasized the symbolic importance of polar bears. Some commented on how hunting a first polar bear –the top predator of the Arctic– marked passage from youth to adulthood for a young Inuk man and hunter (see also ‘Polar bear harvesting’ section).

Polar bear uses

In the past, polar bear meat and fat were shared among families and used as food for sled dogs.

“Back then, [Inuit] used their knowledge like ‘kill [the bear] once you see it’ because food was very important. Everyone was very happy when someone caught a polar bear because that meant that everyone had food and the food was going to last.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“Back then we would harvest a bear, nothing was wasted, all the meat was harvested except the intestines...Back then the hide was divided amongst the hunters who participated in the hunt...The organs were given to the dogs and if the bear was fat, the fat itself was used to light the qulliq [oil lamp] to provide heat.” (Elijah Padluq, Kimmirut)



Traditionally, polar bear hides were divided into parts and shared among the group of hunters who participated in the hunt (Figure 5). In the past, hides were used for clothing, as mattresses and for trade. One contributor from Kimmirut explained that polar bear hides were also used to smooth off *qamutiik* [sled] runners.

“[My grandparents] used [the hides] for mattresses or cover...And trade with Hudson Bay for supplies, trade the pelt with supplies like flour.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

*“Even a small portion of the skin would be useful in the old days. It would be used on the *qamutiik* runners...People would collect moss and soil and when it was cold out they would use water to mix it altogether and put it on the runners of the *qamutiik*. Then they would let [the mixture] freeze on the runner. They would use their knife to smooth it out and finally*

take a piece of the polar bear skin [to smooth the surface]. They would have water in their mouth because in the winter the water would freeze, they would spit the water on the fur and use it to smooth the runners. I have seen it and done it before.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

In Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, polar bears contribute still to this day to sustain local food security, traditional lifestyle, and the local cash economy. Polar bears are harvested today mainly for their meat and hide. Polar bears are a source of country food that is shared among community members. Contributors explained that polar bear meat should not be wasted and highlighted the importance of sharing meat with relatives and community members. Participants highlighted that polar bears hides can be sold but also used for clothing (for pants or kamiit [boots]) and as mattresses or blankets mainly utilized when camping. In both communities, polar bear skulls, carvings and jewelry (made of polar bear teeth and claws) are sometimes sold.

“Some people go on the radio and say: “There’s polar bear meat, you can pick it up!” and people go up there. And the meat is gone within an hour or so...The more fat it has, the more people want it. So the whole meat is brought home and it’s gone.” (Davidee Nowyuk, Pangnirtung)

“[In the past], if someone got a polar bear they would divide the hide and would share the meat with the community. Nowadays they don’t divide the hides anymore but the meat is still really shared. I still have some meat that was given to me by other families.” (Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)

“It is important to keep the polar bears forever for food security.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

“The fur provides everyday income and [is also] used for clothing for the cold weather. People sell the fur when they need some income and they have no other means of getting it.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

“We like using the skins for clothing like pants...My parents have always had a polar bear skin that they use for under their mattresses, when they’re out camping.” (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

“[Polar bear hides can be used] as a mattress. The fur part on the floor because it doesn’t get wet on top...Fox furs when they get wet, it takes a while for them to dry but polar bear hide it’s nothing like it.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

“The teeth are used to make crafts nowadays by younger generations, those who are carvers, and the claws are also useful.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

Some participants reported that the meat of polar bears that were tranquillized, that are too skinny, or that visited the dump is not always eaten.

“Now, researchers put them to sleep [tranquillize polar bears] and study the polar bear. People sometimes are scared because the bears they harvest might have been the ones that were tested on. People are scared to eat it.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"I would not harvest one or let people eat a bear that has a tag [which means] it has been tranquillized. If I catch a bear with a tag, I would not distribute the meat. I would just probably give it to the dogs or throw it away because it has been tranquillized and I am not sure what has been done to it." (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

"If the carcass of the bear looks good to eat we won't waste it. We will use the meat as a meal as long as it's not skinny, if it's healthy enough." (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

"When polar bears go to the dump, people don't want to eat their meat." (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

In both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung, polar bears have been for decades and continue to be today a source of income through the selling of hides. Contributors explained that selling polar bear hides was a strong motivation to hunt polar bears especially in the 1980s and 1990s when polar bear hides were in high demand and consequently their economic value was high. However, many participants commented that the economic value of polar bear hides has declined in recent years (especially over the past 10 years) and that hides are now more difficult to sell; some explained that this situation created a significant disincentive to hunt polar bears.

"Around the 80s and 90s when the Conservation Officers started coming up here is when the price increased for the hides. Those Conservation Officers had contacts to sell the hides for auction...the price of the hides would vary based on how big it was and how clean it was. The condition of the hides were graded and the price was higher if the hide was bigger and cleaner. The biggest polar bear I ever got was a 13 footer and I sold that for \$10,000." (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

"In the 1960s and 1970s it was really important to hunt polar bears because we could sell hides to whoever wanted to buy them and the meat was important to us...now I don't hunt polar bear anymore but when somebody gets a polar bear they share the meat with everybody, but polar bear hides don't sell very much anymore." (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

"I rarely go [polar bear hunting] now because the price for polar bears is not as high as it used to be...maybe five years ago the price dropped." (Matiusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

In Kimmirut, some contributors explained that fewer community members are experienced with preparing hides today, and this constitutes a further disincentive to harvest polar bears in addition to the decreased economic value of polar bear hides. Hide preparation requires a lot of work.

"Lately people have not been really going after bears maybe because there are less ladies that clean the hides for them because the bear hides are not easy to clean...you have to be really skilled to clean polar bear hides." (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

"They are not as important to me because the cost of their hides has gone down and I don't have a wife that can clean the skins for me." (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

Polar bear harvesting

Contributors discussed how polar bears were harvested in the past and how harvesting is done today. Harvesting preferences and practices provide insight on incentives (and disincentives) for hunting polar bears and how knowledge of polar bears is acquired.

Prior to the introduction of the quota system in the 1960s, Inuit hunters could harvest any polar bear at any time of the year, including family groups (female with cubs). Polar bears were most often hunted opportunistically.

“No matter the time of the year, they used to harvest...because they didn’t have any quota or anything at that time.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

“In the past, we could eat all types of polar bears. The biggest male polar bear was more food for the dogs and the female or the cubs were more delicious.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

In Pangnirtung, harvesting denning females in the winter was reported as a traditional practice carried out up until approximately the 1960s, especially in denning sites located on the Cumberland Peninsula. In Kimmirut, contributors had not directly experienced or were not aware about the practice of harvesting denning females in the Kimmirut area and a few participants reported that they were taught not to hunt bears in dens. However, one Elder recalled his father telling him stories of hunters harvesting denning females.

“My father shot a mother [polar bear] when he was approaching the den. And then my father told me to go inside the den. With the rifle I shot the one year old cub. So that was my first polar bear.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

In the past, polar bears were hunted by dog teams.

“My mother used to tell me that her father would not use a rifle to hunt a polar bear, but only a harpoon. That was his way of hunting polar bears at that time...At that time they had dogs with them and [dogs] were part of their hunting method for polar bears.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

“Men used to [cover themselves with a polar bear hide]...and then they went to their dogs...The dogs used to bark a lot when [the men] covered themselves in polar bear hide pretending to be a polar bear to train [their dogs] to know what to do if they encountered a polar bear.” (Michael Kisa, Pangnirtung)

The establishment of harvesting quotas in the 1960s and the development of a cash economy associated with the selling of polar bear hides has contributed to significant changes in polar bear harvesting practices in both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. Harvesting polar bears transitioned from being sporadic and mainly opportunistic to being seasonal and sex-selective. Harvesting quotas today limit the number of bears that can be harvested. Sex-selective harvest regulations¹⁰ have

¹⁰ In Nunavut, the polar bear harvest sex ratio was adjusted in 2019 from two males harvested for every female (2:1) to up to one female for every male (up to 1:1) –male and female polar bears can now be harvested in any proportion up to a maximum of 50% females (Government of Nunavut 2019). Interviews were conducted before this change was implemented.

also encouraged the harvesting of big adult males or *angujuaq*. Participants also explained that the traditional practices of hunting denning females or family groups are not in use anymore.

“When we see one [polar bear] that is when the hunt starts. We go after it once we see one. I observe if it is a female or a male first, I observe the gender if we were going to go ahead with the kill...I try to harvest only the males. I stay away from harvesting females.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Back in the day, not very many young people would go hunting for polar bears. But today, anybody is out hunting with their kids or young hunters who are learning how to kill a polar bear.” (Abraham Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“Today, there are more bears and faster machines and better rifles. The two things combined [make polar bear hunting easier nowadays]. Better equipment and more bears.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Today, hunters harvest polar bears using snowmobiles, except for guided sport hunts which are done exclusively by dog teams. Polar bear hunting is mainly conducted by men, although some women also engage in polar bear hunts.

“I was the first woman to hunt [polar bears] in this community when they picked names [using a draw system after the quotas were implemented]...My name was picked, so I had to go in February, it was the coldest month of the year.” (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

In addition to providing a source of income, sport hunting allows Inuit to maintain strong connections with the land and Inuit traditional ways of life.

“I am the only one with a dog team in town right now and polar bear sport hunts have to be done by dog team. When I get the chance, I try to go on a hunt. It helps me and the community with much needed wages [as I have other people coming along]...If you hunt bears by dog team it is very fulfilling. You can hear the dogs make a call or cry and no other time they will do [the same]: the sound is different.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

Polar bear hunters from both communities reported that the months of March and April are best for harvesting bears because it allows obtaining hides of greater economic value. At this time of year, polar bear fur quality is at its best (longer, thicker) and there are increased chances of harvesting large polar bears (*angujuaq* and *tulajuituq*) as male bears come to the stable ice to hunt seals pups and find a mate.

“This time of the year [spring] is the best, especially for their fur...It’s mating season too. If you want to get a big one, this time is the best to find a big male.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

Contributors from both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung also reported that polar bears have been harvested in defense of life and property in recent years (see also ‘Impacts of increased polar bear abundance’ and ‘Polar bear distribution near communities’ sections).

“I had to kill that one [bear] because it was ruining the cabins there. It was a small bear. It was alone and hungry in the fall.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

"[I am concerned about] the safety of the town when [bears] came in. When they [my neighbours] made a defence kill [in 2015-16] is when I realized about the possibility of them [polar bears] coming into town and I have heard that polar bears are coming in more into town." (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

Many interview contributors vividly recalled harvesting their first polar bear or accompanying relatives on a polar bear hunt for the first time. For a young Inuk hunter, hunting a first polar bear marked passage from youth to adulthood.

"My first polar bear catch was here in the Markham Bay area and I was 16 years old and it was February. A beautiful day and really cold. It was a 13 and a half [feet] polar bear." (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

"I was maybe three or four years old. It was early fall. There was a polar bear that was spotted by our camp...My father wanted to leave me behind when he was going after the polar bear, but I wanted to go so badly that I cried...We walked towards the polar bear and my father and I were pretending to be seals and just waited for the polar bear to come. As the polar bear kept coming, it was going down...ready to attack putting its head up and down. I was so scared...When the polar bear was reaching us, my father shot it." (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

Participants from both communities talked about the importance of maintaining polar bear harvest into the future to preserve Inuit ways of life. Polar bear hunters interviewed explained that harvesting polar bears is an important activity that connects Inuit to the land.

"You have to be really careful but it is a lot of fun looking for polar bears and catching them." (Matiusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

"I am hunting a lot because it is calming and it reminds me of the old days." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

Polar bear butchering practices

Contributors from both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut reported that it is a common practice for Inuit polar bear hunters to butcher polar bears immediately after harvesting before the carcass freezes. In both communities, polar bear butchering is mainly performed by men. First, harvested polar bears are skinned; some contributors explained that polar bear paws and sometimes the head are generally left attached to the skin to be carefully cleaned afterwards by the 'hide cleaners' (i.e., women specialized in processing and cleaning polar bear hides). Then, the carcass is butchered: organs are discarded and the remaining carcass is divided into portions. Polar bear hunters may also collect tissue samples for polar bear research. Polar bear hide and meat are brought back to town, while the organs are left on the kill site. The only organ that is thoroughly inspected is the stomach, which is almost always cut open to check its content. In town, polar bear meat is shared among community members and the hide is given to hide cleaners to be thoroughly processed (cleaned, stretched and dried) prior to be sold or used. Polar bears harvested during sport hunts are processed similarly to bears harvested for subsistence. The difference is that the hide (and often head) of polar bears harvested through sport hunts is often exported right away to be processed by taxidermists.

“We make sure [the polar bear] is dead and it is not playing dead, first of all. Then we cut it up. It takes at least one hour, one hour and a half to [process the carcass of] a bear. Then we wrap the hide and put the bear hide in the bag [the sport hunters] provide. Then we take some of the meat and some of the meat we do not take, and then we go back to the camp and then back to the community after that, at the earliest possible time, weather permitting.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“We butcher [the polar bear] right away, right after it dies because the carcass freezes [fast]. I don’t check much the organs, except for the stomach. I open it up to observe what the bear has eaten.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“I check [polar bear stomachs] and what they usually have in their stomach is seal skin and fat. Sometimes meat. No bones. Hardly. Only when they’re really hungry sometimes they’ll eat the bones. [Polar bears] are similar to us, like, some people are good at hunting, some are not. Same with polar bears.” (Davidee Nowyuk, Pangnirtung)

“I take everything with me [but] the organs...I leave [those] to the ravens to eat. [But I look at the stomach and] there is always seal in it.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

Polar bear hide processing

In Kimmirut and Pangnirtung, women mainly process polar bear hides. Contributors explained that preparing polar bear hides is a work intensive process that is often done collaboratively. Polar bears hides are generally processed soon after butchering. To clean a hide, fat is scrapped off manually using traditional tools including an *ulu* [knife] and a *saligut* [dull knife used to clean the leftover fat]. Once the hide is cleaned and washed, it is hung, dried and stretched with an *inniuti* [rope], onto the *innivik* [frame].

“Cooking [polar bear meat], cleaning [the hide] and putting it on the drying frame, taking it off and then whenever we need to turn it into clothing, stretching it out, sewing it: that’s my responsibility.” (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

*“I have never helped with butchering the animals but I was given the task to clean the hide if a hunter harvested a polar bear. Just clean, stretch and dry and then I would give it back...When I was younger I used to be able to clean the whole hide in one day but since I started aging I normally just remove the fat then [work on] the paws and the head parts the next day. It is a very heavy task. First, you have to remove all the fat so that the skin will not yellow or smell from the fat. Then when I have removed all the fat I do the head and the paws which is the hard part of cleaning of the hide. When I finish all of that, I then remove all the excess fat and water from the fur...We use the woman’s knife, the *ulu*, to scrape the fat from the hide, and then there is a tool that is called *saligut* that is used to remove the excess fat and water from the fur...Then I would wash the hide and remove the excess water with the *saligut* again. When that is finally done we would make holes and put it out to dry out, after [mending] all the holes. Then you finally leave it out to dry during the winter. Sometimes we leave it out longer so that the fur would turn whiter.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)*

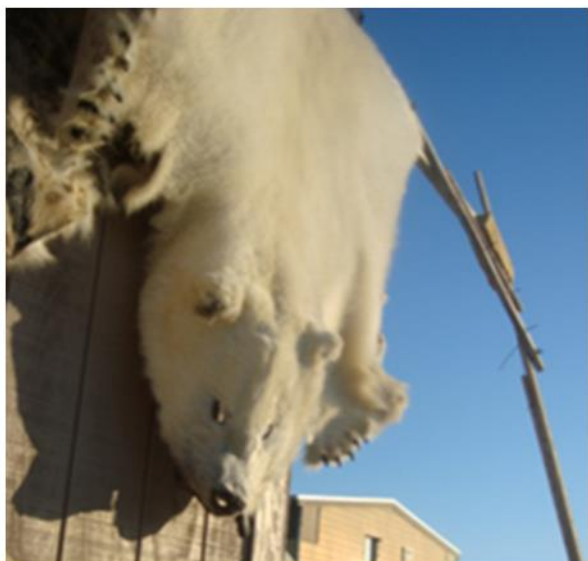
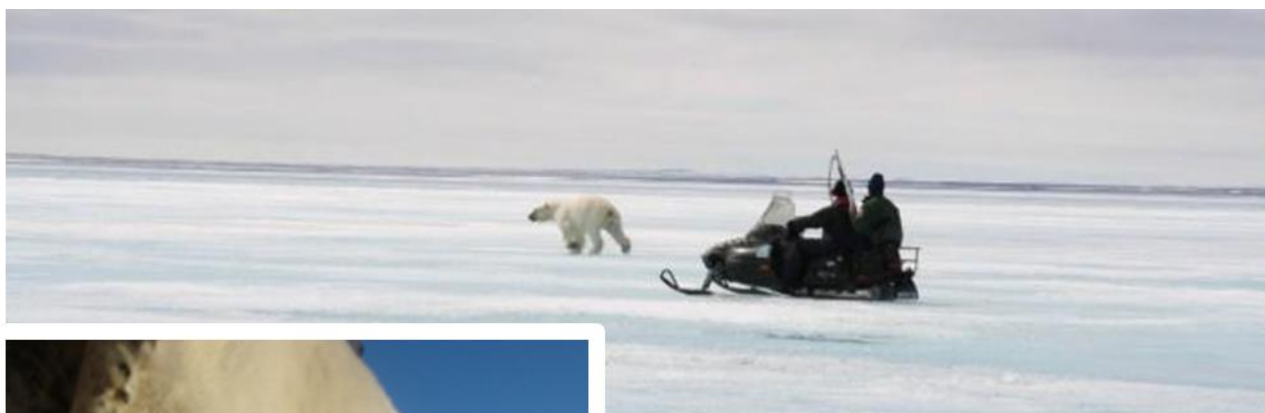
“After I wash [the hide in the washing machine] I usually get my boys to pull the skin with a skidoo, like get it all covered in snow...so it dries faster. After the washing machine, I cover [the hide] with snow because the fur dries faster by stepping on the fur. And then I

have [my boys] pull it on a rope by skidoo on the ice. That way it's cleaner and it gets all the oil off of it...[After that I] hang it to get the fur dry and then after, they dry very easily, they dry quickly...And then we stretch them onto the frame.” (Geetee Maniapik, Kimmirut)

Many contributors specialized in polar bear hide processing explained that polar bear body condition (fatness) is reflected on how difficult it is to clean a hide. Hides with a lot of fat and those from bears that were just butchered are generally easier to clean and process.

“[How easy or hard it is to clean a hide] all depends on the quality of the skin –like how much fat it’s got on it– and it also depends on how it was stored: the sooner you clean it, the easier it is. So if [the hide] was put in a freezer right away and it was frozen for a long time, then it’s also hard to clean. But generally, as long as it’s got a fair amount of fat on it then it’s usually pretty easy to clean.” (Anonymous 04, Kimmirut)

In summary, the role and importance of polar bears in Inuit culture, identity and traditions highlights Inuit unique relationship to polar bears. This relationship may shape how interview contributors talk about and share their knowledge about polar bears. Information shared by contributors on polar bear harvesting, butchering and hide processing practices also sheds light on how Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit is acquired and is crucial to contextualize and understand the depth of insight interview participants can provide related to polar bear ecology and especially health.



Polar bear ecology and health

Contributors shared their knowledge of polar bear ecology and health, including their observations and perspectives on: polar bear abundance and demography; habitat and distribution; diet and prey availability; body condition and general health; disease, mortality and unusual events; human-polar bear interactions; and the future of polar bears. Prior to presenting contributors' knowledge about polar bear ecology and health, we first discuss the temporal depth and geographic scope of their knowledge and ecological observations, as well as modes of IQ acquisition, so that the information presented herein can be adequately contextualized.

Temporal and spatial scope of Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit

Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit shared by participants over the course of this study was acquired through their direct individual experiences with polar bear harvesting, butchering and hide processing, as well as through their experience living and travelling on the land. Some of the knowledge they shared was also obtained indirectly through discussions with other hunters, Elders and community members.

While IQ that participants had learned from relatives and other community members could date back many generations, the temporal depth of their direct ecological observations varied depending on the age of each contributor. Earliest direct ecological observations reported by participants dated back to the 1940s. Direct polar bear observations reported by participants were made during polar bear harvesting and hide processing activities but also while they were hunting other species (e.g., seals, beluga, walrus, birds, caribou, fish) or travelling on the land and at sea.

The geographic scope of IQ that was gathered through this study mainly corresponds to the areas where contributors had travelled and conducted land-based activities over their lifetime. Figure 6 illustrates participants' 'range of direct observations'; this area corresponds to the geographic extent of the aggregated areas where contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut had travelled and conducted land-based activities in spring, summer, fall and winter over their lifetime. Although some contributors may have acquired knowledge derived from other geographic areas (e.g., when living in another community), most of their direct ecological observations and experience relevant to polar bear ecology were made within the areas highlighted in Figure 6. The geographic extent of ecological observations made by participants also varied within their lifetime according to changes in land use patterns and modes of transportation. For example, by the 1970s, most Inuit living in outpost camps along the coast of the Cumberland Sound and Peninsula and the north shore of Hudson Strait were relocated to the communities of Pangnirtung and Kimmirut (then Lake Harbour), respectively. In addition, while travel by dog teams and by foot was a predominant mode of transportation up until the 1960s, motorized transportation (snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles and motorized boats) is mostly used today.

During group interviews conducted with polar bear harvesters from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants), contributors participated in mapping exercises to record in detail their individual areas of observation over four specific time periods: (1) during the 1960s; (2) during the 1990s; (3) around 2005; and (4) over the last three years (2016-2019). All participants (n=8) mapped individually the areas they regularly travelled to and observed for each of these four time periods (Appendix 5). Individual maps were then aggregated to produce heat maps that provide an indication of land use intensity in space and time (see Figure 7). It is important to note from Figure 7 that contributors' overall range of direct observations has remained relatively stable since the 1960s. This information is crucial to support the interpretation of contributors' observations of

temporal changes in polar bear abundance in the Kimmirut area, as well as analyses related to polar bear distribution (see 'Polar bear distribution over time' section). Particularly, Figure 7 indicates that changes in the frequency of observation of polar bears over time are not influenced by temporal changes in land use by study participants.

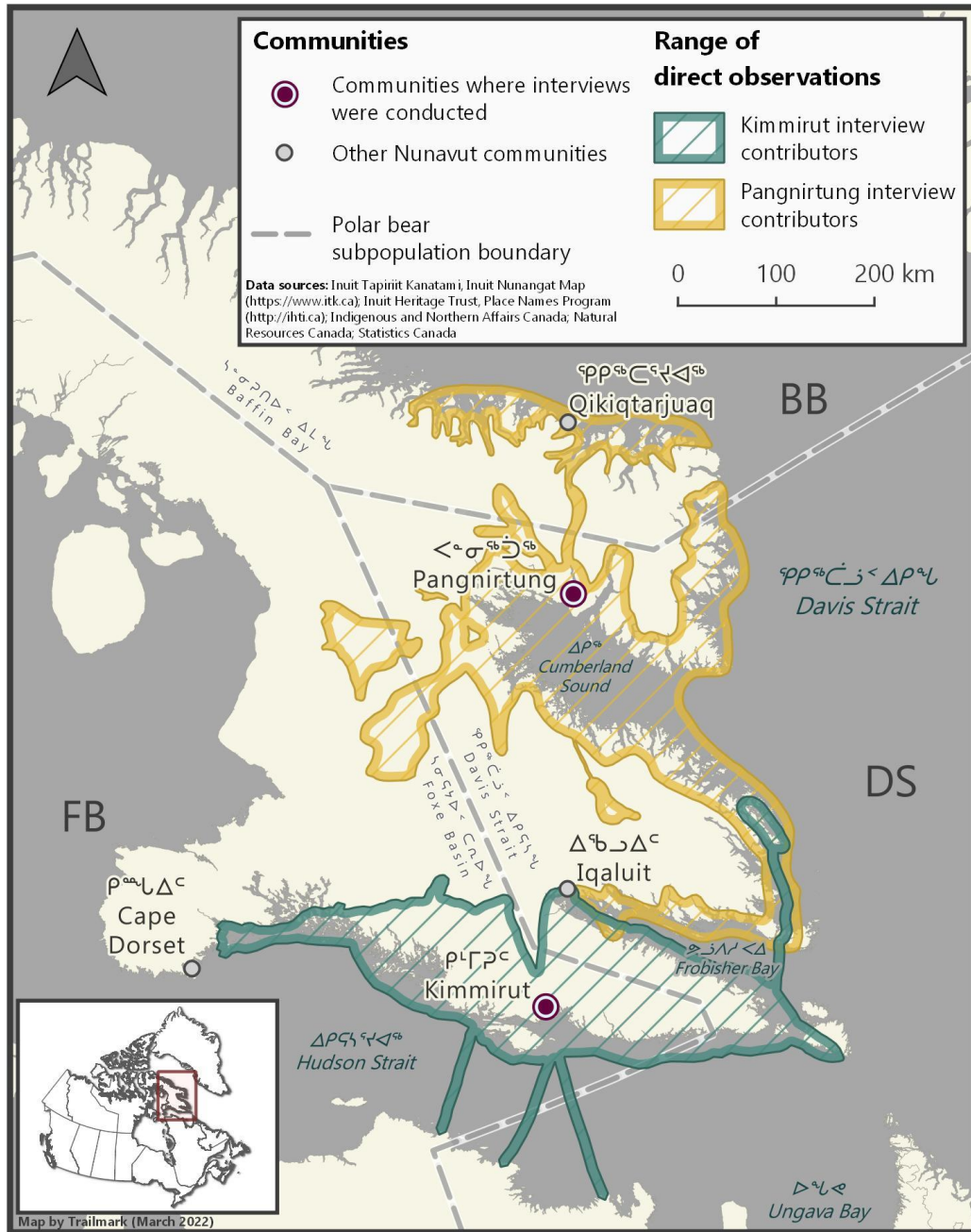


Figure 6. Contributors' geographic range of direct observations. This range was obtained by aggregating areas where participants from Kimmirut (n=21) and Pangnirtung (n=14) had travelled and conducted land-based activities in spring, summer, fall and winter over their lifetime. DS: Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit; FB: Foxe Basin polar bear subpopulation and management unit; BB: Baffin Bay polar bear subpopulation and management unit.

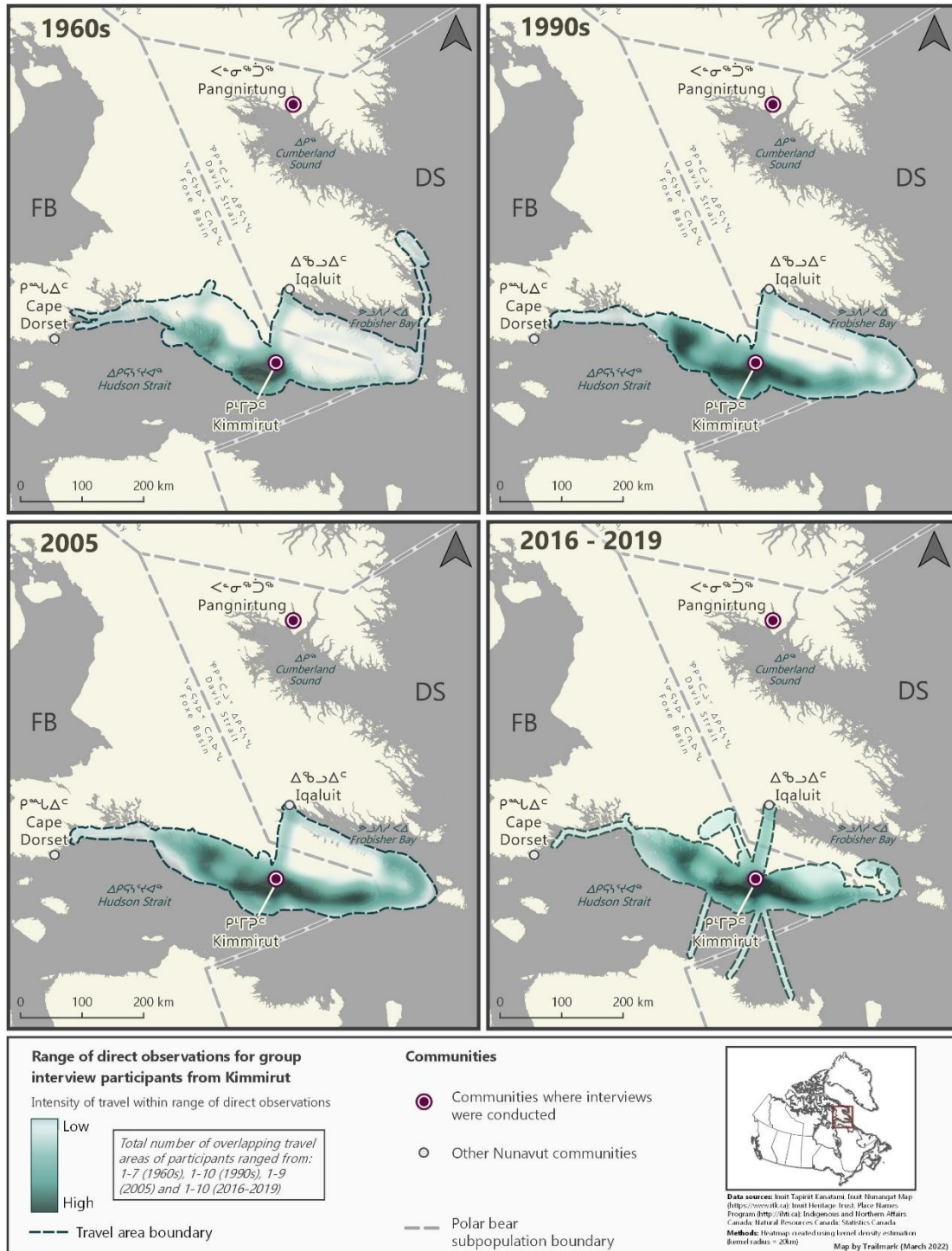


Figure 7. Travel intensity within range of direct observations around Kimmirut over four time periods according to group interview contributors from Kimmirut (n=8). Contributors used both polygons and lines to indicate areas of travel during each time period. Heat maps were generated employing a kernel density estimation using travel areas (polygons and lines) buffered by 20 km. DS: Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit; FB: Foxe Basin polar bear subpopulation and management unit; BB: Baffin Bay polar bear subpopulation and management unit.

Abundance and demography

Interview contributors described changes in polar bear abundance observed over their lifetime. Participants also provided explanations as to why polar bear abundance has changed over time and discussed the various indicators they employ to assess bear abundance. Contributors commented on the size of family groups (female polar bear with cubs), cub productivity (number of polar bear cubs produced in a population) and cub survival (number of polar bear cubs that survive their first year) and discussed changes observed over time in the number of bears observed for certain sex and age groups.

Observed changes in abundance

In both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung, all participants reported a steady increase in polar bear abundance observed across their entire area of observation over their lifetime. Many contributors also described a progressive increase in the abundance of bears observed within or close to their community starting from around the 2000s. Figure 8 summarizes polar bear abundance trends reported by contributors during individual interviews conducted in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut.

During interviews, contributors indicated that polar bear encounters in the past were rare. Some participants reported second hand information and stories from their Elders who explained that polar bear abundance was lower in the past.

“My great grandfather, my grandma’s father, had told stories of going all the way down here [south Okalik Bay] to hunt polar bears and there would never be any polar bears.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“According to the people that have been living here much longer than me, they say they’d rarely see polar bears when they were out camping... You know, [Elders] say that when they were out camping they would barely see bears in those years, now every time we go out we can see a polar bear, almost every time.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

All individual and group interview participants (n=35) reported first hand observations pointing to a general increase in polar bear abundance observed over their lifetime within their area of observation (Figure 8). Earliest observations of this increase were made in the 1970s in the Pangnirtung area and in the 1960s around Kimmirut (Table 2).

“There was not a lot of polar bears back then [in the 1960s]. People living on the coast were not going polar bear hunting because there was no polar bears around at that time; that was around the 60s... And as the years progressed towards the 2000s the population increased and [we could hunt polar bears] closer to town... It is easier to hunt them nowadays than it was back then. If you were to go polar bear hunting to either side [you] would not have a problem harvesting one.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

“In those days [70s and 80s] there was hardly any polar bears around Pang. In those days, we’d see polar bears here and there whereas these days we see them where we go for seal hunting 30 km out, 40 km out of Pangnirtung. Whereas before, we’d go all the way down [the Cumberland Sound] and there would be hardly any polar bears out there... But in the 90s the polar bear population kind of exploded. The polar bears were interfering with humans and also with the equipment and up to today they are doing that so there are a lot more polar bears than before.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

Table 2. Perception of polar bear abundance trends based on direct observations of individual interviewees from Kimmirut (n=13) and Pangnirtung (n=14) over their lifetime within their area of observation. Information on polar bear abundance observed within or near communities (dark green bars) was inductively obtained meaning that direct questions focused on abundance within or near communities were not consistently asked; therefore, absence of information on abundance (no dark green bars) within or near communities does not indicate that participants did not observe an increase of polar bears in the immediate vicinity of their own community.

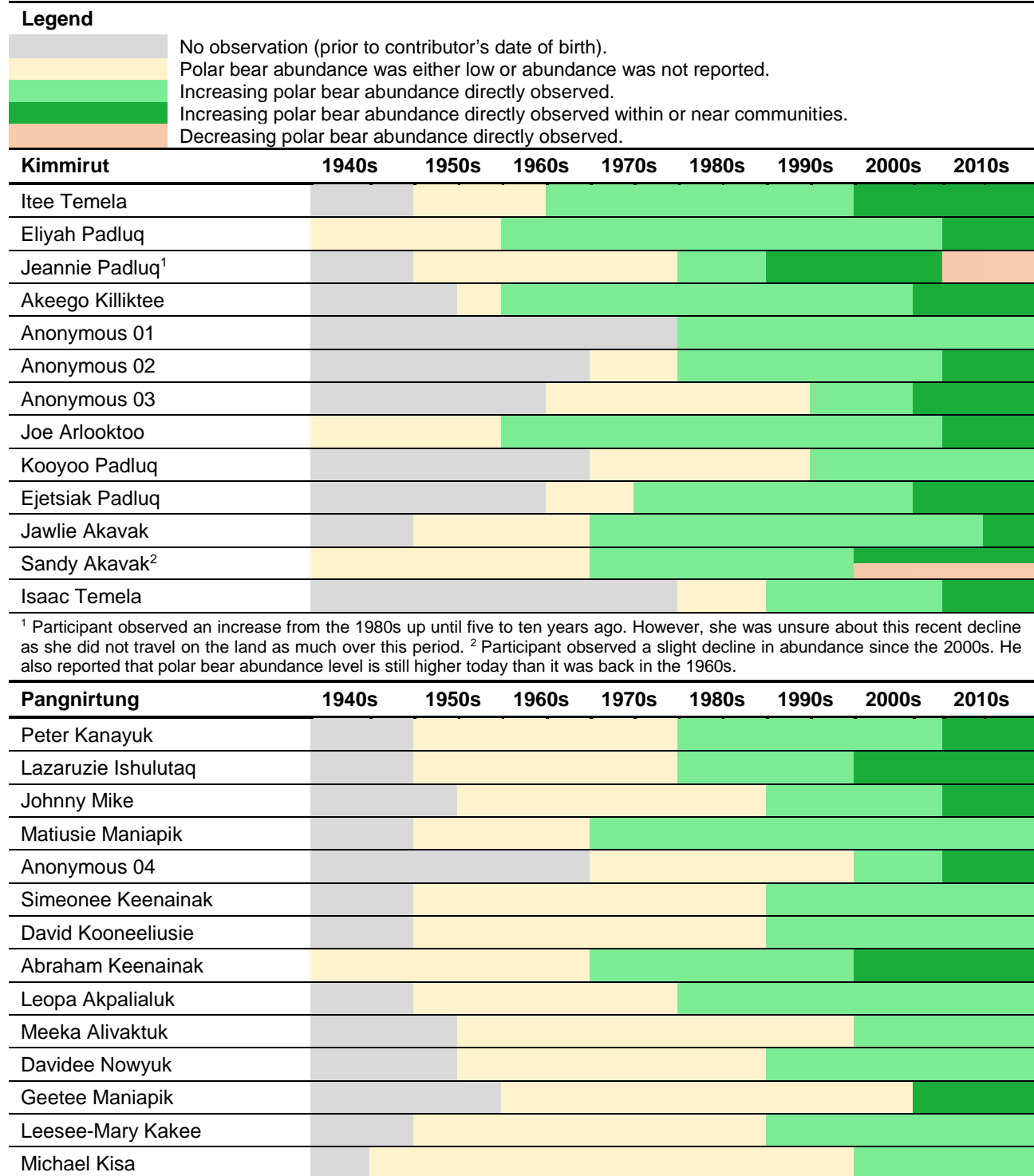




Figure 8. Group interview contributors participating in polar bear abundance exercise in Kimmirut. From left to right: Matilde Tomaselli (interviewer), Mikidjuk Kolola, Sandy Akavak and Joannie Ikkidluak.

In Kimmirut, group interview discussions also suggested an increase in polar bear sightings over time; groups reported the polar bear population had increased by an average of approximately 73% since the 1970s and 14% since 2005 (Figures 8 and 9). Narratives were highly consistent between the three groups. For the majority of group interviewees, 2019 (year of the interview) was considered the year of highest abundance for the population. However, one group of hunters (Group 1; Figure 9) reported that peak polar bear abundance had occurred between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s in the Kimmirut area, and that bear abundance then slightly declined between 2005 and 2018 before increasing again between 2018 and 2019. Nonetheless, this group reported that polar bears were much more abundant today than they were in the 1950s to the early 1980s.

We note that abundance trend information documented through group interviews seems to reflect a ‘true’ increase in the relative abundance of polar bears in the Kimmirut

area and not an ‘apparent’ increase resulting from spatial and temporal changes in land use by participants and/or temporal changes in geographical distribution of polar bears (see Figures 7 and 14, respectively).

In Pangnirtung, group interviews were not conducted and quantitative information on polar bear abundance was not collected. However, narratives from individual interviews were highly consistent: all individual interview contributors from Pangnirtung (n=14) described a major increase in polar bear abundance observed over their lifetime within their area of observation (Figure 8).

We also note that Elders interviewed in both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung –with the exception of contributors living on the east coast of the Cumberland Peninsula (in Inuktitut known as ‘the area where the ice never melts’)– mentioned that they did not recall eating polar bears in their young age or polar bears being a common country food in the past. This further confirms historical low numbers of polar bears in the Kimmirut and Pangnirtung areas, except for the Cumberland Peninsula area. Such historical recollections are also highly contrasting with subsequent observations pointing to a major increase in polar bear numbers over time in both areas.

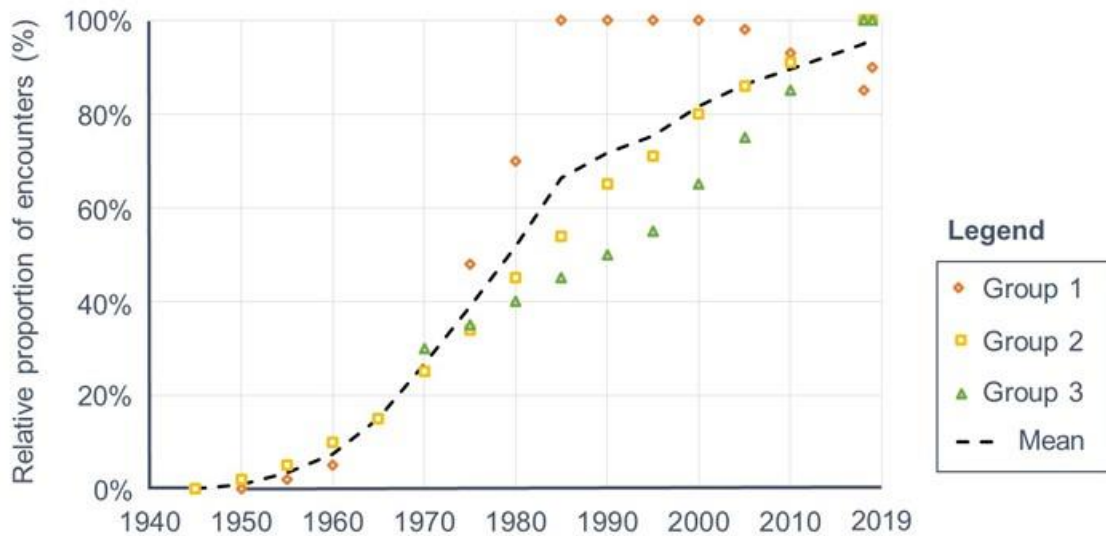


Figure 9. Relative proportion of polar bear observations/encounters between 1945 and 2019 as observed by Kimmirut contributors during group interviews. This information can be used as a proxy for polar bear relative abundance in the Kimmirut area. Information presented is based on interviews with three groups of polar bear hunters from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants).

Explanations for changes in abundance

In addition to provide polar bear abundance observations over time, contributors discussed reasons that could explain why polar bears have increased in their region.

Many contributors from both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut strongly agreed that harvest quotas and sex-selective harvest restrictions were primary drivers of an increase in polar bear abundance.

“In the past, I remember that the hunters had to go everywhere looking for polar bears, days could turn into weeks and into months trying to hunt a polar bear back then. Now, with the system of quotas in place, the bears are coming to the community and I find that they are getting aggressive toward humans or communities...I find that since the quotas are in place and sometimes when the quota are finished, the bears seem to know that they [community members] cannot do anything to them when they are coming to the community.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“My father helped the RCMP travel from place to place by dog team. When my father retired, I took over in 1967 around the last time there were dog teams around. When I became an RCMP officer, I recall the first time I knew about the quota. There was a quota of three polar bears to be harvested. Back then, there was no Conservation Officer but it was the RCMP who enforced quotas and management. This area didn’t have a lot of bears and the RCMP without having knowledge about the population of polar bears because this area didn’t have much at the time they gave a quota of three polar bears. This was in 1967. This is when I first noticed the quota being in place and ever since [polar bears] have been gradually increasing.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

“[There are more bears now] because you can’t kill a female, and especially if they have a cub, you can only kill a male. That’s why there’s a lot of polar bears now...they seem to

show up more in the spring and the fall. In the spring for mating, a lot of males come close to the land to find females and [look] for seal pups, and in the fall just before the ice forms.” (Matusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“[Polar bears have increased] because we’re not allowed to shoot them. We manage them too good.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

Some contributors from both communities also explained that observed changes in polar bear abundance could be linked to polar bear prey availability, sea ice conditions and changes in weather and climate. Some further indicated that the observed increase in polar bear abundance within their area of observation could also be related to greater use of coastal areas by polar bears searching for preys (see also ‘Habitat and distribution’ section).

“[Before polar bears] were mostly in the water and now they are getting closer to land and [they are] more on land. [They are coming closer to the coast because] there is not enough other animals [polar bear preys] here. Because they always have to eat.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“Maybe because there’s lack of ice...ice melts faster now, maybe...I’m not too sure but that’s how I feel because the ice breaks quicker...[So polar bears] come closer to the land.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“I feel there are more bears compared to the past...I think this has to do with the ice conditions. The hunting areas of the polar bears are not as great as before and their hunting grounds have expanded. That is why we see more of them.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“From the knowledge of my ancestors it has always been said that the bears or any other animals will go to the areas where there is plenty of their prey and their main food and it varies: some years [there are] lots [of animals in an area] and some other years [there are not] as much. It is the movement of the animals...when it is seal pup season [bears] will be around more.” (Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)

Two Kimmirut Elders shared more recent observations, possibly made within the past 10 years, of polar bears that were ‘smaller in size’. While such observations were not directly linked by contributors to the potential immigration of polar bears exhibiting a different body size phenotype from adjacent subpopulations into the Kimmirut area, we believe this possibility cannot be ruled out (see also ‘Sea ice changes’ section). From contributors’ narratives, smaller body size could be also a function of shorter interbreeding times or reduced food availability for some polar bears.

“I have noticed that the bears seem to have gotten smaller in size. There seems to be more bears wandering around without their mothers or the mother seems smaller and they seem to be less fat. Some bears are fatter than others but...I don’t really remember when I started to notice the change but lately I have noticed that all polar bears I have seen seem to be smaller and not as fat...maybe the bears that had lost their mother or accidentally got lost from their mother tend to be smaller in size because of the nurturing they did not have growing up.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

“I don’t know how you would call the polar bears that are not fully grown up yet. I have seen them alone without a mother. I think they looked small enough that they [should have

been] with the mother but I have seen them more without their mom [...] I would call them Atiqtaq. They are slightly smaller than the mother and they are in between these two categories [Atiqtaq and Naliqtigiit]. I have seen more of them and [I started to] notice this may be about ten years ago. I have no idea why is that.” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

When discussing polar bear abundance, some contributors explained that polar bear abundance varies between years and highlighted that wildlife abundance follows a cyclical pattern.

“And each year is different, like, some years there’s more polar bears than other years and some years there’s less than others. It’s not always the same.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

“I personally think that the bears will be gone [again]. I am noticing that back in the 60s and later there was not many polar bears and it was [in the] 80s and 90s that the population went up and from then I noticed another decline of polar bears, as well as seals. Compared to the 60s, there are more polar bears today, a noticeable amount more polar bears today than in the 60s...I think that the peak of polar bears was between the 80s and 2000 then around 2000 I noticed a decline. If I was to further graph [the population trend] I think that the population would likely go back down to what it was in the 60s. It is not due to climate change that the numbers are the way they are. The bears can live a long time, they are good hunters and they are able to adapt. They can eat anything, not just ringed seals, sea weed, [other] seals, berries. Those are possible foods that bears can eat. The graph I draw is like a cycle that keeps going.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

Finally, in Pangnirtung, an Elder who used to live in the Cumberland Peninsula (an area where polar bears have been historically abundant) explained that her Elders used to say that removing mature polar bear males from an area can lead to an increase in polar bear numbers in subsequent years. This is because without dominant males, less dominant and juvenile bears tend to disperse more and immigrate into ‘vacant’ areas. This contributor explained that male-biased sex-selective harvest could therefore be a driver of the observed increase in polar bear abundance.

“I grew up around men and I remember a story that was told...[King polar bears or angujuaq] were like the watch for other polar bears, younger polar bears. [Hunters thought that] when [king polar bears] are gone, younger polar bears or female polar bears would be going [to] more places without being scared [by the king polar bears]. So today, that’s how it is. I think there’s less [king polar bears] watching today...[From my knowledge, I tried] to pass on information to people who are controlling the polar bear harvesting quotas only for males to be hunted. I tried to tell them not to only hunt males because [king polar bears] are almost gone. If they are gone, then polar bears will be more everywhere, I guess...[King polar bears] were on the watch...Not only males should be harvested. Also females should be. If all [king polar bears] are gone, more polar bears are coming. If females are harvested more often, it would stop, the coming part would stop.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

Abundance indicators

During individual interviews, contributors referred to four key indicators of increases in polar bear abundance observed over time: (1) encountering more bears while travelling on the land, and particularly family groups and juveniles (n=13 in Pangnirtung; n=11 in Kimmirut); (2) observing

more polar bear tracks while travelling on the land (n=5 in Pangnirtung; n=4 in Kimmirut); (3) increasing risks of conflicts between humans and polar bears and/or polar posing a greater safety concern today compared to the past (Pangnirtung, n=9; Kimmirut, n=7); and (4) hunting trips being now shorter in duration and/or hunters no longer needing to travel as far to harvest polar bears (n=8 in Pangnirtung; n=7 in Kimmirut).

“According to the people who live here all their lives they have seen more bears, they heard more about bears or heard more tracks being seen, observed. There’s more bears in this area now. I know that by talking to the people who live here all their lives.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“It seems [the number of bears] is going up more either because there is less ice...or they are more used to people...My wife says that they just used to go hiking without any rifles or anything...but now we are told not to go anywhere without a rifle...Even in the 1980s we didn’t really worry that much but lately we are encouraged to go with the rifle for our protection or to scare off bears.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“Now, polar bears even break [into] cabins. Because there are so many they seem to be getting more dangerous, going into cabins and trying to look for food.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“When they pull a name from the bag, whoever is going out hunting [has] five days [or] one week. Years [ago], we’d go out, five days [passed] and sometimes we didn’t get nothing because we didn’t see anything. [This was back] in the 1970s and early 1980s. But right now all you need is two days, really.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

Indicators one (1) and three (3) were explored in greater depth during interviews (see following two sections). In-depth probing of indicator one provided further insights into the productivity and recruitment of the local polar bear population which is key to interpret observations related to abundance and assess polar bear population health. Indicator three was important to assess the impacts of increased polar bear abundance at the community and individual levels which represents crucial information for management decisions.

Impacts of increased polar bear abundance

Many contributors expressed that the observed increase in polar bear abundance has had significant impacts on their life on the land and in communities (see also ‘Concerns over public safety’ section). Participants reported increased damage to cabins and property attributable to polar bears in recent years. Some contributors explained that, starting around the 2000s, residents from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung started to use more fixed cabins instead of tents when camping on the land due to concerns for their safety around polar bears. Polar bears killed in defense of life and property were also described as increasing around both communities. Nowadays, Kimmirutmiut and Pangnirtungmiut have to be alert and prepared to encounter polar bears anywhere they go.

“You have to basically keep watch at all times. It’s hard to get a rest when you’re always thinking of polar bears, that they might show up.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

“Nowadays, when we are going camping overnight, anywhere, we always have to keep the thought of polar bear. It might show up or it might not. You always have to be

careful...Even now, in the summer when they're camping, they're going to have to make sure someone is always on the watch...In the spring, when we go seal pup hunting, we always have to make sure there's someone awake during the night, just so we don't get attacked by a polar bear...Now when we catch a whale or anything and we are going to cut it up, we have to have one person on watch just in case a polar bear comes." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"Now it is dangerous to camp in a tent. We do not wish to be in tents anymore unless we have aggressive dogs." (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

"In the past 10 years, everything has really changed. In springtime, we have polar bear encounters and we have killed I don't know how many for self-defence. When a polar bear keeps coming back somebody is going to have to kill it...they may be coming looking for leftover meat because they can't catch any or maybe they will be going to the dump." (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

Size of family groups, cub productivity and survival

Contributors commented on the size of family groups (female polar bear with cubs), cub productivity (number of polar bear cubs produced in a population) and cub survival (number of polar bear cubs that survive their first year), and discussed changes observed over time in the number of bears observed for certain sex and age groups.

During individual interviews, nearly all contributors from both Pangnirtung (n=13) and Kimmirut (n=11) reported having observed more cubs, females, and/or females with cubs (family groups). Many explained that increased sightings of females, cubs and family groups resulted from a general increase in polar bear abundance in the Kimmirut and Pangnirtung areas.

"We see more [cubs], we see more...than ever...We see them more now, since we see more bears." (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

"I think we're seeing more females with cubs now because a lot of the males are being hunted, right. So all I notice is that whenever there's a polar bear close to the community it's often a female with a cub...or a cub by itself." (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

"Today it's more common to see polar bears with cubs." (Davidee Nowyuk, Pangnirtung)

"Within the last five years, I have been hearing that the number of polar bears is climbing and with more cubs observed." (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

"The bears that we have encountered seem to be mostly females. The knowledge I have learned from my Elders [is that] if you do not hunt more females you will have more females." (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

"I think I have seen more females with cubs. A lot more than the other [polar bears]. [I started to notice more family groups] I think about 15 years ago. [Nowadays] most times [females] have two cubs and before some had two cubs and some [only] one cub. [Recently] I see more females with two cubs but we still see single cubs. I think we [have] see[n] more [females] with two cubs in the last 15 years than [females] with single cubs." (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

When discussing the size of family groups, there was consensus among contributors that females generally have one or two cubs, and three on rare occasions. Some participants from both communities (n=9 in Pangnirtung; n=5 in Kimmirut) stated that females with two cubs were most frequently observed.

*"We mainly see a [female] bear with two cubs, on rare occasions there is three."
(Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)*

*"[Females have generally] two cubs and sometimes they lose one." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq,
Pangnirtung)*

Some contributors (n=7 in Pangnirtung; n=6 in Kimmirut) also reported having encountered females with three cubs. According to one contributor who had worked to monitor polar bears in the Auyuittuq National Park over many years, 1993 was the best year for cub productivity in the Pangnirtung area; that year, he saw females with three cubs and tracks of a female polar bear with four cubs.

"The time when I was young, we'd see two polar bears maybe one of them had two little cubs. Right now, we see 28 [bears] in one day. Maybe 18 of them are with a little cub...Some of them with one, two or three. Mostly two...We see three every now and then in spring and summer." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

*"Once I have come across a mother and three cubs. [When] I saw that I thought I had seen dogs walking on the land because I never saw a mother with three cubs before...Normally they have two cubs or one cub. I have never seen three cubs. I have seen this only once... It is rare that they get three cubs...maybe within the last six years."
(Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)*

"Me and an old guy, we came from Cape Dorset one time in February or March and we came across the tracks of a mother bear and three cubs. That is kind of rare, usually it is two or one cubs, but that only one time I saw a mother bear with three cubs. That was years ago in the 1990s." (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

Some contributors from both communities (n=8 in Pangnirtung; n=3 in Kimmirut) reported the increased observations of family groups were likely due to harvest regulations protecting females and family groups (in particular, sex-selective harvesting and restrictions on harvesting denning bears).

"Seems to have more cubs. The family groups have increased since the time I have started to observe polar bears. Mother and cubs have increased a lot since then. One reason for this is could be that females are not to be harvested and, therefore, they are producing more cubs...and females with two cubs are seen more regularly now than before, within the past five years." (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

"Because we're not allowed to hunt female, cubs, he sees more of that and they're growing in population. Female with cubs." (Davidee Nowyuk, Pangnirtung)

"I think we're seeing more females with cubs now because a lot of the males are being hunted, right. So all I notice is that whenever there's a polar bear close to the community it's often a female with a cub...or a cub by itself." (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

While sightings of family groups, cubs and females have increased in recent decades, contributors from both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung did not report any notable changes in cub productivity and survival over the years. According to results from proportional piling exercises conducted during group interviews held in Kimmirut, there was no difference in litter size and cub survival between the contrasted time periods (around 1990, around 2005 and 2016-2019; Figures 10 and 11). Around Kimmirut, mothers were observed more commonly with two cubs-of-the-year and two yearlings (Figure 11). While quantitative information on litter size over time is available for Kimmirut only, contributors from Pangnirtung offered qualitative observations related to changes in cub productivity and survival over time. Nine contributors reported that throughout their lifetime female polar bears with two cubs were more commonly observed. Three participants further specified that while more family groups had been observed in the Pangnirtung area, they had not noticed any changes in family group size (both females with cubs and females with yearlings) over time.



Figure 10. Mikidjuk Kolola (left), Sandy Akavak (centre) and Joannie Ikkidluak (right) participating in proportional piling exercises on cub productivity and survival around Kimmirut. Contributors expressed the relative proportion of family groups they had observed with one, two or three cubs using piles of beans distributed along an axis picturing three family group types (female with one cub, female with two cubs, female with three cubs).

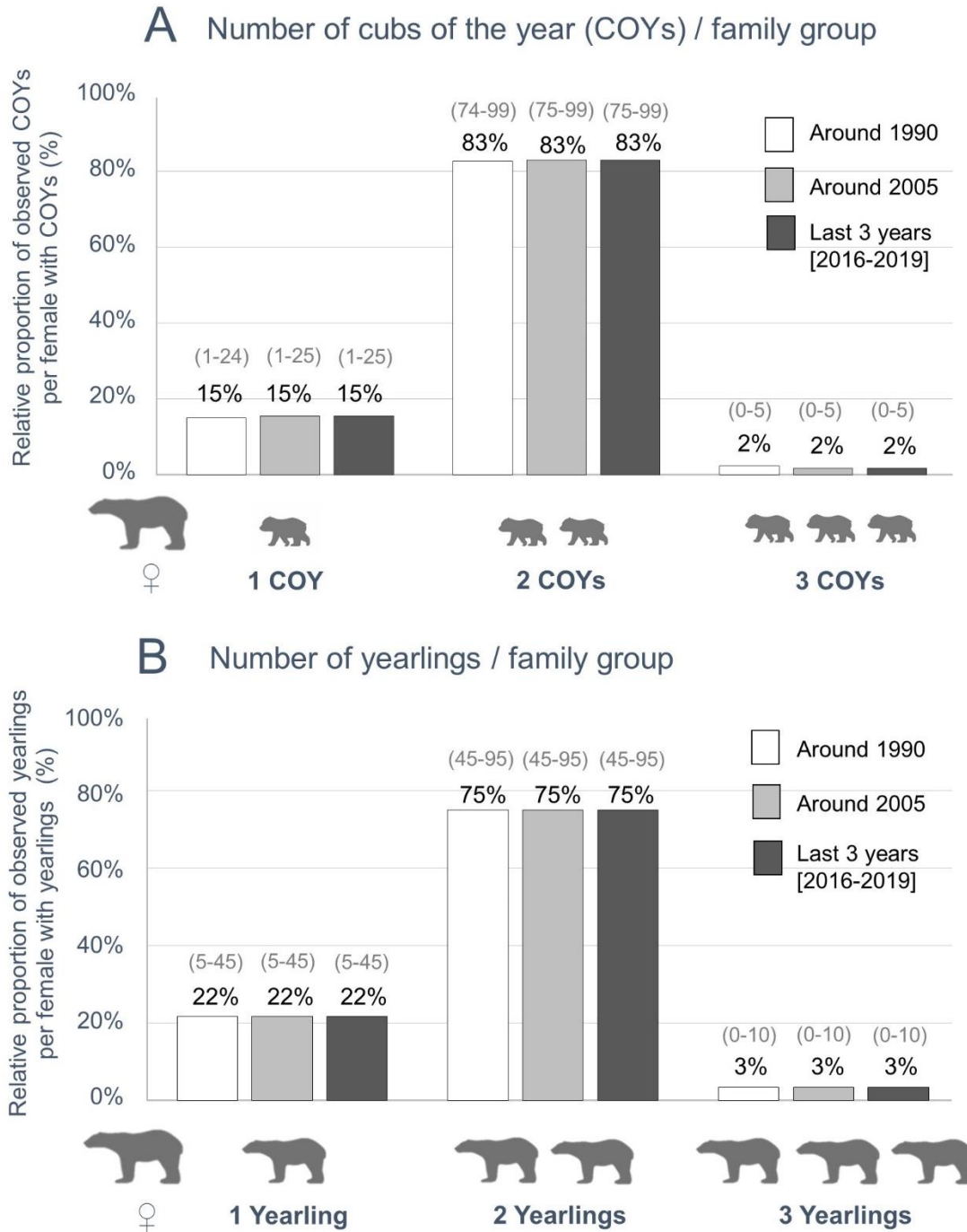


Figure 11. Relative proportion of cubs-of-the-year [COYs] (A) and yearlings (B) observed per female (♀) polar bear with COYs and yearlings, respectively, observed over three time periods (around 1990, around 2005 and last three years [2016-2019]) in the Kimmirut area. Percentages were derived from proportional piling exercises with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Each group reached consensus on the relative proportion of each type of family groups observed over three time periods. Final percentages were calculated using mean values across the groups. While there was some variability in proportions identified by the three groups within the same time period, each group was consistent in reporting no changes in litter size over time.

Distribution and habitat

Contributors shared observations on the historical and contemporary distribution of polar bears around Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. They indicated that more polar bears have been observed near communities and offered explanations as to why this phenomenon may be happening. Contributors also shared perspectives on what constitutes a 'good' polar bear habitat and commented on polar bear seasonal distribution. They reported changes in sea ice observed over their lifetime and discussed potential effects on polar bear distribution. Finally, participants discussed polar bear denning behaviour and identified denning areas.

Polar bear distribution over time

Contributors shared perspectives on the changes in polar bear distribution observed over time with their areas of observation. Perspectives from Kimmirutmiut and Pangnirtungmiut are presented separately below.

Kimmirut

Through proportion piling exercises conducted with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (Figure 12), we were able to map polar bear relative distribution within participants' range of direct observations over time (Figures 13). Relative proportion of polar bear sightings was used as a proxy for polar bear distribution and provided insights into differences in polar bear relative density at different locations. Observations on polar bear distribution around Kimmirut are available for four time periods: (1) during the 1960s; (2) during the 1990s; (3) around 2005; and (4) over the last three years (2016-2019). Table 3 offers a descriptive summary of historical polar bear distribution around Kimmirut. Narratives from individual interviews were consistent with information collected during group interviews (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Jawlie Akavak (left) and Eliyah Padluq (right) participating in mapping and proportional piling exercises on polar bear distribution around Kimmirut. Participants expressed changes in the distribution of polar bears they had observed over four time periods using piles of rice distributed over topographic maps. Through discussions, participants from each group reached consensus on the relative proportion of polar bears they had observed in specific areas during each time period.

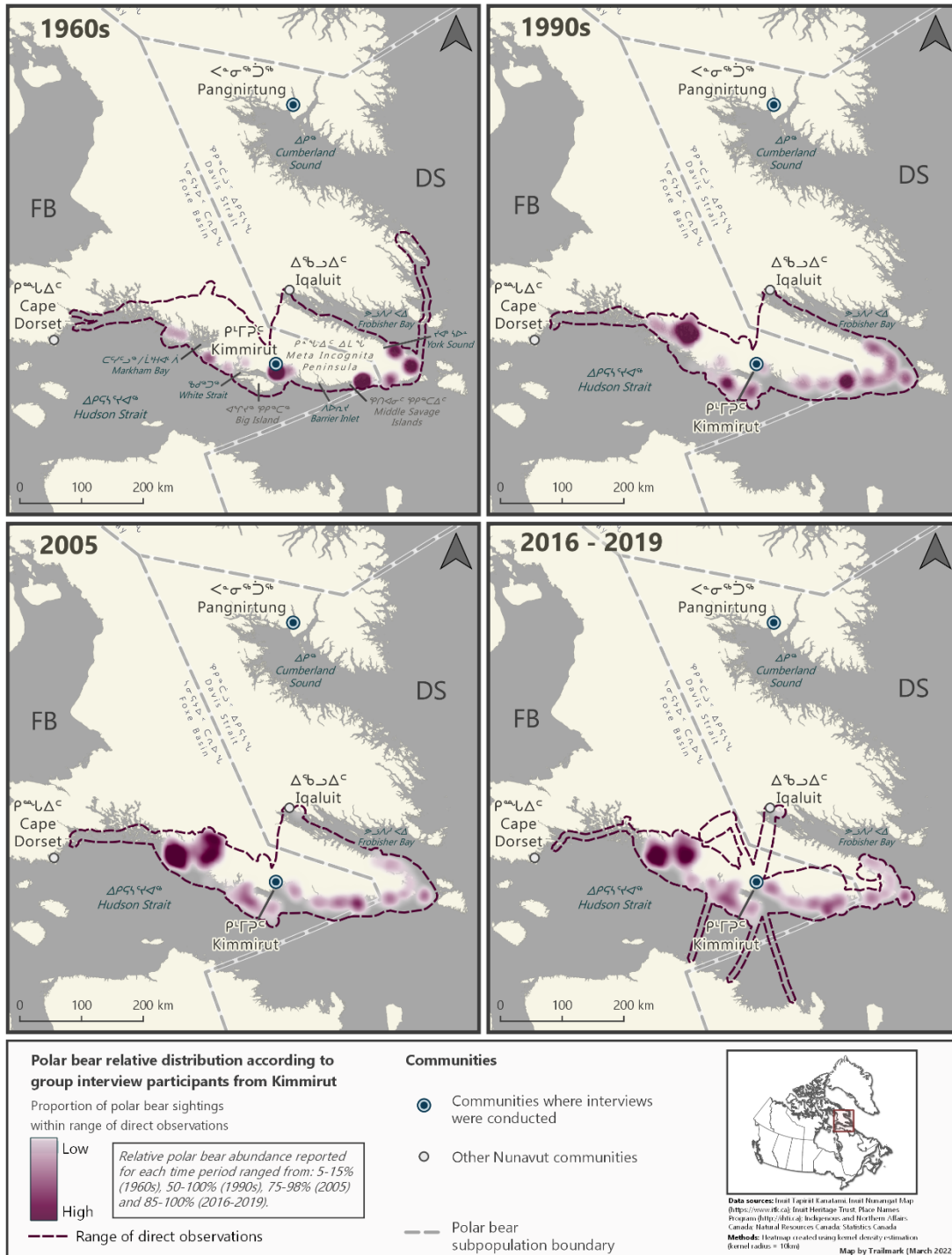







Figure 13. Polar bear relative distribution in the Kimmirut area between the 1960s and 2019 as reported by contributors during group interviews. Information presented is based on interviews with three groups of polar bear hunters from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). From each time period considered, data points were obtained from mapping and proportional piling exercises and were transposed on QGIS along with the ‘range of direct observations’ obtained by aggregating areas of observation of individual participants (n=8) (see also Figure 7). Heat maps were generated for each time period by averaging distribution information provided by each group and employing a kernel density estimation with data points buffered by 10 km.

Table 3. Descriptive summary of historical and contemporary polar bear relative distribution and relative abundance in the Kimmirut area. Table content was developed by coupling information presented in Figure 13 with group interview results related to polar bear relative abundance (represented under the polar bear icon as a progressively increasing bar).

Period		Polar bear relative distribution around Kimmirut
1960s		Although in the 1960s encounters with polar bears were rare, about 60% of the encounters happened along the south shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula particularly towards its eastern tip. That area was also a known denning site for female polar bears (see 'Denning' section). About 15% of bears encountered were observed close to Markham Bay and about 25% were seen close to the community.
1990s		By the 1990s, the number of polar bear encounters had substantially increased and about 75% of bears encountered were observed distributed along the south shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula (from Barrier Inlet to York Sound) and in Markham Bay. The remaining 25% of polar bear encounters occurred close to the community, especially in White Strait and around Big Island.
Around 2005		From the 1990s until around 2005 polar bear numbers continued to increase and, around 2005, about 77% of polar bear encounters took place along the south shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula (30%) and in Markham Bay (47%). The remaining 23% occurred between White Strait, Big Island and the inlets located close to town.
2016-2019		During the 2016-2019 period, about 73% of polar bears encountered were observed along the shore of Meta Incognita Peninsula (32%) and Markham Bay (41%) while the remaining 27% were observed between White Strait, Big Island and the inlets in close proximity to the community.

Around Kimmirut, common areas where contributors reported encountering polar bears were: Markham Bay, Big Island, White Strait, Middle Savage Islands, south shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula, and the floe edge.

“In my experience there are more bears around here [along the south coast of Meta Incognita Peninsula]. The further you go down [along the coast], the more bears...Whenever you are going further down [along the coast of Meta Incognita Peninsula] you can see more bears. [In general] there are more bears here [in the Markham Bay area] and here [along the coast of Meta Incognita Peninsula] and polar bears do travel so whenever they come around [closer to town] we see them. I guess [in Markham Bay and along the south coast of the Meta Incognita Peninsula] there’s more seal population and more sea ice and there [are] more polynyas and of course the polar bears take advantage of that.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

Figure 13 and Table 3 illustrate that while the abundance of polar bears kept increasing in the Kimmirut area between the 1960s and 2019, their distribution does not seem to have substantially changed during this period within contributors’ range of direct observations (which has also remained stable over time around Kimmirut; see ‘Temporal and spatial scope of Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit’ section). In particular, since the 1960s, group interview contributors had observed higher numbers of polar bears (about 70-80% of the total) along the shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula (from York Sound to Barrier Inlet) and in Markham Bay. From these

observations, it appears that the probability of polar bear encounters within or close to the community area has increased with time (from the 1960s to 2019) as a function of increased polar bear numbers rather than as a result of shifts in polar bear distribution within participants' range of direct observations.

Pangnirtung

In Pangnirtung, group interviews were not conducted and quantitative information on polar bear relative distribution was not systematically collected. Nonetheless, combining narratives from individual interview contributors (n=14) allowed to produce a qualitative account of polar bear distribution over time within participants' areas of observation. Figure 14 and Table 4 offer a summary of temporal changes in polar bear distribution and polar bear harvesting areas in the Pangnirtung area.



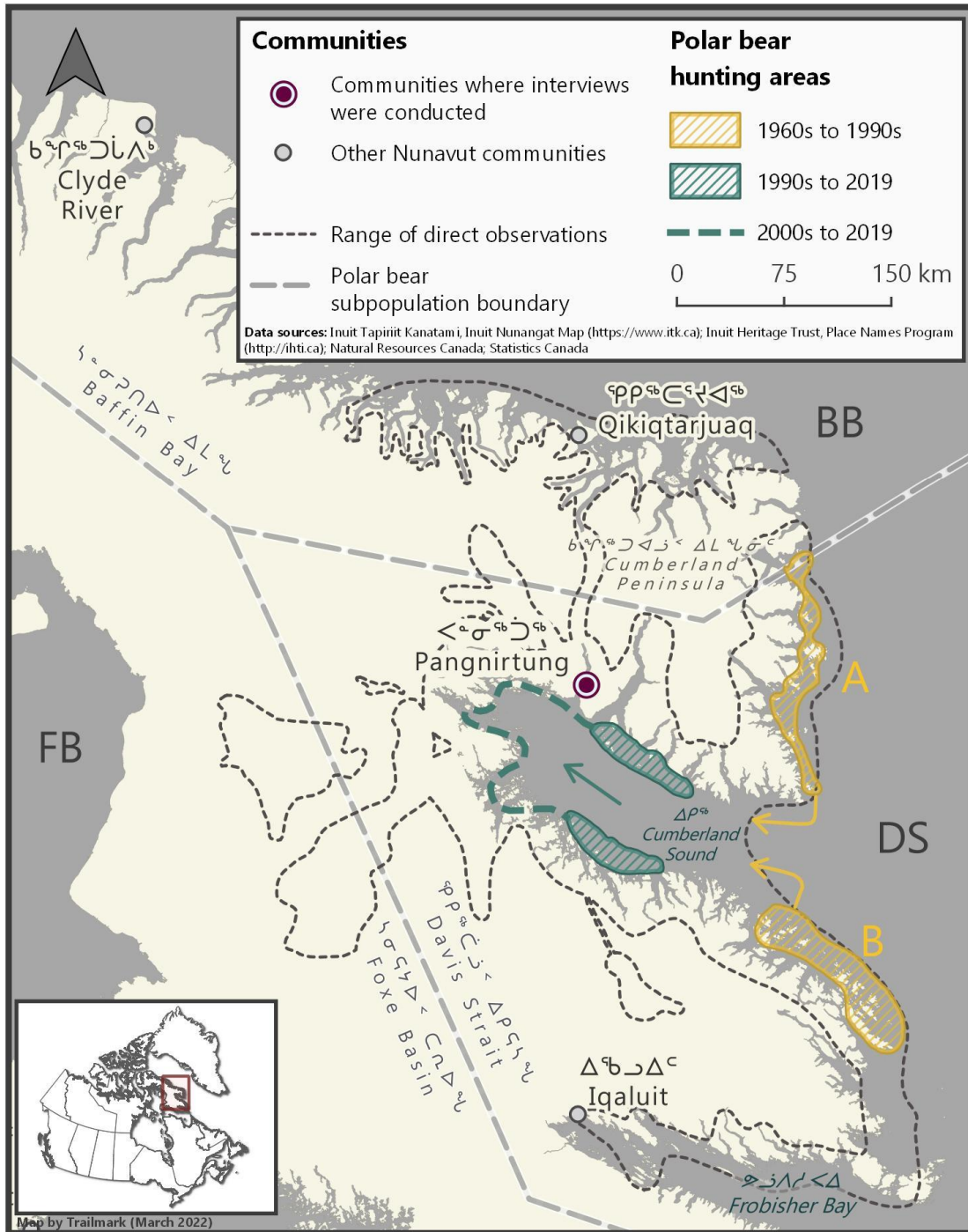


Figure 14. Summary of main polar bear harvesting areas from the 1960s to 2019 with arrows showing the directionality of expansion of polar bear range over time according to individual interview contributors from Pangnirtung (n=14). For complete interpretation, refer to Table 4. DS: Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit; FB: Foxt Basin polar bear subpopulation and management unit; BB: Baffin Bay polar bear subpopulation and management unit.

Table 4. Descriptive summary of historical polar bear distribution around Pangnirtung. Table content was developed by aggregating individual interview (n=14) results related to polar bear distribution and abundance in the Pangnirtung area.

Period	Polar bear distribution around Pangnirtung
From 1960s to 1990s	<p>Around the 1960s (when families living in camps around the Cumberland Sound were relocated to Pangnirtung), encounters with polar bears were generally rare. Polar bears were mostly distributed outside Cumberland Sound.</p> <p>Few polar bears were seen around Pangnirtung and hunters would have to travel further away from the community to harvest polar bears compared to today (see yellow areas, Figure 14).</p> <p>Seeing polar bears or harvesting them was rare for families living in camps in the upper Cumberland Sound but more frequent for families located on the south shore of the Cumberland Sound towards its mouth (where polar bears were spring hunting in seal pupping areas). Observing and harvesting polar bears was then more common also for families living on the Cumberland Peninsula on the north side of the Sound.</p> <p>From the 1960s up until the early 1990s, main polar bear hunting areas were located along the eastern shore of the Cumberland Peninsula (yellow area marked with A, Figure 14) and along the south shore of the lower Cumberland Sound (yellow area marked with B, Figure 14). One contributor who lived with her family in the Cumberland Peninsula reported that Inuit were hunting polar bears (including denning females) in this area even before the 1960s as polar bears had been there for a long time.</p> <p>By the 1990s, the number of polar bear encounters had substantially increased. Polar bear sightings and signs of bear presence had become more common in areas where they were previously rare, in particular they started to be consistently found in the central part of the Cumberland Sound.</p>
From 1990s to 2019	<p>From the 1990s until 2019, polar bear sightings continued to increase and polar bears progressively expanded their range into the central and upper Cumberland Sound closer to Pangnirtung. This resulted from the mid-1990s onwards in a progressive shift in the location of main polar bear hunting areas closer to the community (green areas, Figure 14). From the early/mid2000s, polar bears have also been consistently and increasingly seen in the upper Cumberland Sound where harvesting has also been reported in recent years (green dashed line, Figure 14).</p> <p>While polar bears continue to be found in great numbers within their historic distribution range (outside and in the lower part of Cumberland Sound), today polar bear hunters from Pangnirtung do not need to travel as far from the community in order to harvest or see a polar bear. Coastal areas in the central Cumberland Sound, particularly on the south shore, are prime polar bear harvesting areas (where bears hunt for ringed seal pups in the spring).</p>

Individual narratives were highly consistent (n=7) in reporting a progressive shift in the location of polar bear harvesting areas closer to the community (Figure 14), as well as an increase in polar bear sightings in the central and upper Cumberland Sound which started approximately around the 1990s and 2000s, respectively.

“[Back in the 1960s] people from this area [Qimmisuuq area located on south shore of the Cumberland Sound towards its mouth] used to get polar bear every year, people from

there [Cumberland Peninsula] used to get more than this area. People here [upper Cumberland Sound] never used to get any polar bear. [There were] lots of camps around here [upper Cumberland Sound] but they didn't usually go out polar bear hunting; only a few maybe but it was very rare. But right now you are guaranteed to see polar bear or tracks." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

"When we moved to Pang [in the 1960s], there was no polar bears in this area, so not a lot of hunting...When snowmobiles were introduced to Pang [in the 1960s] and they were used more often, by snowmobiles hunters would go polar bear hunting from Pang [to other places]." (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

"Even back then in the 1960s we knew these areas [eastern shore of Cumberland Peninsula and south shore of the lower Cumberland Sound] were known to have lots of polar bears. [Those are] areas with open water...There's a lot of seals, whales around this area [eastern shore of Cumberland Peninsula], that's why there was always lots of polar bears...It seems like polar bears getting close to Pangnirtung...[Since] 2000, even end of 90s. You see polar bear tracks everywhere, all [along] this coast [upper Cumberland Sound], [and] all the way down." (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

In addition, two contributors who visited the eastern shore of Cumberland Peninsula and the south shore of the lower Cumberland Sound (see Figure 14; areas A and B, respectively) in the 2000s mentioned that polar bears were still abundant in those areas at that time. One of them mentioned that he had stopped travelling to his cabin in the Cumberland Peninsula in the early 2000s due an increase in polar bears in the area, making it unsafe.

"I don't go to my cabin anymore [in the Cumberland Peninsula]...because there are too many polar bears now...[Last time I was there] it was early 2000s." (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

In summary, all these observations suggest that as the local polar bear population increased, polar bears have, from the 1990s onwards, progressively expanded their historic distribution range into the central and upper Cumberland Sound closer to Pangnirtung, where historically polar bears were encountered only sporadically. Prior to the 1990s, polar bears were mainly observed along the south shore of lower Cumberland Sound and the eastern shore of the Cumberland Peninsula. We note that observations from Pangnirtung contributors suggest that the polar bear distribution range has expanded –rather than shifted– towards the community of Pangnirtung in the timespan of a few decades.

Polar bear distribution near communities

Many contributors from both communities described a progressive increase in the number of bears observed within or close to their community starting from around the 2000s (see also 'Abundance' section). Indeed, most individual interview participants (n=13 in Kimmirut; n=9 in Pangnirtung) indicated seeing more bears in or near communities today than in the past (see also Table 5). While any type of polar bear could be seen in the vicinity of or within communities, contributors reported that more inquisitive juveniles, which also tend to be more aggressive than adults, and sometimes mothers with cubs are the types of polar bears most frequently observed near communities.

“In the last few years, we have seen polar bears that come closer to town...[I have noticed this] in the past 15 years. As per my knowledge, [they come closer to town] more in the fall...When there is less sea ice, they go close to town for food...They go into town in the summer and winter time [too] but not as much as in the fall...[I have noticed] maybe more mothers and cubs [coming close to town].” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

“About five years ago, three [came into town] in one summer season, other times would be twice [in a season. I think they have been coming closer to town] in the past three years. I think it has been happening only during spring and summer. I think that those young ones again [are coming into town], the atiqtaq. The grown up bears I don't think they never come close.” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

“The younger bears seem to have more courage and be less afraid than the bigger and older bears. [Also] females with cubs would normally come into the community.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

“Nowadays a bear would not hesitate to approach something moving thinking that is food and they come after the food that is stored in town and this is more often these days...It is more likely that bears come into town in fall and winter when there is enough ice. Any kind of bear could come into town.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

During individual interviews, participants identified three potential causes that could explain why more polar bears are observed in or near communities: an increase in polar bear abundance (n=11 in Kimmirut; n=6 in Pangnirtung); polar bears being attracted by the smell of food in communities and at the dump and/or by the smell of carcasses from harvested animals near communities (n=3 in Kimmirut; n=1 in Pangnirtung); and changes in sea ice leading to increased use of coastal habitat by polar bears (n=2 in Kimmirut; n=1 in Pangnirtung).

“In the past 10 years, everything has really changed. In spring time, we have polar bear encounters and we have killed I don't know how many for self-defence. When a polar bear keeps coming back somebody is going to have to kill it...They may be coming looking for leftover meat because they can't catch any or maybe they will be going to the dump.” (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

“Today when there's a whale hunt here and [community members] leave the carcass...it attracts polar bears.” (Michael Kisa, Pangnirtung)

“[Polar bears are closer to communities] maybe because there's lack of ice...Ice melts faster now...I'm not too sure but that's how I feel because the ice breaks quicker...[So bears] come closer to the land.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

Habitat and seasonal distribution

During individual interviews, contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut indicated that polar bears can be encountered on the sea ice, in open water and on the land, depending on the season and prey availability. Many participants associated sea ice (n=10 in Pangnirtung; n=7 in Kimmirut) and abundant preys (n=6 in Pangnirtung; n=6 in Kimmirut) with 'good' polar bear habitat. One contributor mentioned that low anthropogenic disturbance and the presence of both male and female polar bears were also important habitat conditions for polar bears. Another participant also highlighted that the presence of polar bears of different age categories (including young and

mature individuals) is a characteristic of a 'good' polar bear habitat that can sustain a healthy polar bear population.

"The land and the sea ice would be an ideal place for the bears...where their preys are abundant. The polar bears would be in the inlets more so than out in the open because the preys are more abundant there." (Elijah Padluq, Kimmirut)

"Polar bears can be on land, ice, water. They're able to swim and basically they can live off anything." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"[A good polar bear habitat is where] there's less people and good hunting for them, like lots of seals and clean environment and lots of females to mate with." (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

"[Their distribution] varies [with] the sea ice: when the sea ice is formed the bears are out on the ice more, when the ice is gone you cannot tell where the bears are...[Where polar bears are] depends of their preys, they will be around where there is enough seals and where they find a washed up [bowhead] whale on the shore." (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

Individual interview participants described seasonal polar bear distribution patterns that were mainly driven by sea ice dynamics and seal availability. Many contributors (n=9 in Pangnirtung; n=7 in Kimmirut) commented on the importance of sea ice to polar bears –notably for hunting, mating and traveling– and explained how sea ice formation influences polar bear distribution and seasonal movements.

"When the pressure ice or the broken up ice would land to the mainland there would be more bears coming in. The ice packs are bringing in bears...The current and the wind are the main causes of the movement of the ice packs...Normally if it had been a lot of wind coming from one direction for so long the ice packs would come in and stay in and that creates the bears to come up [on the mainland]. Or the freeze over of the ocean would be the other one for having the bears coming in. The bears would start coming to the mainland side during the pup seal season, in March." (Elijah Padluq, Kimmirut)

"It's different ever year. This winter we got lots of northwest wind, that's why there's been blue sky almost all winter. And some years we get southeast wind...we get more clouds and we get more snow with southeast winds. Some years we get both...but this winter we got northwest winds a lot more so we might get lots of ice this summer, [old] ice from the north. That's what they say, we get [old ice] with northwest wind. [Northwest winds] push all the old ice from the High Arctic down to eastern Arctic. When spring comes, we change from [northwest to] southeast wind, [and this] shoves all the old ice [towards our shores]...If we get southeast wind, [winds] put the polar bears into the shores more." (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

"It's easier to find bears on the coastline when there's a floe edge. They stay close to the floe edge. That's where you see them more...They can hunt better when the ice is thin because the seal holes are not quite shut yet. They're still open and so for seals, [polar bears] sit there and for long time wait for the seals to come up and just grab them...Once [the annual ice] gets thicker they'll go open sea because on the open sea there's more floe edge and thin ice and all that." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Participants mainly observed polar bears on the sea ice (on the pack ice, at the floe edge or around polynyas) in winter, in ringed seal pupping areas in spring (March and April), and in coastal areas (on the shore, on islands, on floating ice or swimming in open water) in summer and fall until freeze-up.

“In the winter, [polar bears] are out at the floe edge or out in the pack ice...When I am close to town hunting, I see lots of tracks here around the floe edge...In the spring, they are going after seal pups so they are more in the fjords and places like Markham Bay, looking for seal pups or looking for mates. In the summer, they are along the coast, not so much inland but sometimes...They could be on glaciers too from what I have heard, like when it gets very hot they spend time on glaciers where they can cool off...In the summer, you can see them from the boats in the water or along the coast all the way through there [Markham Bay area] and even through here [coast of Meta Incognita Peninsula]...We see them on the islands mostly, even on small islands. They want to get out of the water and rest on the land and there’s a lot of islands here that have potential for bears or where bears might be.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“In the winter, we see bears on the sea ice and very rarely on the land. In the summer sometimes we see them swimming and most of the times [we see them] along the shore.” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

“[Polar bears are] where there is a good population of seals and where the sea ice is and the floe edge area and where there [are] polynyas, where there’s open water. Whenever I go there [Markham Bay area], there are lots of tracks [close to] the polynyas so that’s a good place for them.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

“[Where] there’s more ice that’s where the bears will hang out more or on thin ice...And then when there’s completely no ice, they go into the fjords or open sea, stay in the water for a while...When there’s big waves coming in, swells, [polar bears] all head up to the land and then from there they wandered off onto the land...If there’s been big waves that means there’ll be more bears on the land... And then I used to say well, right now [there are] big waves. Now is a good time to hunt bears, right after that.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“On the land in summertime, wintertime on the ice...They’re very smart, polar bear...They know what they’re doing.” (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

Some contributors mentioned that polar bears of certain sex or age types have specific habitat preferences, although this topic was not explored in detail. Three contributors noted that some big male polar bears (mostly referred to as *tulajuituq* in Inuktitut) spend most of their time at sea. These large pelagic bears were described as solitary polar bears which live on the moving sea ice and in open water, coming to shore only occasionally for mating. Participants indicated that these ‘sea bears’ also have distinctive morphological characteristics, including a very large size, a grey or silver stripe on their neck back, and long fur on their front legs due to constant swimming.

“Polar bears that stay out at sea most of their time are larger and have a grey stripe on their back. There is a different Inuktitut name for these males.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“There are the big angujuaq, bigger than a 13-footer and going up to 20 feet. They stay at sea and we very rarely see them. People say that. They stay mainly in the sea and they can eat their own kind, the smaller polar bear. The size of their head is massive, they are amazing...I have only seen them a couple of times...They barely go to the land, they go to the land only when they have to.” (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

Sea ice changes

While contributors emphasized the importance of sea ice for polar bears, many (n=9 in Pangnirtung; n=8 in Kimmirut) also reported changes in sea ice quantity and quality observed over recent decades. Changes observed included: thinner sea ice, bigger polynyas, changes in floe edge location (closer to coast), as well as earlier sea ice break-up in and later freeze-up.

“The ice started to break up a lot earlier than it used to do. Like maybe a month earlier or a month and a half...I feel sometimes that the water is warm because we don’t get the ice like it used to be.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“The ice around here [Pangnirtung area] never melted until July but now it melts the fastest...Now already in April the ice is getting thinner and some part melts fast and it can be dangerous [to travel]...I started noticing these changes from the 1980s...I used to go turbot fishing here [in the middle of Cumberland Sound], but now it’s always open water.” (Matusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“[Freeze-up is] also happening later than it used to. Even one year they were still able to go out boating in December and even into January...That was not normal...It used to happen late October, early November. Now it only happens in early December.” (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

“[Now] there is possibly less ice and even in summer there seems to be less ice, like pieces of ice floating around where seals usually are sunning on top in the summer. [I have also noticed] maybe [less ice in the winter] because right now the ice floe edge is pretty close. And from what my buddy said when he went to the Markham Bay to go fishing [this year], like he said that the polynyas were very big and he has never seen them that way: the ice didn’t really form that much and there’s hardly any snow too...Within the past ten year it seems to be less ice even in the spring, maybe it melts quickly.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“When I was growing up, during the month of December we would be traveling by dog team. Nowadays we are traveling by boats [in December]...on the same routes...This is how much a difference there is now from back then! The ice used to be really thick back then...This may have affected some polar bears in a way because it has been affecting the humans. When it has impact on the humans I am sure it has an impact on the bears too in a way.” (Elijah Padluq, Kimmirut)

Several participants from both communities mentioned that while sea ice changes may have an effect on polar bears, *nanuq* is highly adaptable to habitat and sea ice changes (see also ‘Future of polar bears’ section). For example, some contributors mentioned that polar bears are able to effectively hunt seals also in open water (see also ‘Feeding behaviour’ section). However, others noted that hunting seals on sea ice may be ‘easier’ for polar bears. Overall, participants shared the view that while polar bears are highly adaptable predators able to effectively hunt a broad

spectrum of preys available at different times of the year and in different environments (on sea ice, on land, and in open water), polar bears are not all equally able to effectively hunt in every situation as 'some polar bears are better hunters than others'. Therefore, the apparent diversity of responses under this theme does not reflect a disagreement between contributors but instead highlights that the adaptability of individual polar bears to a changing environment varies along a spectrum and is influenced by local prey availability and polar bear feeding behavior (see 'Diet and prey availability' section).

"Some bears are still as fat as before, but some are not as fat as they used to be...You know, some bears are good hunters so they are very fat, others that are not so fortunate. It is just like humans: the good hunters provide themselves good meals regularly, those that are not as good hunters are not as fat." (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

"There is less ice meaning that [polar bear] hunting area on the sea ice is smaller in the winter. It's so different. But there is floating ice all the time and [polar bears] got no problem living on that floating ice." (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

"[Change in sea ice] doesn't affect the polar bears and it never will affect. Like I said, [polar bears] pretend to be ice [in open water] and a seal comes to them and they tend to be in areas where there's fish. And they also go for the young walrus, the baby ones...When there is no more ice, the polar bear pretends to be a piece of ice and stays still in the water for a long time, until a seal comes." (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

"The more experienced hunter usually passes word of mouth to everyone to tell how thick the ice is and if it is safe. I have started to notice [thinner sea ice] within the last ten years...I imagine that this has an effect on the bears because they hunt on the ice. Their hunt depends on the ice conditions but I believe they are adaptable. They are predators and they eat what they can hunt." (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

"People have been worried about ice going but one other Elder told me: 'There's always going to be ice in the fjords'. Maybe less ice in the open areas but we have lots of fjords and he said that there will always going to be ice in those fjords. So bears will have somewhere to hunt their preys [but] maybe less areas for them. I believe that guy. It is always going to be cold here and there is always going to be ice in the fjords." (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

"We know that the polar bears use the ice for their advantage to catch seals. If the sea ice melts faster then there will be less time for the easier hunts, but they have other means to hunt...I am sure they will be able to adapt because they are animals but I guess time will tell." (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

In Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, several participants (n=4 in Pangnirtung; n=2 in Kimmirut) reported that polar bears are now spending more time on the land and in coastal areas near communities as a result of changes in sea ice conditions.

"Now, they are getting closer to land and more on land." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"When the ice is melting or when there is no more ice, the polar bears seem to be going more inland." (Matiusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“The ice is a lot thinner nowadays...Polar bears normally hunt on the ice and out there the ice is not as stable as it was and as a result the polar bears are coming in the coastal areas, where towns are, looking for food. Nowadays there is more polar bears coming into town in search of food.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“[Polar bears] are coming more into town. They have always been around but lately they have been around more, within the past 10 years. The Elders here know more about [the reasons why polar bears are coming into town] but from what they say the polar bears are always looking for food and they rely on the ice [for hunting]. If the ice forms that is where they are more likely to hunt...They are searching for food, so if there is no ice I guess they are bound to be anywhere within the coast or the land.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

In Kimmirut, one participant also indicated that because of sea ice changes, some polar bears may now be immigrating from northern Québec across the Hudson Strait. Another indicated that polar bears may be coming into the Kimmirut area from the west in search for preys.

“I have noticed that the temperatures [have changed], the winters were colder back then. Nowadays is not as cold. I believe that climate change has an effect on the bears...because polar bears go to wherever ice conditions are good and there is cold weather. If the climate is changing there too, I think that the bears of northern Québec area may be also coming up [here]. I have seen clean bears with white fur out in the middle of the ocean far from land swimming [from south to north into the Hudson Strait].” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“I believe that the bears are coming [to the Kimmirut area] from that direction, from the west [Markham Bay area] or they could be coming from the [open] ocean. Even other hunters have stated that too. If it is true that the bears are coming from that direction and going towards that direction [movement from the west to the east] maybe the bears in this area [in the west] will decline because [the bears] are moving. I know that they are following their preys, the seals, and this is true for all the animals. All the animals follow where their preys are.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)



Denning

During individual interviews, contributors from both communities identified known polar bear denning areas and discussed polar bear denning behaviour and habitat.

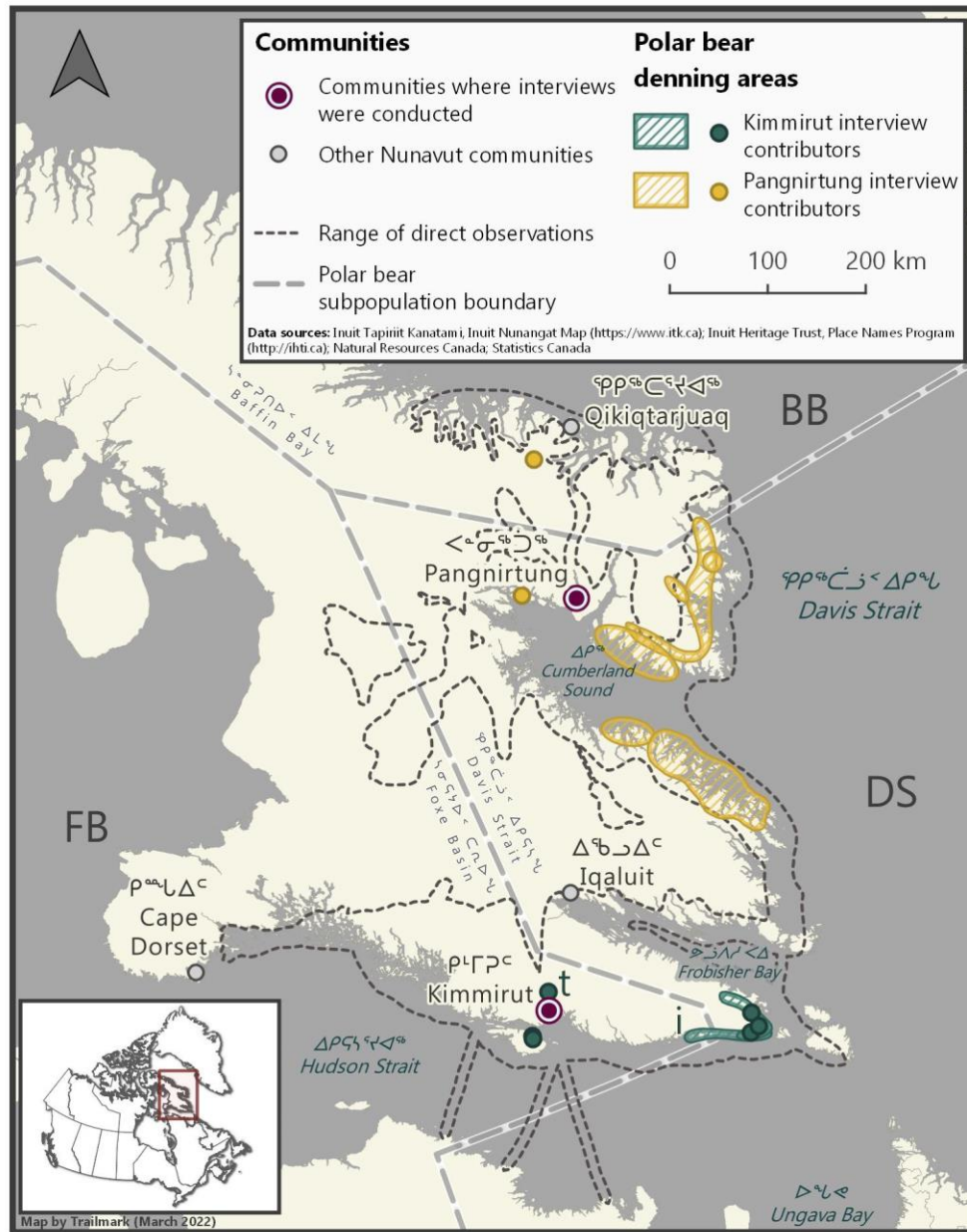


Figure 15. Polar bear denning areas identified by individual interview contributors from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung. Polar bear denning areas were obtained by aggregating the specific areas where participants from Pangnirtung (n=7) and Kimmirut (n=7) had directly observed polar bear dens over their lifetime. One contributor from Kimmirut also shared indirect knowledge on general location of dens passed on by Elders (polygon on the south shore of Meta Incognita Peninsula marked with i). Denning areas represented include both maternity dens and a temporary den (t). DS: Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit; FB: Foxe Basin polar bear subpopulation and management unit; BB: Baffin Bay polar bear subpopulation and management unit.

Fourteen participants (n=7 in each of Pangnirtung and Kimmirut) had directly observed polar bear dens over their lifetime or learned their general locations from Elders, and identified specific polar bear denning areas around Pangnirtung and Kimmirut (Figure 15). Some also noted that it was uncommon for them to come across polar bear dens and that dens were often difficult to spot or access. Contributors who described the characteristics of a 'good' polar bear denning habitat and explained that they generally observe maternity dens in hilly or mountainous coastal areas with good snow coverage (including in proximity of glacier complex), landscape features facilitating snowdrift formation, and abundant preys.

"My dad and my older friend told me that there are lots of dens down here [along the southern coast of the Meta Incognita Peninsula]. [Those are good denning spots for bears because] there's lots of walrus and seals there and fish." (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

"I have seen dens on Big Island most times. Last year I was looking to see if there may be a den in the same spot where it used to be but last year it wasn't there. It is on a high hill [with] a snow area that never melts during the summer. It is not a glacier, it is just snow but it doesn't melt. I don't recall [seeing other dens]. [I haven't noticed any changes in the time of denning], usually the denning [happens] at the same time." (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

"The mountains are higher and there's more snow in these areas...Not many people go in these areas, so they're a really good spot for polar bears to have dens, because no one goes there...[The den] looks like an igloo. You kind of have to be bent down [to stand inside]...It's ice inside. From the [polar bear] breath, [ice forms] inside the den." (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

"[Polar bears] use the fjords to go inland [to their] denning areas to give birth...They always go back [because] there's more snow in [the] backcountry. Like being closer to the glaciers and all that. But they don't use the glaciers...They just use the snow that's close to the glaciers...And I have noticed that [polar bear dens] always seem to be always facing southeast...I don't know why. I know we used to [track dens] with helicopter and sometimes [we saw dens at] 3,000 feet. That's really high...this is because the snow is drier higher up." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Some participants explained that females typically give birth to cubs in maternity dens in December and January, and leave their dens around March or April at the time of year when ringed seal pups are born.

"Some of the polar bears make a den and stay there all winter. And they're permanent, that's for sure. They stay there until March...all the pregnant ones do that. They come out of the den in March when the baby seals start to be born and they go out on the ice for the seals." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

"I have seen [polar bear] dens in Kagitukutaa [Nanuq Harbour] and Isuqtuq [Noble Inlet] areas [at the tip of Meta Incognita Peninsula]. The timing of denning could vary but around winter they start denning and come back out around March or April. Dens are likely on slanted slopes." (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

Some contributors reported that adult males use temporary dens.

“Even angjuait [big adult male polar bears] do that too sometimes. If they are really fat, I guess. They make a den in the snow and stay there. Sometimes even three or four months...That is what the Elders told us and I believe it.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“Temporary [dens are] not really shut [covered] because they’re just temporary ones. Mostly big males would use the temporary ones a lot. I found if there’s a good snow bank...they will go in just to use it temporarily...Maybe just to relax, wait for the ice to freeze up or something...In October [before freeze up] we see many temporary dens and you could even see [that] the bear is in there because it’s not shut...It’s a big male most of the time that uses those temporary ones.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

While changes in timing of denning were not reported, one participant from Pangnirtung noted a shift in maternity den location due to melting glaciers.

“I have seen a couple dens. I would look up in the mountains and a polar bear would show up for a bit and then go back in [the den]...They keep their dens in the glacier areas, but now there is nothing here anymore [showing an area where a glacier used to be]. It melted. The more the glaciers are melting, the more they move.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

One contributor described how, in the past, harpoons were used to locate maternity dens when hunting denning females.

“I watched my father looking for dens. They were looking for dens [using harpoons]. If [the harpoon] went all the way [through snow], there’s no [den]. But if you touch ice, that’s when they knew there’s a den in there. When they touch ice and you keep poking it, if it goes through, that’s the den.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

Diet and prey availability

Contributors discussed polar bear diet and feeding behaviour, and reported changes in prey abundance and availability around Pangnirtung and Kimmirut.

Diet

Contributors described the broad diet of polar bears and all individual interview participants (n=27) identified ringed seals (*natsiq*) and their pups, but also other species of seals (including bearded seals, harp seals, harbour seals) to be the main polar bear preys (Figure 16), together accounting for approximately 75% (range: 64-90, n=3) of polar bear overall diet according to contributors from Kimmirut (Figure 17). Additional polar bear preys consistently mentioned were: walrus, ducks and bird eggs (including eider ducks and their eggs and seagull eggs), whales (including belugas, narwhals and bowhead whales), fish (including Arctic char), plants and berries (including seaweed, mountain sorrel [*qunguliit*; *Oxyria digna*], crowberries [*paungaq*; *Empetrum nigrum*] and blueberries) (Figures 18 and 19). Preys or diet items that were occasionally part of the polar bear diet were also mentioned and included: other polar bears, anthropogenic waste and man-made items, caribou, dogs and Arctic foxes (Figure 16). In Kimmirut, the overall proportion of each prey in the annual polar bear diet (Figure 17), the seasonality of prey availability (Table 5), and changes in the availability of prey species (see ‘Changes in seal abundance and health’ section), particularly seals, were also explored during group interviews.

Participants from both communities reported that polar bears prey on live animals, but also feed from carcasses of harvested animals (particularly belugas and narwhals) and whale carcasses that have washed ashore (particularly bowhead whales). Importantly, a majority of contributors from both communities highlighted that *nanuq* is a highly adaptable and opportunistic predator that can “eat anything”.

“The bears can live a long time, they are good hunters and they are able to adapt. They can eat anything not just ringed seals, seaweed, [other] seals, berries. Those are [all] possible foods that [polar] bears can eat.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

“They will eat anything. They eat all types of seals and even walrus. They eat fish, they eat anything...they eat berries, anything. They could eat even other bears and sometimes when they are coming into communities they would start eating dogs.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“Their main meals are seals, walrus and whale carcasses. They eat berries and plants. I have seen a bear that had a whole bunch of plants in its stomach, you know those sour plants [mountain sorrel], they look like sugar cane but they are sour. This is what they love to eat. They eat fish too. We left a whole box of chocolate in our cabins, the bears came and eat them all...they like eggs very much too, and now and then they will have also the ducklings and the adults that cannot fly.” (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

“[Polar bears eat] seal, walrus, whale too if they can get close enough, fish. Those are the main ones, I think, but seals are the most common preys, any kind of seals...[As for fish], they eat mostly char. They go to a river and when the fish are going upstream they would catch them. That would be in August, when the dark season starts.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“I’ve seen polar bear eating walrus, bearded seal, ringed seals and dead carcasses of bowhead whales, whale meat after the hunters have hunted whales. I think they eat anything they can get their hands into...I haven’t seen a polar bear eating a polar bear [except] when we went bowhead hunting in 2013...There was a big polar bear just starting to eat up a male polar [bear]. That’s the only time I’ve seen that.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

“I saw a polar bear [that had] just killed a caribou in 1995 when I was caribou hunting.” (Abraham Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“[Polar bears] also eat berries, blackberries and blueberries in the summer and seaweed quite a bit.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“I don’t know what they don’t eat...polar bears eat anything.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

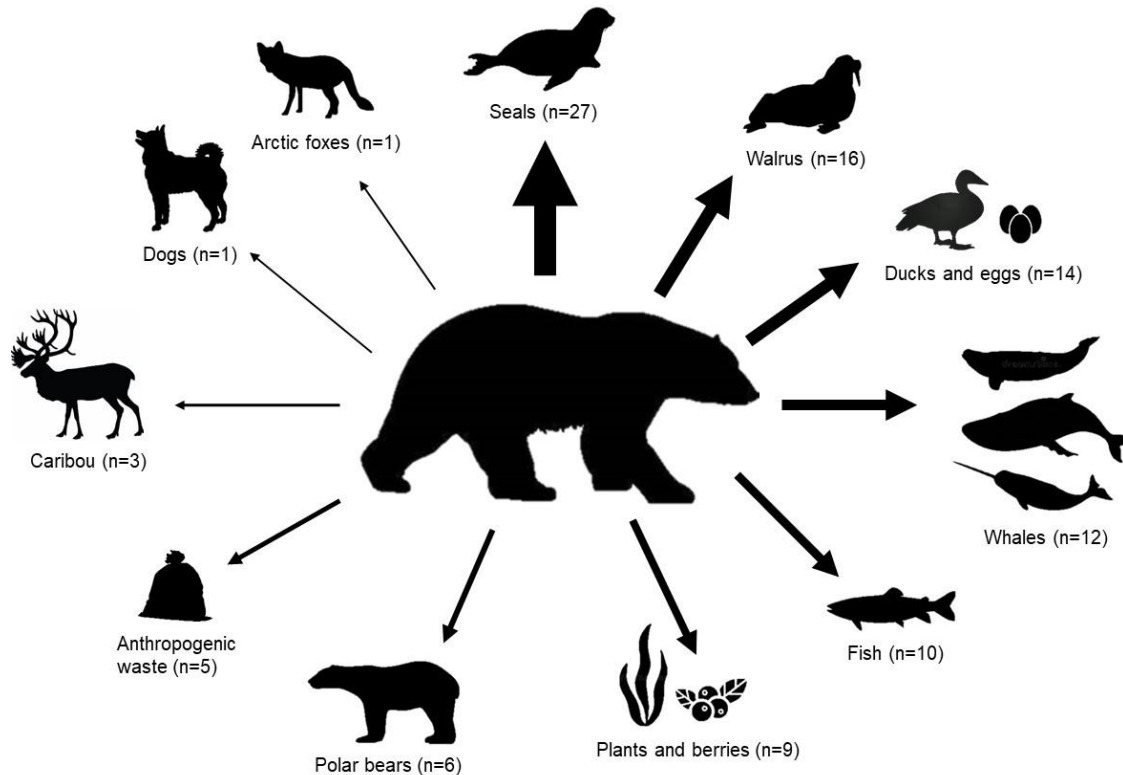


Figure 16. Polar bear preys or diet items identified by individual interview contributors from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung (n=27). Arrow thickness indicates frequency of mention by participants with thickness increasing with number of participants (n) who mentioned the prey/diet item.

Participants from Kimmirut explained that polar bear diet varies seasonally throughout the year depending on prey availability and the specific ecology and phenology of prey species. For example, while polar bears consume ringed seals throughout the year (and especially in March and April when ringed seal pups are born), they will only prey on ducks and bird eggs during the summer months. Table 5 describes the seasonality and availability of various polar bear prey species around Kimmirut.



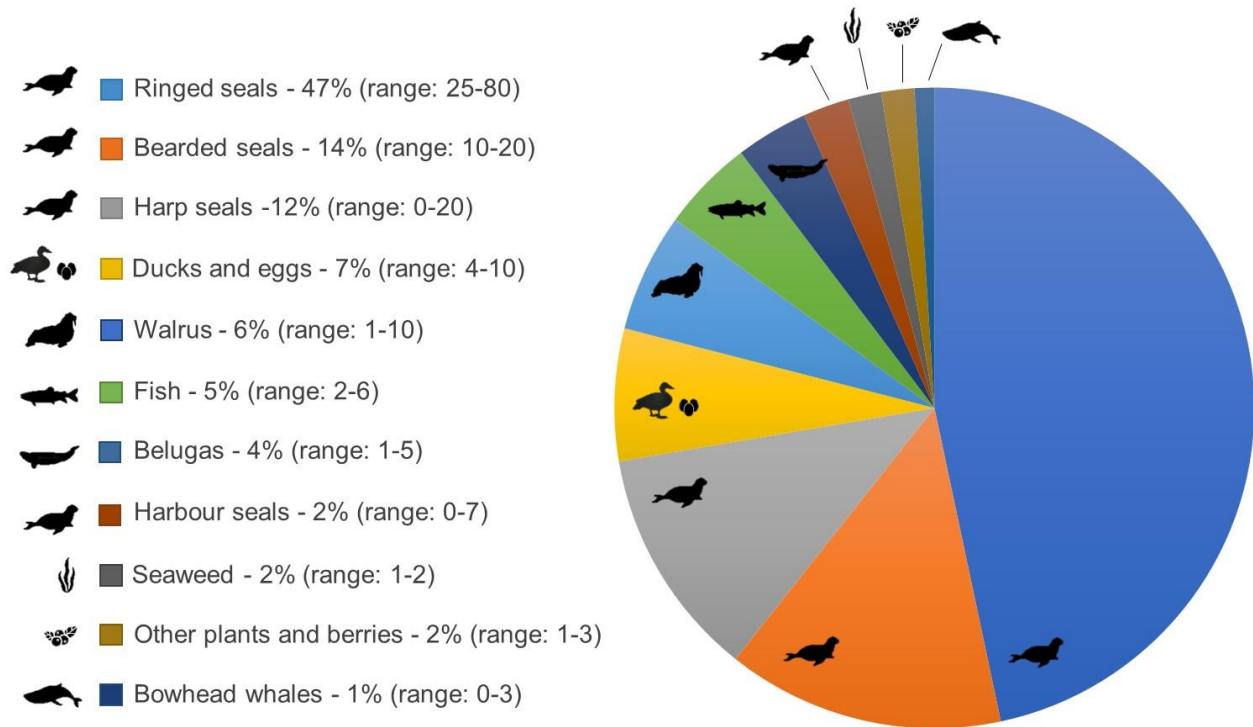
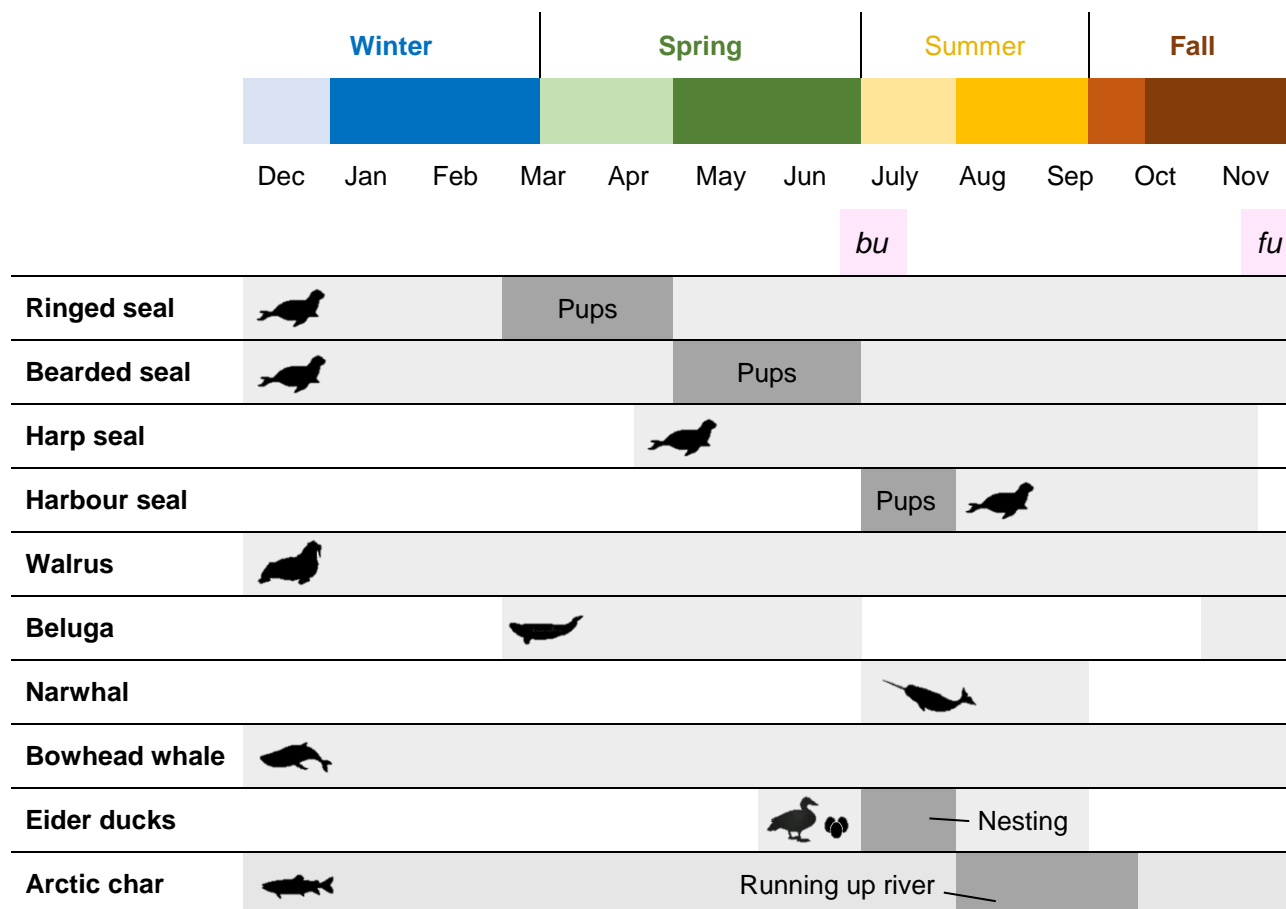


Figure 17. Relative proportion of preys in annual polar bear diet in the Kimmirut area. Percentages were derived from proportional piling exercises with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Each group reached consensus on the relative proportion of each prey item within the annual polar bear diet. Final percentages were calculated using mean values across the groups. Some polar bear preys/diet items identified by participants during individual interviews (i.e., narwhal, other polar bears, anthropogenic waste, caribou, dogs and Arctic foxes; see Figure 16) were not included in this figure as group interview contributors considered their importance to be marginal in the diet of polar bears of the Kimmirut area.

Kimmirut contributors also commented on changes in the abundance trends of some polar bear preys. Importantly, they highlighted a major decline in local ringed seal abundance (see 'Changes in seal abundance and health' section) which may contribute to explain variability in responses related to the relative proportion of ringed seals in the annual polar bear diet (see Figure 17, data range: 25-80). Participants also noted that beluga whales may have slightly declined in recent years while the number of bowhead whales seems to have increased in the area. Within the past five years, some had also observed a local decline in eider duck abundance with fewer nesting birds and colonies that have moved. Contributors reported that polar bears were increasingly preying on eggs in eider duck colonies. They also mentioned that one eider colony located in the Middle Savage Islands was displaced by walrus in recent years. Finally, contributors mentioned that the seasonal presence (from spring to summer) of orcas appears to have increased in the Kimmirut area within the last five years. They further explained that when orcas are in the area, seals and whales –which are their targeted preys– move into shallow waters to escape the orcas but in turn become more accessible to other predators, including humans and polar bears. All these important observations provided by knowledge holders contribute to better understand the complexity and interconnectedness of the ecological system, and how *nanuq* is situated within this system.

Table 5. Seasonality of some polar bear prey species present in the Kimmirut area according to contributors from Kimmirut. For each season, early phases can be identified (early winter, early spring, early summer and early fall) and are represented by the lighter colour bars. For each species, grey bars represent presence or availability and white bars indicate absence; information of interest is highlighted in dark grey bars. *Fu*: sea ice freeze-up; *bu*: sea ice break-up.



Feeding behaviour

Contributors who discussed polar bear feeding behaviour explained that polar bears are effective seal hunters on sea ice but also on the land and in open water. Polar bears are tactical when hunting seals modifying their hunting techniques depending on the specific hunting environment (sea ice, land, or open water). It is important to note some contributors also pointed out that some polar bears are better hunters than others “just like for humans”, meaning that polar bears are not all equally able to be effective hunters in every situation.

“Polar bears are really good at sea ice hunting for seals, and also in open water and on the land too for sure...I have experienced just once [seeing] a polar bear catching a [ringed] seal through a [breathing] hole on the sea ice...When that seal came up to breathe the female polar bear cut that seal hole with its front paw...It cut off the nose of the seal along with the ice. When [the seal has such an injury on the nose] it cannot dive. So the polar bear technique was to [injure] the nose of the seal so it could not go underwater anymore. It caught the seal with this strong jaws, it grabbed its head and pulled the whole

seal through a head sized hole. There is an old saying that says 'a polar bear can pull out an entire seal out of a head sized seal hole' and I witnessed that one time." (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

"Polar bears can float anywhere in the water and seals think they're a piece of ice. They wait for seals to come to them, acting like they're ice. Since they're white and they look like ice, some seals believe that it's a piece of ice and go to them." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"They catch their prey in the water. They pretend to be ice to catch seals. They are professional hunters." (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

"I know that the bears could eat their catch in the water. Bears could eat anywhere they are comfortable. Some bear would drag the seal up to the land to eat it [on the land] and some would eat their catch in the water right there. I have seen bears eating seals on the land." (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

Some participants reported that polar bears prefer to feed on fat from seals and sea mammals. They also noted that bears will only eat meat "if they are really hungry" and tend not to consume the bones of their preys.

"Once we came across a bear that had killed a seal and that bear...seems to have just ate the fat of the seal so I was thinking, I guess, they eat more the fat than the meat of a seal". (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

"When [bears] are fat they rather eat fat of other animals. If they are really healthy they eat some of the fat and leave the rest of the carcass behind." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

"Polar bears eat fat. They can kill seals, they don't eat the meat, just the fat. They eat meat only when there's no other [food]...Last week my brother shot a polar bear. I checked the stomach and there was nothing but fat, just like oil, a little bit of skin there and there. The polar bears don't chew bones, they don't. You can see the dead seal with all the bones in them...[Bears prefer] fat, seal fat or any sea mammal fat like whale fat, bearded seal fat, walrus fat." (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

"[Polar bears] have big teeth, but they don't eat bones. Even if it's a fish, they won't eat the bones...They only eat the meat of the fish, they leave the bone and the head." (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

Four contributors indicated that polar bears can camouflage themselves when hunting for seals on the land in summer.

"When polar bears hunt seals in the summer, they cover themselves with mud to blend in with their surroundings, and get the seals as they are lying on rocks. They hunt seals in the summer too without ice. Because the seals in the lovely days they usually sit on top of the rocks when there's no ice, and the polar bears hunt them." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“In the summertime, some [polar bears] can also make themselves dirty to camouflage...Polar bears are capable of camouflaging themselves, rolling around dirt and mud to [disguise] their white presence. I have seen a bear that looked almost like a rock.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

When commenting on polar bears preying on ducks and eggs, some participants who had been picking eggs around their community noted that while this was not a new phenomenon, there has been evidence that more bears are feeding in duck colonies nowadays. Up until 2019 (when interviews were performed) this phenomenon seemed to be a function of the increased number of polar bears present in the area –which determined an increasing pressure on resources overall– rather than resulting from a change in polar bear prey species or dietary habits.

“When I was younger, I have heard my father talking about polar bears that were upon the bird colonies nesting grounds. When [hunters] go egg hunting sometimes there would be [egg] shells on those islands. Although at that time, when I was younger, there were not many bears to be seen or many bears to be heard of. [But I remember] my parents and my father talking about bears upon those islands going after eggs.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

“[Bears] have seen [bears disturbing bird colonies] you know. It’s already been disturbed a lot really badly by polar bears eating eggs like from eider ducks eggs...It’s always probably been ongoing for so many years but people seem to be noticing that more today.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

A total of seven contributors (n=5 in Pangnirtung; n=2 in Kimmirut) had either directly observed polar bears feeding on other polar bears or heard reports of cannibalism from other community members.

“Some [polar bears] eat polar bear meat...The hungry ones would hunt another polar bear. I have seen the polar bears with the young ones run away from other bears. In summer and winter, I have seen them. We saw them running [and thought] why are they running? All of a sudden, there’s something behind: a bigger bear is after them.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“There are so many polar bears, now, some of them attack other polar bears and kill them and eat them because there’s not enough food...I saw a dead polar bear attacked by another polar bear. That must not be the only one, there should be more than that; [but] I saw only that one.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“When there was a bowhead whale hunt in 2013, there was a polar bear at the site where the bowhead whale was killed. It was eating another polar bear. I didn’t see it [directly], but it was on the pictures [from the bowhead hunt].” (Abraham Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“I haven’t seen a polar bear eating another polar bear. [Although once] we saw a polar bear eating on the carcass [of] a bear we [had harvested and] skinned the [previous] day.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

In both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut, contributors had not observed any significant change in polar bear diet items over time, except for anthropogenic waste. Some noted that polar bears feeding on garbage and other man made items is a recent phenomenon. A total of seven participants

(n=5 in Kimmirut; n=2 in Pangnirtung) had directly observed anthropogenic waste or man-made items in polar bear stomachs while checking polar bear stomach contents (see also 'Anthropogenic waste and other unusual observations' section).

"When we open the [polar bear] stomach, we find ringed seals or their pups, more likely we see ringed seals or any kind of food they have eaten. I have seen some bears, not a lot, but I have seen some bears that had come into town that had garbage [in their stomachs]." (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

"[Polar bears] go to the dump, that's never happened before. Even here sometimes in the fall they go to the dump and anything they can get, they eat...A few years ago we saw a polar bear at the dump in the fall." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

Changes in seal abundance and health

While all individual interview participants (n=27) identified ringed seals or seals in general as primary polar bear preys, many contributors had also observed and commented on changes in seal abundance and health over their lifetime.

In Kimmirut, all contributors who commented on changes in ringed seal abundance (n=11) during individual interviews reported a decline in ringed seal abundance occurring within the last few decades.

"The number of seals has really declined. In our harbour here, there used to be hundreds of seals on top of the newly formed ice. Now, I don't see [them] anymore. Our seals are the ringed seals. I have noticed this in our harbour in the past ten years...because bears are coming from the west. In the last five years the ringed seals have really declined in this area." (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

"[Polar bears] are healthy. Their numbers are up and there is food for them. It does not seem to be as many seals as before though, lately, in the past few summers. Before there used to be hundreds and hundreds of seals but you don't really see that anymore. I have noticed this in the past ten, 15 years...and the seals are skinny and not very healthy." (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

Participatory exercises conducted during group interviews held in Kimmirut also pointed to a major decline in ringed seal sightings over time, a substantial increase in harp seal sightings, and no change in the number of bearded seals encountered (Figure 18: plates A, B and C). Groups interviewed reported that ringed seal abundance had declined by 80% (range: 80-80) since 1960, and that harp seal abundance had increased by approximately 65% (range: 50-80) since 1950 (Figure 18: plates A and B). Narratives were highly consistent across the three groups. The coupling of seal and polar bear abundance trends obtained from group interviews conducted in Kimmirut (Figure 18: plate D) further illustrates that while contributors reported a 92% (range: 90-95) increase in polar bear relative abundance over the 1960-2019 period within their area of observation, ringed seal relative abundance (polar bear main prey) had declined by 80% (range: 80-80) over the same time period.

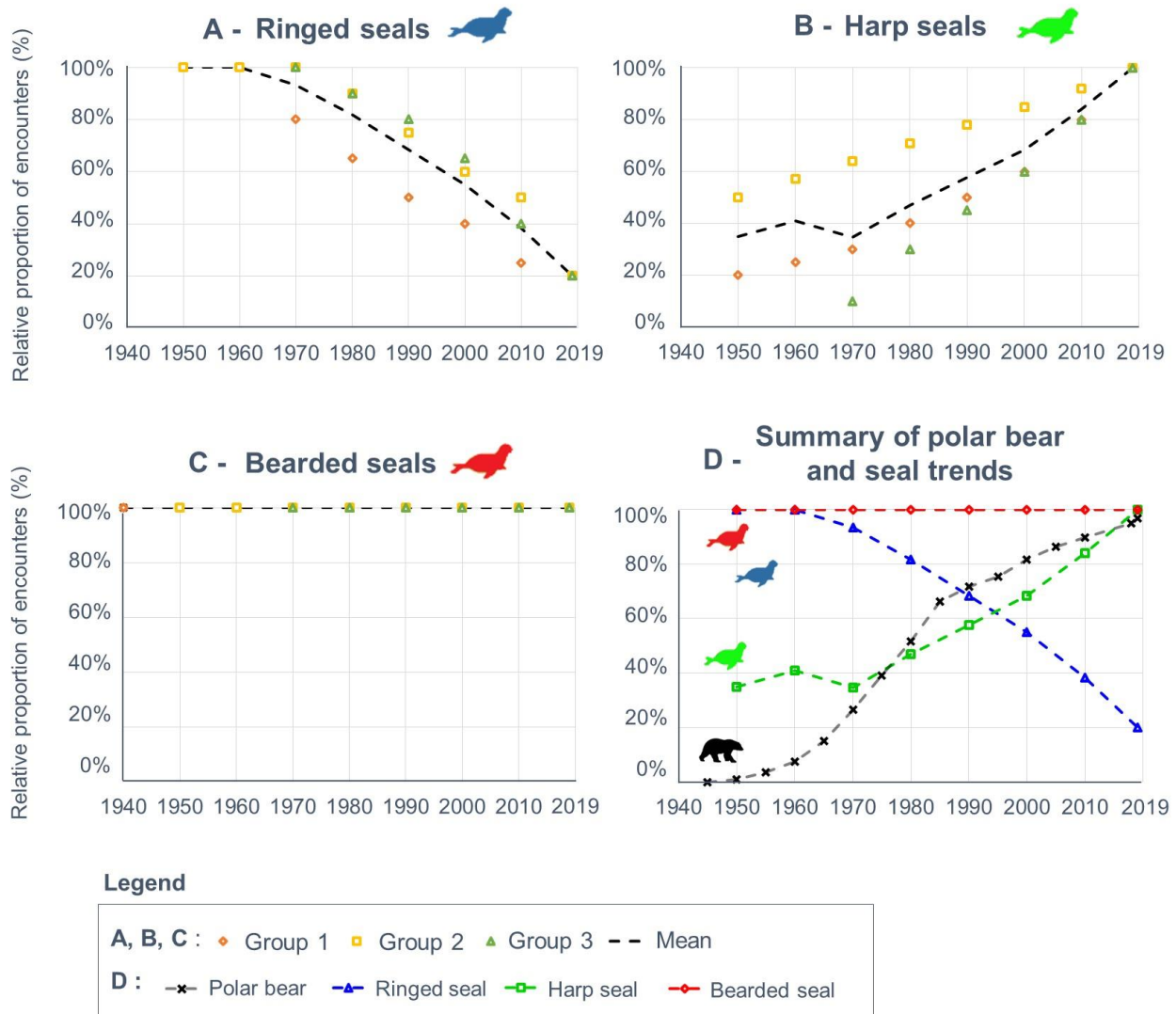


Figure 18. Relative proportion of ringed seal (A), harp seal (B) and bearded seal (C) observations/encounters between 1940 and 2019 and summary of polar bear and seal trends (D) as observed by Kimmirut contributors during group interviews. This information can be used as a proxy for seal relative abundance in the Kimmirut area. Information presented is based on interviews with three groups of polar bear hunters from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants). Data points were obtained from proportional piling exercises; each group of participants reached consensus on the relative proportion of seals they had observed over time for each species (see Appendix 5 for details). The dashed black line is the mean value. Polar bear trends presented in (D) are the same as those presented in more detail in Figure 9.

Although quantitative information on relative abundance trends for specific seal species is not available for Pangnirtung, many individual interview participants provided qualitative observations on changes in seal abundance around Pangnirtung. Similar to Kimmirut, there was a strong consensus that the ringed seal population around Pangnirtung had declined in recent decades. All contributors who commented on ringed seal abundance around Pangnirtung (n=13) reported a decline with the earliest observation of this phenomenon dating back to the 1980s. Regarding bearded and harp seal abundance trends, individual interview results were inconclusive as

questions related to bearded and harp seal abundance were not asked systematically and only two contributors offered contrasting observations. Additional group interviews would be necessary to further document directionality and magnitude of local seal abundance trends in the Pangnirtung area.

“Ever since I was young, it seems [ringed seals] have declined somewhat. [I] go out hunting all the time, like every month, every week, and [I] see less and less [seals] every year...In the last 10 or 15 years I say [ringed seals have declined]. Right now, [there is] hardly any young seals in this area...So many polar bears hunt them every year. So seal started to move out somewhere else. If the seals lose their young ones every year, they won't stay in the same area. They'll move away.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“Now, here, there's not as much [ringed] seals, anymore. Because polar bears are here hunting [them]...There are so much polar bears, now, they're hunting a lot of seals. So people aren't catching as much seals as they used to.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“Because there's too many polar bears eating the seals, there's not many seals anymore...All kinds, any type, even if it's an adult, even if it's a mother, if it's a ringed seal or bearded seal, it doesn't matter.” (Leopa Akpaliak, Pangnirtung)

“There are a lot less ringed seals since I was a boy. [Now] we get more harp seals but they stay in the summer only and they go back to Newfoundland in the winter... and there is about the same [number] of bearded seals [compared to when I was a boy], some years more some years less but it is normal [fluctuation].” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

During individual interviews, contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut offered various explanations as to why they thought ringed seals had declined in recent decades around their community. Potential causes of decline cited by participants included: increase in polar bear predation, especially around ringed seal pupping areas (n=11); increase in local community harvest (n=3); ringed seal emigration into other areas (either following preys or due to displacement by other species) (n=3); increase in maritime transport (n=2); lack of sea ice (n=1); warmer ocean waters associated with climate change (n=1); increase in fox predation (n=1) and changing winds (n=1).

“The population of polar bear has grown so much and I believe there are a bit too many now to sustain the seal populations. The seal population has declined very much over the last 40 years, 30 years because of the increase in polar bear population.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

“All I can say is that there's more of the people hunting and with more noise today. They got better equipment and polar bears are also really harvesting them, like pups. More polar bears. More seals like being killed and today foxes are not being trapped. Nobody's doing trapping anymore. Also, [foxes are] better hunters than polar bears for seal pups. Polar bears, people, foxes. Everybody's going after the seals. That's why the numbers go down.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“I think that [ringed seals] had declined because of the global climate change. [Ringed] seals are more comfortable in in cold waters. I think that they are searching for cold waters and I suspect that the decline [is noticeable] in warmer waters [because of] climate change.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Especially in the fall there used to be hundreds of [ringed] seals and you could almost see them everywhere during their mating season. But we have also seen these man made [devices] that drive away wildlife because of the ship traffic. We have seen a few of those around town and maybe [this] has something to do with [declining seals]...[These devices] make sounds to scare away the wildlife...That’s what the shipping companies or somebody put in the ocean. We have seen them close to town...That is what some of us think, [that these devices] are driving away the marine mammals. We thought that those devices in the ocean were one [cause of decline] but, I don’t know, maybe another reason could be less ice...One Elder said that seals seem to want to go against the wind and we have been getting quite a bit of south wind in the past years. That one Elder thought that the seals tend to want to go against the waves or against the current or tide. I heard him say that one time but he is no longer with us...a very knowledgeable Elder. So [ringed seals] may be going to different areas. If we keep getting the south wind [ringed seals] may be going somewhere else. That is what he was thinking: out in the open ocean or closer to Quebec or Labrador...[Before] we used to get more north wind.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

In addition to discuss seal abundance, contributors commented on seal health. While five participants had not seen any changes in seal health over time (n=3 in Pangnirtung; n=2 in Kimmirut), nine contributors (n=5 in Kimmirut; n=4 in Pangnirtung) described abnormalities observed in ringed seal fur over the last 20 years, including fur loss (alopecia) and molting lasting longer than usual. One contributor from Kimmirut observed alopecia also in bearded seals and reported a case of severe fur loss in an adult bearded seal in which the animal appeared completely without fur and lethargic. Furthermore, three participants (n=2 in Pangnirtung; n=1 in Kimmirut) reported that ringed seals are now skinnier than they were in the past. One contributor highlighted that unusual molting patterns could be related to an increase in ocean temperatures and possibly other changes (e.g., salinity). Others explained that because sea ice break up is now occurring earlier, seals spend less time on the ice and more time on the shore, which can impact fur molting and growth. We note here that the topic of seal health was not explored in depth during interviews. Additional interviews would be required to document the extensive IQ available on this subject.

“[Ringed seals] have always being good, there is no difference. Now and then, it is the same thing as any other animals, they would either being skinny when they are supposed to be fat or they are sick when they are not supposed to be sick. It is the same thing as in any other animals.” (Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)

“I am noticing a change in the condition of the seals that I have seen within my lifetime. A lot of them are losing fur and at one point I have noticed that the whole seal had no fur and I think that this is due to climate change...this was maybe in 2002. I have seen this in seals that are in between young seals and adults...Fur loss could be anywhere on the body. I have noticed it more in the summer and have only noticed it in ringed seals...The meat and the fat of the seals are always good.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Sometimes I would notice that the seal has fur but then it has some sort of oil on the fur. Ringed seals are likely to have less fur and if they do have fur we have been noticing grease or some sort of oil. This is mainly in summer time, the boating season. I have noticed this in seals that are in between an adult and a young...the seals are in pretty much normal health except for the fur condition. I would not know why [seals] are like this.

I have started to notice the first seals with these fur conditions about ten years ago.”
(Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

“We have seen [ringed] seals that we shot with no fur on their back or on their belly but we still eat them considering that when we cut them up they look healthy inside. That could be [caused by] being on rocks and rubbing on to them. That is what I think but I don’t know. I see it very rarely and I see it in the summer [not in the winter]. I haven’t seen other seals that are like that [apart from ringed seals].” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

“Some of the ringed seals don’t change their fur properly every year...because [sea] ice breaks up too early. To change the fur, ringed seals have to go on top of the ice. If one year there is not enough ice or it breaks up too early they don’t have time to change their fur so they have two furs: the old fur that keeps shedding and the new [fur that] starts to grow. We call them maqoalik, ‘two hair’ [seals]...There are more [‘two hair’ seals] now. It used to be [that] maqoalik [were seen] only in the springtime, when they start to lay on top of the ice...That is the time when there are ‘two hair’ [types] on them: the old and the new growing hair. They are skinny then because they don’t eat anything when they’re lying [on the ice] for almost two months. When they go in the water with the new hair, brand new, they are fattening up, they’re eating. They’re starting to be fat...I see maqoalik throughout the summer and the winter and it used not to be like that...The ice started to break up a lot earlier than it used to do. Like maybe a month earlier or a month and a half...I feel sometimes that the water is warm because we don’t get the ice like it used to be... Now, ringed seals are usually skinnier than used to be. [In the] winter, ringed seals they are always fat. Right now, even in winter, some seals are skinny. At the floe edge [when] we shoot them, they sink under water.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“The fur of ringed seals might be a little different because they have to stay on top of the ice to sun tan to get new fur. If there is less ice, the fur doesn’t molt properly. Inside the animal there is an organ [spleen] that looks like a liver attached to the stomach...and every year it gets red and big in certain times of the year. When [the spleen] is swollen and becomes red that is when the [ringed] seal wants to be on top of the ice and the fur starts to get loose...I am not a scientist but I know because every year I get [ringed] seal to eat and I notice any little changes that happen in the body of the seal in the different seasons. That organ [spleen] normally has a bluish dark color and it’s thin, but at certain times of the year [it can get] swollen and turn with blood inside. When that happens, the [ringed seal] fur starts to brown and get loose. But the seal has to rub himself on top of the ice to help get rid of that old fur. And when that happens, [ringed seals] don’t want to eat. The stomach is completely empty for two months and they lose weight. This is in June, July. As soon as the ice is all gone in fjords and the seals have new fur on them they then disappear down to Davis Strait to feed on the shrimps and they stay there up until October and they are fat when they come back...So when they have new fur on, they all move. Well, not every single one of them move but I would say 90% of the [ringed] seals go out to the deeper ocean where they can find the shrimps. Since we get a lot less ice, we get more skinny seals in early summer...We lose more seals [when we hunt them] in the summer. When we shoot them in the summer they have no fat on them [so] they drown. We see also some seals with no fur on them because they go on rocks to sun bathe if there is no ice. Rocks are not like ice so when seals move around they lose the fur plus the nails, they don’t have sharp nails anymore. I have started to notice these changes since 20 years ago, since the ice has started to melt earlier.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

Despite the observed local decline in ringed seal abundance and reported changes in seal health, contributors generally indicated that polar bears have broad diets and that they can adapt to changes in prey availability. Many indicated that they were not concerned about polar bear persistence related to changes in local prey availability; however, some participants also acknowledged that if ringed seals remain scarce, polar bears could move to areas where ringed seals and other suitable preys are more abundant.

General health and body condition status

Polar bear health indicators

During individual interviews (n=27), contributors from both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung shared information about what they are looking for (indicators) to assess the health of individual polar bears, how they assess these indicators, and when. Polar bear health indicators discussed included: polar bear fatness (n=22); behaviour and movement (n=18); fur and/or hide colour and condition (n=15); meat/fat colour, smell and taste (n=7); stomach contents (n=3); teeth condition (n=1); and appearance of internal organs (n=1). Contributors also reported using direct and indirect measures (or metrics) for assessing these indicators, particularly to determine fatness of individual polar bears. Some of these metrics may be useful as early warning signs of impending population changes. Participants assessed the health of individual polar bears both before harvesting (while observing live polar bears on the land) and after harvesting (during butchering, hide processing and consumption of harvested bears). Figure 19 describes in detail polar bear health indicators mentioned by contributors, as well as how these indicators are assessed. Table 6 provides a summary of the polar bear health assessment process, including stages at which each indicator is assessed.

Importantly, participants reported assessing the health of individual polar bears holistically, employing multiple indicators and adapting their scale of assessment to take into account seasonal variability in polar bear condition. However, contributors highlighted that fatness was the indicator that most reflected the overall health of individual polar bears as it correlates with many other indicators. Seasonal variability, and in some instances also geographic variability, of indicators were important observations made by contributors, highlighting that the assessment of the health of individual polar bears needs to take into account such variability.

Contributors explained that assessing the health status of individual polar bears was important to them as it guided their polar bear harvesting and consumption decisions. Many noted that they preferred harvesting and consuming 'healthy' polar bears that provide good quality meat and hides.

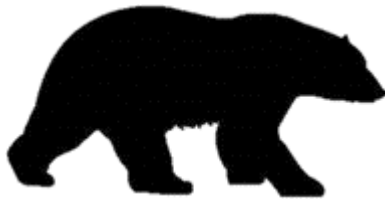
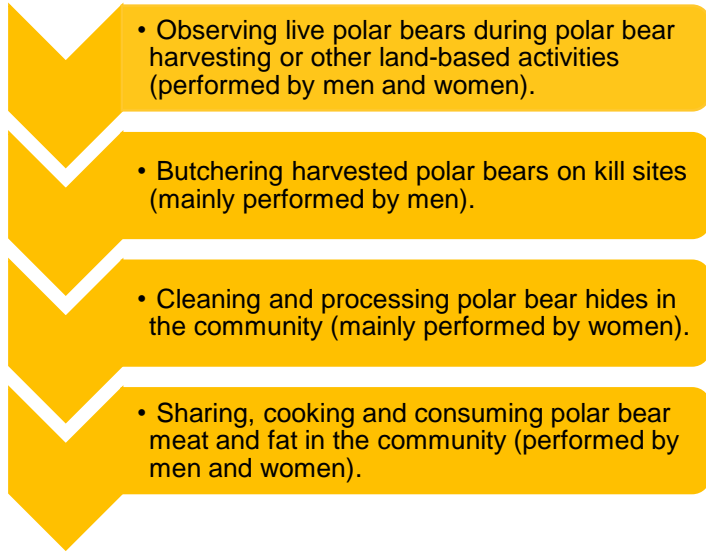
"[I know when a bear is healthy] by observing the bear: if it is fat it seems to be healthy. I tell people who go harvest bears to only get bears that are fat and not to harvest bears that seem skinny." (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

"[To eat] we prefer a fat polar bear [rather] than a skinny one. The skinny ones are not so healthy so they are not very good to eat." (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

"We were able to tell that the one that I caught was healthy because of how much fat it had on it. It was chubby, you could say that. And also the coat was very white." (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

Table 6. Polar bear health indicators and their associated assessment stages according to contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut (n=27).

Polar bear health assessment stages

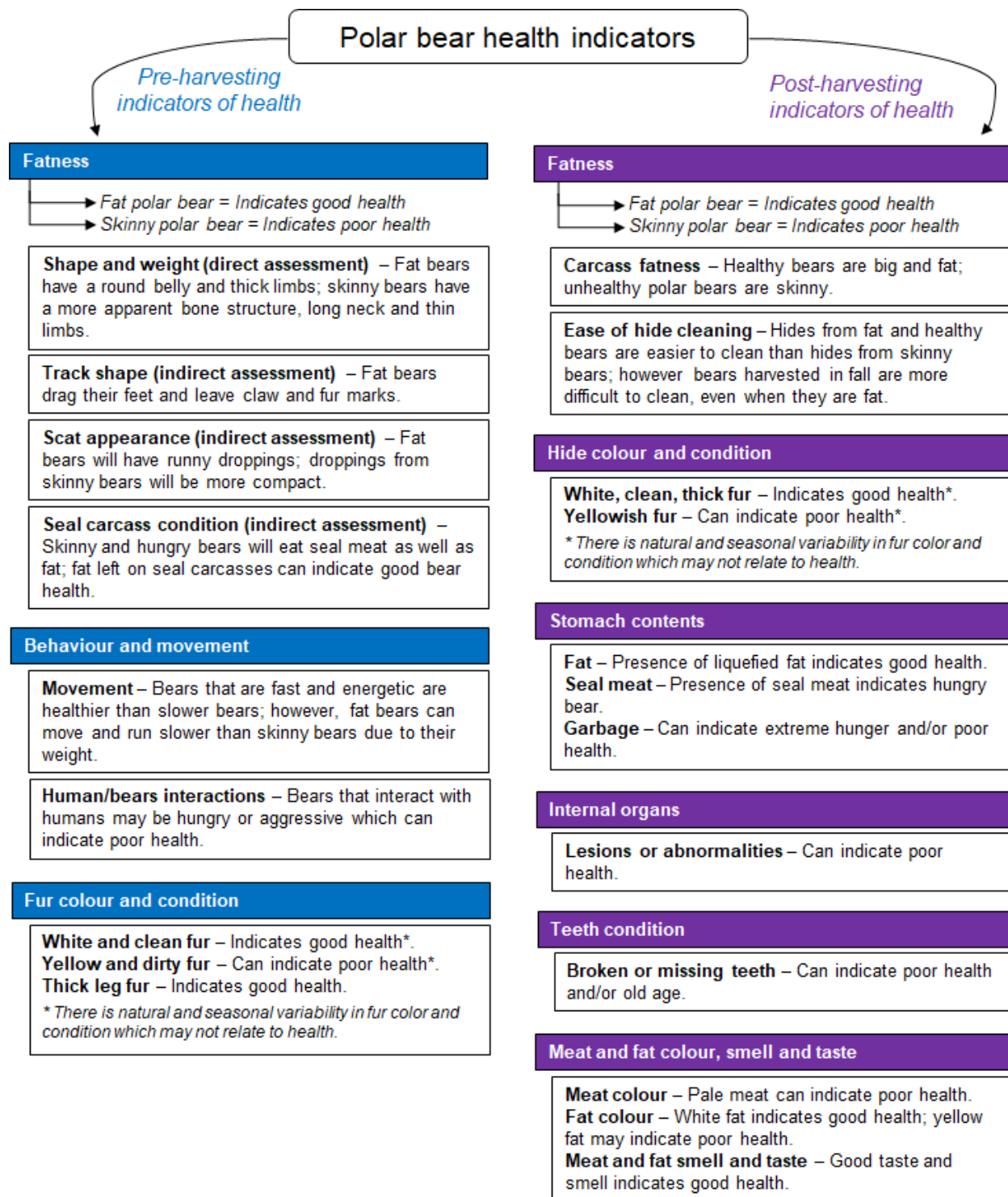


The health of an individual polar bear is determined holistically by using various indicators at multiple stages.

Indicators	Polar bear health assessment stages			
	Observing live polar bears	Butchering	Hide processing	Food sharing, preparation and consumption
Fatness	✓	✓	✓	
Behaviour and movement	✓			
Fur colour and condition	✓	✓	✓	
Stomach contents		✓		
Internal organs condition		✓		
Teeth condition		✓	✓	
Meat and fat colour, smell and taste		✓	✓	✓



Figure 19. Summary of pre- and post- harvesting indicators employed to assess the health of individual polar bears and their specific assessment metrics according to contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut (n=27).



Body condition (fatness)

Fatness was consistently used by contributors as an integrated indicator of polar bear health (n=22). Fatness was considered by contributors as a synonym of health, with fatter bears consistently described as healthier bears. Participants indicated that fatness could be assessed using direct but also indirect measures or metrics (Figure 19). Metrics used could provide a measure of fatness at the individual or population level (e.g., visual assessment of polar bear roundness and visual assessment of degree of consumption of seal carcasses, respectively).

Fatness can be determined directly by looking at a polar bear shape (roundness) and weight. When commenting on a standardized polar bear fatness scale conventionally used for in polar bear research in Nunavut, contributors further identified 'unhealthy' versus 'healthy' levels of fatness for individual polar bears (Figure 20).

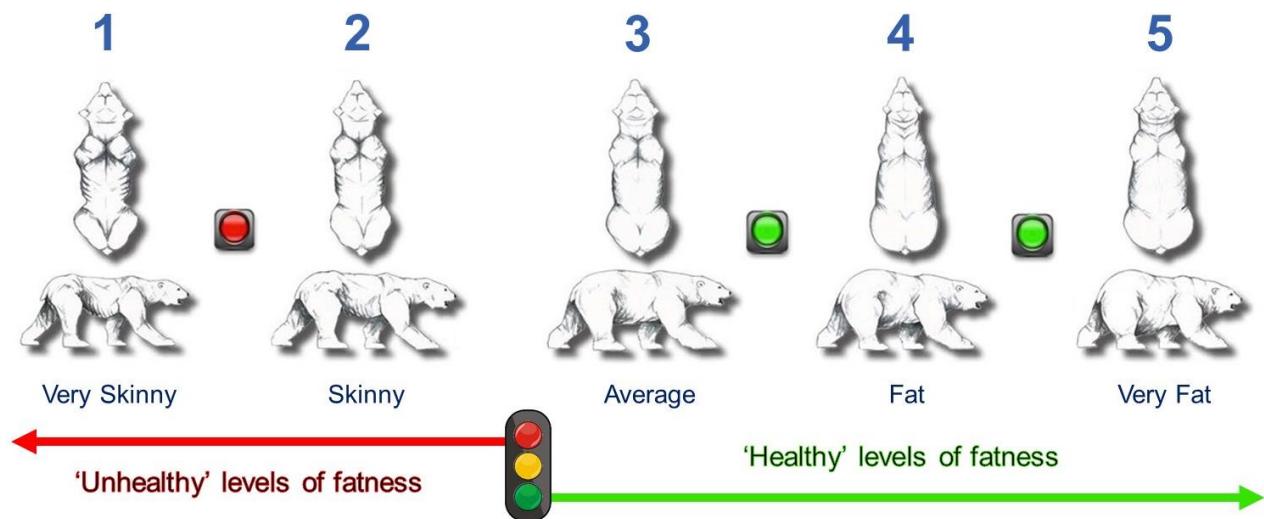


Figure 20. 'Unhealthy' versus 'healthy' levels of fatness of individual polar bears classified based on their body condition status using the fatness index on a 1 to 5 scale developed by Stirling et al. 2008. Polar bear categories and drawings of body types are sourced from the Polar Bear Body Condition Index Card used by the Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment (Government of Nunavut, n.d.).

"The healthy polar bears are nice and fat, while unhealthy polar bears are usually very skinny...Heathy males show the belly nice and fat." (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

"The size and the width [indicate health]. You know, if [a polar bear] has a long big belly hanging out it's healthy." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

"If you see a polar bear from the distance, you could tell if it is fat and healthy or skinny. It is very noticeable to see how it looks. The healthy bears are big and fat. A fat bear has its stomach almost touching the ground while walking, while a skinny bear has just skin and bones. It is very noticeable." (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

"I have seen all kinds of bears, the ones that are healthy are normally the fat healthy bears. And the skinny ones, when you see and observe them you can tell that they are not healthy bears, just by seeing them...When you see a skinny bear you can see the bones sticking out on the body and they are not healthy." (Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)

“One good way to tell [if a polar bear is healthy] is by [assessing] its weight and its fat[ness]. [If it is fat], you know, [this means that the bear] has been catching preys like seals and other game. When it is fat, we know it is healthy. The hair is good and it is a young healthy bear hunter that would catch preys. That is one sure way to tell whether a bear is healthy or not: when it is fat.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

Some participants from both communities indicated that fatness could be determined also indirectly by looking at the shape of polar bear tracks. In particular, fat polar bears tend to drag their feet which is reflected in tracks with dragging marks (Figure 21). One contributor explained that these types of polar bear tracks are typically seen in the spring.

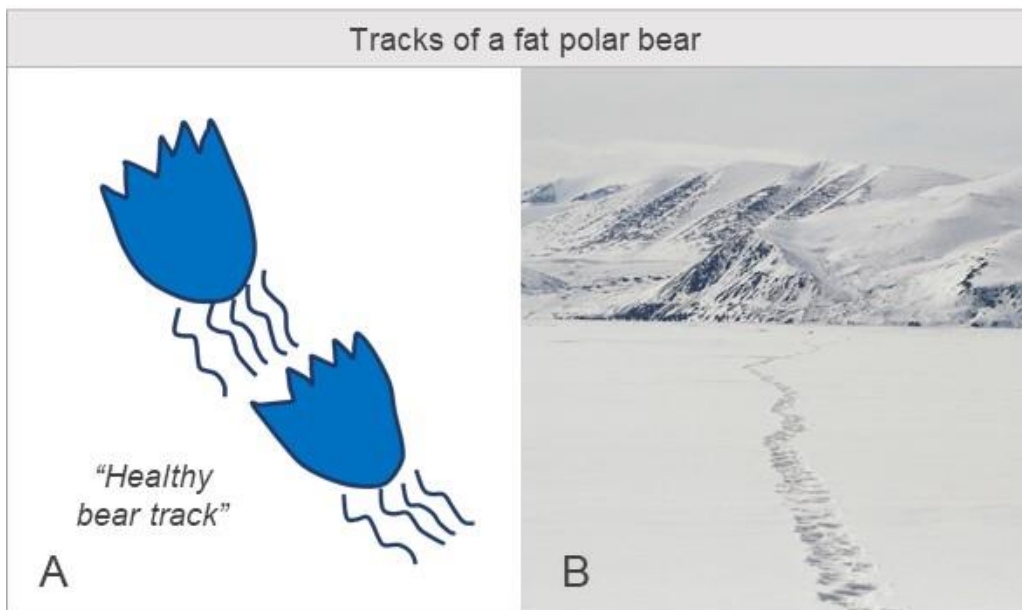


Figure 21. A: Schematic by Sandy Akavak representing a typical polar bear track with dragging marks indicating a ‘fat’ or ‘healthy’ bear; B: picture of polar bear tracks on the frozen ocean (courtesy of David McGeachy).

“I would know by looking at the footprints whether a polar bear is healthy and fat or [if] it is skinny. You can tell by looking at its footprints...As it walks along, a healthy fat bear would drag along the fur and a bit of the claws. I would be able to tell if it was a fat, healthy bear. If it was skinny bear it would not show the same dragging marks. It would be just the footprint without the dragging marks. I can also easily tell by its appearance...If the polar bear is fat I would notice the jiggle [of the fur] and the fur of the legs would also likely be thicker. I would be able to tell if a polar bears is skinny or not by looking at its joints, the high parts of the animals where there is less meat [the shoulders and the hips]. In skinny [polar bears] those joints would likely be showing...I would be able to tell also by looking at its neck. In a skinny bear, the neck is really narrow and long and its limbs would be thin.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

*"I can tell by the tracks. When they're healthy, they're kind of drag their paws. It's really fun when you can tell they are big by [looking] at their paws... Since I was a little boy, I was told that when they are dragging [their feet] it's a big polar bear. But when they're not dragging and [leave] just perfect paw [marks] then that's when it's always skinnier."
(Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)*

One contributor indicated that the appearance of polar bear scats could reflect fatness and overall health of a polar bear, although he also added it extremely rare to find scats. In particular, scats of 'healthy fat' bears is runny as polar bears eat mostly fat, while 'unhealthy skinny' bears will have more compacted scats. We note that, while these observations are important for the broad understanding of health indicators and their multiple measures of assessment, given the difficulties in finding polar bear scats on the land this metric is less suitable for the systematic monitoring of polar bear body condition status.

"The droppings of a healthy bear would likely be runny as opposed to a skinny bear that would have the droppings a bit more compact." (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

Other two participants mentioned that the degree of consumption of a seal carcass preyed upon by a polar bear provides indirect insights on the level of hunger of that polar bear, which in turn relates to its body condition status and overall health. They explained that finding leftover fat on seal carcasses could indicate the presence of fat and healthy polar bears, while seal carcasses on which both meat and fat have been consumed could indicate the presence of skinny and hungry polar bears. Assessing the degree of consumption of seal carcasses in an area could therefore provide additional information on the nutritional stress that the local polar bear population may be subjected. We believe this measure of assessment may be well suited to serve as an early warning signal for changes in the local polar bear population.

"If [polar bears are] really healthy, they'll eat some of the fat and leave the carcass behind. They just eat the fat, mostly fat." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

"If they're really hungry they'll eat [seal] meat too but they'll go for just the fat...first. Sometime when you open the gut of a polar bear mostly you can see it's liquid, just the fat." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Finally, participants reported that polar bear fatness can be assessed while observing live polar bears on the land, when butchering harvested bears on kill sites but also during polar bear hide processing. Women specialized in polar bear hide processing highlighted that polar bear fatness can be determined based on ease of hide cleaning. They explained that polar bear body fat content is reflected in how difficult it is to scrape fat off a hide: hides from skinny bears are more difficult to clean than hides from fat bears. However, one contributor also explained that the hides of polar bears harvested in the fall tend to be more difficult to clean than those harvested in winter, even when they are fat. This last comment highlights natural seasonal variability that has to be taken into account when utilizing specific assessment metrics.

"When I'm cleaning the skin that's when I know [if the bear was fat]...It's harder to scrape the excess fat from the skin [if the bear] was not fat...When [a bear is] healthy it's easy to scrape off the fat and the fur is white." (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

"If it is a skinny bear, the hide is harder to clean." (Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Hides of fat bears are easier to clean and skinny bears are very hard to clean and there is more work to do because you are not scraping [the fat] but you are trying to cut through it...Some of the bears harvested in the fall have less hair [in the paws area] because [the bears] have been walking during the summer and part of the fall. In the winter their fur grows back and [the paws] are easier to clean. I have done so many [hides] that I know what they go through. And the bears that are harvested in the fall are dirtier than the bears that are harvested in the winter and this has always been like this. Even if they are not skinny, the bears harvested in the fall are a bit harder to clean than the bears harvested in the winter.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

Behaviour and movement

Many contributors stated that how a polar bear moves and behaves is also an indicator of health (n=18). In general, healthy bears are fast and energetic, whereas significantly slow movements can be indicative of poor health. Some participants indicated that fat bears can also move slowly due to their weight.

“Sometimes you see very skinny polar bears that are not moving as healthy polar bears...Just by the movements you can tell that they are not as healthy: they don't move as fast as a healthy polar bear. It is a very lazy type of walk.” (Matusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“The unhealthy ones will be like more slow or may limp.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“[I can tell if a bear is healthy] by looking at the way it moves. When they are fast when they are start running, that is a healthy bear. I know that if it is a starving or unhealthy bear they won't move as quick.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

“It is pretty obvious, a healthy bear, it is more alive [and has] more energy compared to an unhealthy one, which is skinny and slow. It is pretty easy to tell the difference by the outlook appearance.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

“Healthy fat bears would run slower, and skinny bears would be a lot faster. A skinny bear runs fast while a fat bear moves slow.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

When discussing polar bear health, some contributors further noted that polar bears that interact with humans and come near communities may be hungry and aggressive which could indicate poor health. We also note here that when talking about 'problem bears' many contributors mentioned healthy juvenile individuals that tend to be more inquisitive and aggressive (see 'Human-polar bear interactions' section).

“The polar bear that I have observed are healthy but the bears that are hungry are the ones that tend to come to the community...The ones that come to the community some are hungry but bears nowadays coming in the communities are more aggressive and attack humans even if they are not hungry.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“If we see an unhealthy [bear] it is likely in the time when there is no ice, in the summer or the early fall when there is no ice...I have seen both young ones and older ones that looked unhealthy.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

“When you see a polar bear that is not running away then it is not as healthy as the others, it is hungry. Even if you scare it off, it keeps returning. That is a hungry polar bear.” (Matusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

Fur colour and condition

Fur or hide colour and quality was also identified as an indicator of polar bear health (n=15) which can be assessed while observing live bears, as well during butchering and hide processing. Contributors reported that white, clean and thick fur generally indicates good health while yellow and dirty fur could be indicative of poor health.

“[Healthy bears have clean fur] because I think they move in ice and water when they’re healthy, they swim a lot and they clean themselves a lot.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“They are very noticeable when their yellow fur is not really healthy.” (Michael Kisa, Pangnirtung)

“Sometimes they are dirty, sometimes they are clean. I would think that a good healthy bear is clean, it is more white. [Unhealthy bears are] more dirty, not as white, and skinny looking.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

We note that participants also reported natural seasonal and geographic variability in polar bear fur colour and condition which may not relate to health. For example, one participant specialized in processing polar bear hides explained that polar bears harvested in fall generally have dirtier fur than those harvested in winter. A hunter also noted that polar bear fur is generally yellower in summer when bears spend more time on the land. In addition, some participants highlighted that fat stains on polar bear neck and head indicated that bears had been preying on large animals. Others mentioned that bears may camouflage by covering in dirt and mud as they look for preys on the land. Finally, one contributor mentioned that polar bears from the Pangnirtung area are ‘yellower’ than polar bears from the Qikiqtarjuaq area, thus highlighting the geographic variability of this indicator. Therefore, although related to polar bear health in some context, fur colour in itself was not described as a definitive indicator of health.

“To us, anything that has an ugly looking hair, it’s not healthy...[Unhealthy bears have] very brownish colour of hair...Healthy [bears] look like fat and [have] really clean [fur]. Really nice, white...Sometimes they get brown hair in the neck area because they have been eating fat, maybe bowhead whale.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“The younger it is, the more white. It’s not because bad health or good health...some are really yellow even when they’re adult.” (Davidee Nowyuk, Pangnirtung)

“If the fur is really clean you can tell [the bear] has been eating good and if the coat is really good [clean and white] you can maybe tell that the bear has been swimming out in the ocean a lot... [But in the summer, when polar bears hunt on land they] look pretty dirty. That is their way to camouflage themselves when they hunt on land so they won’t be as visible: they dirty themselves up in the mud when they hunt on land.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“A healthy polar bear has nice fur: all white, not too yellow. That’s a healthy bear. Yellow ones or dirty [can be] healthy too.” (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

Meat and fat colour, taste and smell

Polar bear meat and fat colour, taste, smell and overall quality was identified as an additional indicator of health (n=7) that can be assessed during butchering, hide processing and/or during food preparation and consumption. Contributors explained that white fat generally indicated good polar bear health while the presence of yellow fat and pale meat suggested poor health. Good meat/fat taste and smell were also perceived as a sign of good health.

“If the carcass of the bear looks good to eat, we won’t waste it as long as the bear looks healthy enough...if the carcass is fat enough and by looking at the colour of the meat. If the meat has a good colour and it is not pale, it means it is a good meat, but if the meat is kind of pale it does not look good and we won’t eat it...[I can tell] if a bear is healthy by its look, and the taste and smell of its meat.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“It has always been mentioned that some bears have really bad smell [while] others don’t have any smell. Inuit have the knowledge that it’s always been like that. [I mean] the smell of the meat.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

“[When] fat is really white, that’s healthy. [And when] you don’t see any brown spots on the fat area, we feel that’s healthy.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“A healthy polar bear often will have nice fat on [its hide]. It’s easy to scrape off, it’s not really yellow. It’s easier to clean...I’ve worked on one that wasn’t really very healthy, the fat looks a little more yellow and it’s harder to scrape off.” (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

Stomach contents, internal organs and teeth condition

Some participants reported that stomach contents (n=3) and internal organs (n=1) from harvested polar bears can be examined during butchering as indicators of health. They noted that healthy polar bears would have seal remains and mostly liquefied fat –looking almost like water– in their stomachs. The presence of anthropogenic waste or unusual prey items may indicate poor health or hunger and may correlate with poor body condition. One participant further explained that the presence of lesions or abnormalities on internal organs can also be indicative of poor health.

Lastly, one contributor highlighted that broken or missing teeth could be signs of poor health and/or old age. Poor teeth status was also correlated with poor body condition.

“The bears with less or broken teeth would be skinny or skinnier bears...I have seen bears with no [canines] and they are skinnier. I have seen that twice.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

Changes in polar bear body condition and general health

Contributors shared their observations of changes in polar bear fatness (body condition) and overall health over time. These are presented below per community. In this section, polar bear fatness is discussed alongside general polar bear health given that ‘fatness’ was identified as the main indicator of health by participants from both communities (see ‘Polar bear health indicators’ section).

Kimmirut

In Kimmirut, changes in polar bear body condition and health were discussed during both individual and group interviews. Qualitative individual interview results are presented and discussed together with quantitative findings from group interviews.

Temporal changes in body condition status

During individual interviews (n=13), when discussing temporal changes observed in polar bear fatness (body condition status), contributors shared multiple perspectives which are summarized in Table 7. While it was acknowledged that level of fatness differs from polar bear to polar bear – depending on the hunting skills of individual bears–, a majority of contributors reported observing more polar bear in poorer body condition compared to the past. Some participants interpreted this observation as indicative of a general decline in polar bear body condition over time in the Kimmirut area, although some also specified that the change they had observed was slight. However, some contributors expressed the view that polar bear body condition had remained stable or were uncertain about any change in polar bear body condition over time.

Table 7. Observations on temporal changes in polar bear body condition status in the Kimmirut area based on individual interviews (n=13).

Type of observation	Frequency of responses	Notes
More “skinny bears” or polar bears in poorer body condition compared to the past	7	Five contributors interpreted this observation as a general decline of polar bears’ body condition status with one of them noticing this change within the past 10 years.
Body condition may have declined but it is still unclear at this point	1	The contributor noted that more time was required for a definitive answer.
No change observed	3	Two women specialized in hide processing and one hunter provided this answer.
Unknown	2	One contributor (Elder) was not confident in commenting on this aspect as he was not actively harvesting anymore at the time of the interview. However, he also mentioned observing a decline in body condition while still harvesting.



Figure 22. Mikidjuk Kolola (left), Sandy Akavak (centre) and Joannie Ikkidluak (right) participating in proportional piling exercises on polar bear body condition around Kimmirut.

Group interviews with active harvesters (n=3, totalling eight participants) were important to clarify some of these uncertainties, minimizing potential biases¹¹, as well as understand the degree of change observed. Changes in polar bear fatness were determined using proportional piling exercises over the 1 to 5 body condition types used in conventional monitoring (developed by Stirling et al. 2008) and repeated over three time periods: (1) around 1990; (2) around 2005; and (3) within the last three years (2016-2019) (Figure 22). Group interviews indicated that the increased number of 'skinny bears' reported by individual interviewees were likely a function of a population increase rather than the result of a substantial change in polar bear body condition status over time. Group interview results highlighted that overall changes in polar bear body condition status in the

Kimmirut area were very minor across the three time periods examined (Figure 23). This finding likely explains uncertainty in individual interviewees' responses (Table 7).

In summary, based on proportional piling exercises, for each time period (around 1990, around 2005, and last three years [2016-2019]) most polar bears observed were classified within 'average' or 'fat' body condition categories and, overall, proportions of polar bears observed per body condition type had remained similar since the 1990s (Figure 23). Starting from 2005, there was a small increase in the proportion of 'skinny' bears –about one percentage point from the 1990 level. Over the 2016-2019 period, there was also a shift of a few percentage points from the 'fat' to the 'average' body condition type compared to 2005 (Figure 23). In particular, there was a slight decline in the proportion of 'fat' polar bears from 49% (range: 48-50) observed around 2005 to 45% (range: 40-50) observed in 2016-2019. This decline was mainly compensated by a small increase in the proportion of 'average' bears from 42% (range: 30-49) observed around 2005 to 45% (range: 30-55) observed in the 2016-2019 period. However, overall, across the time periods examined, changes were minor with the majority of bears (over 94%; range: 92-98) classified within 'healthy' fat levels (Figure 23). In fact, there was a consensus among group interviews contributors (n=4, totalling 15 participants) that polar bears exhibiting body condition types 1 and 2 had 'unhealthy' fat levels and that polar bears with body condition types 3, 4 and 5 had 'healthy' fat levels (Figures 20 and 23).

¹¹ The presence of skinny bears attracted to food available in or near communities could magnify perceptions of poor body condition among community members who do not travel far from the community.

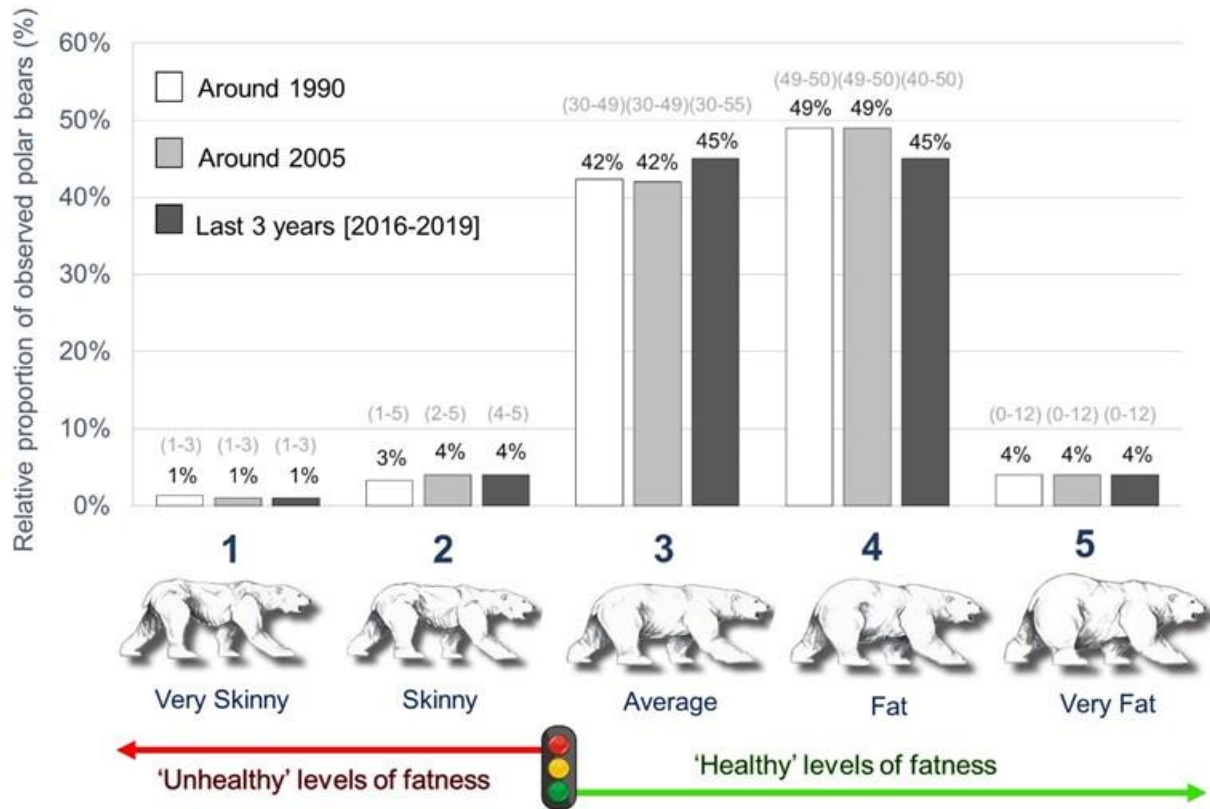


Figure 23. Relative proportion of polar bears observed per body condition type (1 to 5 scale developed by Stirling et al. 2008) over specific time periods (around 1990, around 2005, and last three years [2016 to 2019]) in the Kimmirut area. Percentages were derived from proportional piling exercises with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants); mean values are presented over each bar with respective value ranges provided in brackets in light grey. Polar bear categories and drawings of body types are sourced from the Polar Bear Body Condition Index Card used by the Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment (Government of Nunavut, n.d.).

Contributors who had observed a decline in polar bear fatness over time mostly attributed these changes to an increase in polar bear abundance combined with a reduction in the abundance of ringed seals (polar bear main prey) and changes in sea ice conditions reducing polar bear access to seals.

Some participants also highlighted that skinny or ‘unhealthy’ polar bears tended to be observed close to the community in the summer and fall when there is less sea ice and hunting is more difficult for polar bears.

Some contributors linked poor body condition with young polar bears being abandoned by their mothers or with old age. In particular, two Elders shared observations of polar bears that were “smaller in size”. While this change could be related to a true decrease in body size possibly due to shorter interbreeding times (i.e., polar bears that invest less in growth and mature early to increase their reproductive potential) or reduced food availability (i.e., polar bears that are born in cohorts with reduced food resources and therefore that did not grow as large), it could also be a sign of immigration of polar bears exhibiting a different body size phenotype from adjacent subpopulations into the Kimmirut area (see also ‘Sea ice changes’ section).

Finally, participants highlighted that whether observations of polar bears in poor body condition have implications for population persistence remained uncertain at the time interviews were performed.

“Not from my personal experience but from what I hear from other people, polar bears [are] skinnier nowadays...I have an idea that could explain why [polar bears] may be skinnier: back then the bears were a lot healthier because this area had more ringed seals for them to eat. Nowadays, there is less ringed seals. When the bear population was high, likely the polar bears hunted the seals until the numbers declined. I recall baby seals and younger seals within their first year of age coming in a lot around the end of July and back then there was a lot of those young seals coming in, whereas today there are a lot less, almost next to none. When I was hunting back then, I would likely be catching about 20 to 30 seals in a day whereas today they are catching less, like one, two or three in a day hunt.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

“When I was a child, in the 70s, there were hardly any bears...but in the 70s and 80s polar bears were fatter compared to today...In particular, during the summer polar bears are not as fat and they seem skinnier also during the fall and winter. In the spring, some bears could be skinny and some bears could be fat...Nowadays, [polar bears] seem to be not as fat as they used to be. One of the reason could be [related to changes in] the sea ice conditions because sea ice provides [a platform for the polar bears to hunt] the seals that are sun bathing or that are under the ice. I know this since the time my grandfather used to tell us stories [about polar bears] and up to this day I have seen that the polar bears are doing the same as my grandfather told me.” (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Some [polar bears] seem to be way too skinny, probably there is not much in their stomach. One Elder had to shoot a bear for defence since it was close to his cabin and he had never seen a skinny bear, it was a very unhealthy bear. But there’s some healthy ones too but we start to see a bit more skinny bears here and there. In the past 10 years or less...I may be seeing them more in the summer when it is harder hunting for them, when there is no ice...The skinnier bears are at the dump or they come close to town looking for food...I have always seen healthy bears there [Markham Bay area].” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“Mostly young bears that I have seen that are quite skinny. But that other one I saw was a female, but it could have been from old age too like an old bear, very skinny and unhealthy...I think that [skinny young bears] have either lost the mother or the mother pushed them away. There are more bears coming into town and sometimes a mother bear may be harvested not knowing that it has cubs, sometimes we can’t see cubs. We are not supposed to hunt family groups and I know people respect that. If it has cubs nobody hunts that but if it had cubs that we did not know about that we don’t see maybe a mother bear may be harvested without not knowing about the cubs.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“All the bears that I have caught were in good shape from the first to now...and the bears I have observed some are skinny and you can tell they are hungry....I think it is fair to say that they are the same [as the past] but I guess maybe we will wait and see what we will observe in the next five years. My thinking anyway if we get less sea ice we will be able to find out if we start to see more skinny bears. But for now most of them are in relatively good shape.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

Temporal changes in overall health

When invited to discuss general polar bear health (considering polar bear fatness along with other health indicators; see 'Polar bear health indicators' section), individual interview contributors often noted that both 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' bears are encountered today. Similarly to observations of body condition status, there was a general sense that in recent year the proportion of unhealthy polar bears may have increased compared to the past, however the odds of encountering unhealthy polar bears continued to be low.

"Some of them are really skinny and hungry. The first polar bear we saw last year, the six footer male, was all bony; that was the first one we saw last year. Then a couple of days later we saw a healthy male, it seemed healthy. We see healthy looking ones and not healthy looking ones, bad hunters and good hunters...polar bears seem getting to be hungrier. I started to notice that about eight years ago." (Isaac Temela, Kimmirut)

"I have seen my share of unhealthy ones and also healthy ones too...it is less likely to see unhealthy ones than we do healthy. The odd bear here and there are unhealthy and I see more frequently healthy bears...If we see an unhealthy [bear] it is likely in the time when there is no ice, in the summer or the early fall when there is no ice [...] I have seen both young ones and older ones that looked unhealthy." (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

"The polar bears that I have observed are healthy but the bears that are hungry are the ones that tend to come to the community." (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

Group interviews with active harvesters (n=3, totalling 8 participants) were then performed to further explore temporal changes in overall health status of polar bears in the Kimmirut area. Proportional piling exercises were used to record the relative proportion of 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy' polar bears observed around Kimmirut over three time periods: (1) around 1990; (2) around 2005; and (3) within the last three years (2016-2019) (Figure 24). During group interviews, 'health' was assessed and understood as a general characteristic going beyond the fatness (body condition) indicator alone. Participants expressed proportions of 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy' polar bears employing all of the pre- and post-harvest indicators they were familiar with (see 'Polar bear health indicators' section). While over 90% of the polar bears observed by contributors were considered 'healthy' across the three time periods, group interview participants reported a slight increase in the proportions of 'unhealthy' polar bears since 2005 (Figure 24). In particular, around 2005 the proportion of 'unhealthy' bears had increased to 8% (range: 5-10) from to the 2% (range: 0-7) level recorded around 1990, and further increased to 9% (range: 5-15) in the 2016-2019 period (Figure 24).

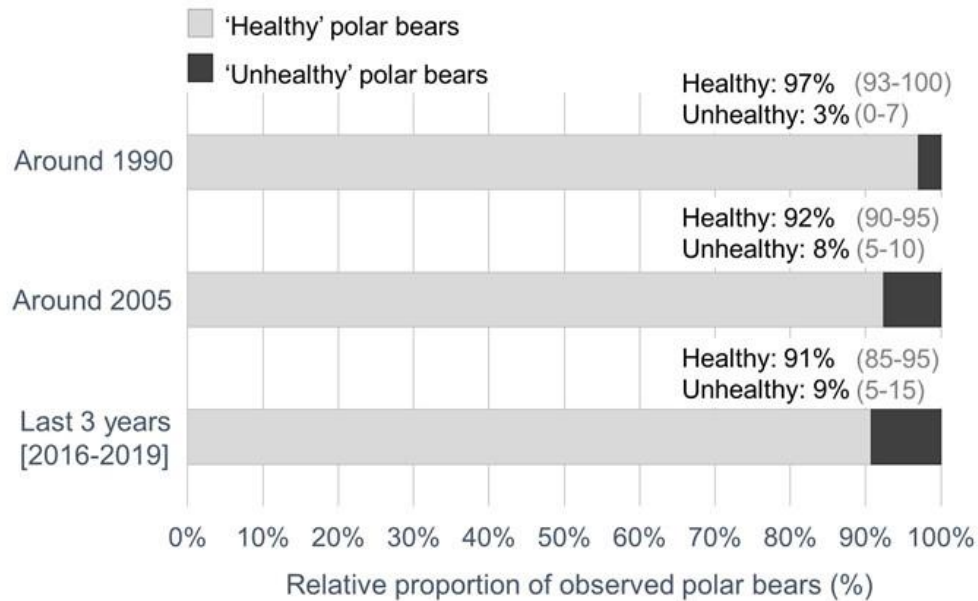


Figure 24. Relative proportion of ‘healthy’ vs ‘unhealthy’ polar bears observed in the Kimmirut area over three time periods (around 1990, around 2005, and last three years [2016 to 2019]). Percentages were derived from proportional piling exercises with three groups of contributors from Kimmirut (n=3; totalling eight participants).

Section summary: temporal changes in body condition status and overall health

In summary, based on individual and group interviews performed in Kimmirut, from around 1990 to 2019, over 90% of the locally observed polar bear population had been within ‘healthy’ fatness levels and ‘good’ overall health (Figures 23 and 24). However, in more recent years –within the 2016-2019 period– minor changes had been observed from previous years, including a shift of a few percentage points from the ‘fat’ to the ‘average’ body condition type and a small increase in the proportion of polar bears considered ‘unhealthy’ (Figures 23 and 24). At the time interviews were conducted, such changes were not reflected in observations related to cub productivity and survival which had been stable since the 1990s (Figure 11; see ‘Size of family groups, cub productivity and survival’ section). Given the rate of environmental change reported by participants –including observations of major declines in local ringed seal abundance and changes in sea ice conditions–, continuous documentation of Inuit observations will be required to understand how polar bear body condition and health will evolve over time.

Pangnirtung

In Pangnirtung, participants discussed changes in polar bear body condition and overall health during individual interviews only (n=14); therefore, unlike for Kimmirut, quantitative information generated though group interviews is not available for this community. Observations specific to changes in polar bear fatness over time are presented below, followed by comments made by contributors regarding general polar bear health.

Temporal changes in body condition status

Contributors from Pangnirtung shared similar perspectives as individual interview contributors from Kimmirut as summarized in Table 8. Pangnirtung participants acknowledged that polar bear fatness levels vary on an individual basis due to differences in hunting skills/success but possibly also due to body type, with this making it difficult to assess temporal changes. Despite these limitations, a majority of individual interviewees reported observing more polar bears in poorer body condition compared to the past with some of them interpreting this observation as indicative of a general decline in polar bear body condition over time within the Pangnirtung area. Earlier signs of change dated back to the 1980s but were more consistently observed starting from the late 2000s. However, similarly to Kimmirut, some expressed the view that polar bear body condition had remained stable or were uncertain about any change in polar bear body condition over time. (Table 8).

Table 8. Observations on temporal changes in polar bear body condition status in the Pangnirtung area based on individual interviews (n=14).

Type of observation	Frequency of responses	Notes
More “skinny bears” or polar bears in poorer body condition compared to the past	7	More “skinny bears” were noticed starting from: the 1980s (n=1), the late 2000s (n=1), 2010 (n=1), the last 2 years [2017-2019] (n=1). Six contributors interpreted this observation as indicative of a general decline in polar bear body condition status.
No change observed	5	Two women specialized in hide processing and three hunters provided this answer.
Unknown	2	One contributor explained that it was difficult to identify a general trend given individual variation in polar bear fatness.

“Some polar bears are really good hunters and some are not. Some polar bears do better than others.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

“It doesn’t matter what animal they are, some of them live to be skinny, just like people. You know, it doesn’t matter what they eat, how much they eat, they’ll be skinny. But I think the polar bears are like that too.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“They used to be fat all the time [back in the 1960s] ... [Today], when we go boating, we see lots of polar bears during the summer. In summer, we see lots of very, very skinny bears. We even worry about them. They might not make it through the winter because they are so skinny... [Within the past 10 years] some of them [polar bears] seem to be skinnier. Because we see a lot more bears, we see more skinny bears too. Even when we don’t look for them or we don’t expect to see polar bears, we see them.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“There’s not much change to the fat... People don’t want to eat the meat if there’s not much fat in it.” (Michael Kisa, Pangnirtung)

Similarly to Kimmirut, Pangnirtung contributors who had observed a decline in polar bear fatness over time reported three main potential causes, acting alone or in synergy, that could explain this phenomenon: an increase in polar bear abundance leading to increased competition over and reduced access to preys (mainly ringed seals), less sea ice cover leading to reduced access to preys, and a decline in ringed seal abundance observed around Pangnirtung.

“Polar bears are getting skinnier because there is not enough food and the polar bear population has grown more.” (Matiusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“[Polar bears] seem to be getting smaller and I think they’re hungry. Now, there are too many polar bears and it’s harder for them to catch food, like seal. And that’s why they’re getting smaller and smaller because they’re not eating as much as they used to do before...They’re smaller and, when they’re smaller, they don’t have much fat. It’s harder for the smaller ones to hunt compared to the bigger polar bears...[Polar bears are] not as energetic as they used to be. They are slowly losing [their energy]. I think this is because they don’t catch much food anymore...Each year, there is not much ice anymore so they can’t hunt as much. And with too many polar bear [there is] not enough food.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“Polar bears they tend to get skinnier now too because there’s hardly any seals left in this whole Cumberland Sound.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Some participants also mentioned that the poor hunting success of older bears and the chemical immobilization of polar bears for scientific research could explain why some individual bears were observed in poor body condition.

“When [polar bears are] not active as hunters anymore they get skinnier and myself, I don’t want to harvest big males...Sometimes there’s hardly any fat [on older bears].” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“The ones that have been put to sleep are the ones that are usually skinny. There is no specific gender or age.” (Matiusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

Three contributors explained that skinny polar bears observed within close proximity of the community tended to be juvenile bears and seen more often in spring and summer.

“[Today] some [polar bears] are healthy [but] we keep seeing kind of skinny polar bears, especially younger ones. Young ones alone, maybe three or four years old, are usually skinny. Females are usually fatter or big...I see the skinny ones like in the spring and the summer...more skinny bears in the late 2000s. When you go around you see more skinny bears now. There is not enough food and they are having hard time catching seals, I guess some of them.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“I’ve seen some [healthy bears] too but the ones I’ve seen that...interact with this community in the past years haven’t been really fat.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Temporal changes in overall health

When asked to discuss general polar bear population health (considering polar bear fatness along with other health indicators), five contributors mentioned that polar bears observed around Pangnirtung were generally 'healthy' and three highlighted that bears are not as 'healthy' as they used to be.

Two participants further noted regional differences in polar bear body condition and health, explaining that bears living on the northern side of the Cumberland Peninsula and that do not come inland are usually healthier.

"[Polar bears] seem to be healthier along the coastline [northern side of the Cumberland Peninsula] instead of [Cumberland Sound] here because there's more plenty of sea mammals along the north side of Baffin Island and that's why the bears are healthier...I would say the [bears] that stay out at sea, way out there, that almost live off their own icebergs, I'd say they're always healthy." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

In addition, one male polar bear hunter and one female contributor specialized in hide processing both observed a greater number of polar bears with yellow fur (which are not preferred for harvesting), particularly in the Cumberland Sound area. However, based on contributors' narratives, this difference appears more likely as a function of geographic variation rather than reflecting a true difference in health status (see 'Polar bear health indicators' section).

"I have noticed more [bears] in [the Cumberland Sound] area [with fur that is] kind of really yellowish... I have never seen anything like that on the north side [of the Cumberland Peninsula]. Just here in this Cumberland Sound." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

"The fur got more yellow and it's skinny...But the whiter it is, the fatter the polar bear is...If you see a yellow skin, it's skinner, too. But if it's white, it's fat. That's the change." (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

Although the proportion 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy' polar bears observed over time was not systematically explored in Pangnirtung through group interviews, one male polar bear hunter estimated at 80% the proportion of 'healthy' polar bears he had observed in recent years and one female contributor did not notice any change in polar bear health over time from cleaning and processing hides.

"I would say 80% of it [local polar bear population] are healthy...In the past we don't see much polar bear like we do now... but it seems like the polar bear that we caught down there, most of it was pretty healthy bears." (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

"I don't think there is any difference between then and now." (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

Section summary: temporal changes in body condition status and overall health

Based on individual interview results alone, we believe that changes in the body condition status and overall health of polar bears in the Pangnirtung area may follow a similar pattern to what was observed in Kimmirut. At the time interviews were conducted, a recent decline in body condition status and overall health had been observed by some contributors; however, the magnitude of this decline may not have been substantial given that observations were not unanimous and also considering that some participants who had noticed a decline in polar bear body condition stressed that healthy and fat polar bears were still observed. Group interviews would be required to clarify these uncertainties, including confirming changes in body condition and general health status of polar bears in the Pangnirtung area and identifying their magnitude.

Mortality, diseases and abnormalities

In this section, all quotes related to polar bear mortality, diseases and abnormalities were anonymized to preserve confidentiality.

All interviewees (n=35) discussed polar bear non-hunting related mortality, diseases and other abnormalities they had directly observed or heard about from relatives and Elders. We specifically probed on fur loss (alopecia) lesions, asking direct questions supported by pictures (see Appendix 4, interview guide) given such occurrences were reported in other subpopulations, particularly in the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska (see Atwood et al. 2015). In general, contributors were able to provide detailed observations about what they saw, including where, when and type of animal(s) involved (adult vs. young polar bear; female vs. male). The level of detail provided by participants suggested a strong ability to detect and recall unusual polar bear observations.

Overall, participants considered non-hunting related mortality (including starvation), diseases (including fur loss or alopecia) and other abnormalities to be rare or uncommon. As such, single occurrences could be recalled almost one by one.

In addition, most contributors did not recall Elders talking about dead or sick polar bears in the past. Only one contributor from Kimmirut mentioned learning about starving polar bears from his Elders when he was young (around the 1950s); those starving bears were described as “polar bears that died” and considered a rare occurrence. One contributor from Pangnirtung recalled Elders saying not to eat polar bear liver which was known from experience to be source of toxicity (scientifically known as vitamin A poisoning).

“No, they [Elders] didn’t [talk about polar bear abnormalities or diseases], but they [Elders] just told us not to eat the liver or we will lose our hair. That’s what they said. They told us to never eat the polar bear liver.” (Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung).

Tables 9 to 11 summarize signs of diseases (lesions and syndromes) or abnormalities reported by contributors from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung and provide differential diagnosis based on scientific veterinary knowledge. Figure 26 specifically displays locations of some cases of fur loss or alopecia observed by contributors.

Non-hunting related mortality and starvation

Among Kimmirut and Pangnirtung contributors (n=35), 23 of them (n=16 in Kimmirut; n=7 in Pangnirtung) had never directly observed or heard of mortality due to causes other than harvesting. Observations of polar bear mortality due to starvation or other natural causes were reported by a total of 12 participants (n=7 in Pangnirtung; n=5 in Kimmirut) as rare and single occurrences with five events observed around Kimmirut and 12 events around Pangnirtung (Appendix 7, Table 3S). The first occurrence recalled dated back to the 1960s and the most recent one was made in 2019 (the year interviews were performed). Polar bear mortalities were often reported to local conservation officers. Importantly, mortalities suggestive of disease outbreaks – that is, involving more than one animal and/or multiple species at once – were not observed.

While causes of polar bear mortality events observed by contributors remained mostly unknown, participants mentioned old age, starvation, severe traumas (e.g., polar bear falling in an avalanche), drowning (e.g., polar bear trapped by ice when hunting seals), and killing by another polar bear as some potential causes of death (Appendix 7, Table 3S).

“I saw a dead polar bear that was washed up on the shoreline. I went on the site with the wildlife officer who went to investigate and got the skull and everything. There is so many things that could have happened: sometimes when they are seal hunting, they can really sneak up and get really close [to the seal], the seal then goes down and the bear would go in there to and sometimes they cannot get up and cannot back out and they drown because of the ice. During the springtime [especially] in May, June. And one time a good friend of mine in Iqaluit was tracking a polar bear by dog team and saw [a similar thing], he saw polar bear tracks disappearing into a seal hole and never came back out and drowned. You know, those things happen.” (Interviewee 08, Pangnirtung)

When discussing episodes of cannibalism, contributors reported that “it’s been known for a long time that polar bears eat other polar bears.” One contributor from Pangnirtung mentioned that this phenomenon may be happening more often now since polar bear numbers have increased.

“Sometimes we see lonely cubs and we know a male polar bear killed the mother. Well, I think the male polar bear tried to kill the young ones and the mother tried to protect them and ended up being killed...I heard in my younger age that the polar bear do that but from then, since there is more polar bear, we start to see more. I think I have been noticing this [cubs alone] more in the last five years...and we know that the cubs won’t make it alone but we just leave them because we are not allowed to kill small polar bears but that is just wasted.” (Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung)

Seventeen of the 35 Inuit experts we interviewed (n=9 in Kimmirut; n=8 in Pangnirtung) reported having seen or heard about starving or severely skinny polar bears (Appendix 7, Table 4S). However, those occurrences were uncommon. For example, one contributor specified he had seen “very skinny” polar bears only six times in the last 40 years.

“We see some that don’t look like healthy, they look like very skinny but not many. I would say six altogether in the last 40 years. You could tell that they were sick just by looking at them.” (Interviewee 11, Kimmirut)

Signs of diseases, syndromes or abnormal lesions

When talking about observations of polar bear diseases or sicknesses, contributors mostly referred to 'skinny' or 'very skinny' polar bears, including old individuals or polar bears that were unfit for human consumption.

"Sick bears are really skinny. I would not know if it was from sickness or from starvation, but it is really obvious from the appearance. I have seen a few sick bears in my time, but it is the odd one." (Interviewee 05, Kimmirut)

"Sick polar bears are very noticeable, they have yellow fur, and they are skinny. It was rare to see sick skinny polar bears [in the past] and it is still rare [today]." (Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung)

"I have never seen or heard of a sick polar bear but of very old polar bears with teeth falling off. I have seen that only once when I was living in the outpost camp." (Interviewee 13, Pangnirtung)

Overall, observations of conspicuous polar bear disease and sickness were rare with 16 contributors (n=8 in each of Kimmirut and Pangnirtung) reporting specific lesions or syndromes they saw while examining harvested polar bears or while observing live individuals. These included: signs of fur loss or alopecia; limping or lame individuals; white spots in the liver; greenish lumps in the subcutaneous fat and in the muscles; brown spots in subcutaneous fat; dull and soft claws; and posterior paralysis. Eleven contributors observed those as single events; over their lifetime, only five contributors had seen or heard of a few polar bears displaying a specific lesion/syndrome. Table 9 provides a list of possible causes, or differential diagnosis, based on scientific veterinary knowledge for the lesions and syndromes described by participants. Tables 10 and 11 include a description of disease occurrences reported by contributors.

"Some bears do not look healthy at all now...I notice from the meat that sometimes it does not look healthy and sometimes it is not even edible. I notice that the fat sometimes has some lumpy or infected areas, they are kind of greenish in color. They are mainly in the fat, between the skin and the meat, but sometimes I have seen it in the meat too...I have noticed this in three bears that I have harvested in the years 2016 and 2017...I have seen them in both female and male bears that were adult but younger than the big polar bears...I have never seen those before, and I have heard that other people mentioned they had encountered those type of lesions too...I have taken some samples to the Conservation Officer, but they have never reported back what it was." (Interviewee 02, Kimmirut)

"Sometimes liver's got big white stuff on it and through it...We just say tigulluk [which in Inuktitut means] 'bad liver'. Even seals have it sometimes and even caribou...You don't see this often, only [in] a few [polar bears]. And you can see some little round brown spots when you cut the fat under the skin. It is not only in polar bears but also seals and whales. They are small, about a quarter inch. I see it sometimes." (Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung)

Interestingly, one contributor told us that Elders had known for a long time that posterior paralysis is a sign of rabies in polar bears; he had learned this in 1970s when he saw a polar bear with paralyzed hind legs. Scientific information of rabies in polar bears, including its presentation in the paralytic form, are more recent (Taylor et al. 1991). This example, amongst others, highlights the value of IQ to understand and assess polar bear health.

“I have never seen a sick polar bear. Except for one time when I saw a polar bear that was dragging his back legs. He was walking only with his front legs, and it was a big bear [too]. I asked the Elders ‘Why is the polar bear doing that?’ and the Elders said ‘He got rabies’. When the polar bear gets rabies, the back legs are numb, so he drags them.” (Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung)

While specific questions regarding trichinosis were not asked, only one contributor specifically mentioned being aware that polar bears can be infected with *Trichinella* spp., which has implications for human health.

“I have been hearing in other areas that they [polar bears] have trichinosis. Last year, I think one tested positive for trichinosis here in [Cape] Dorset and then more recently in Sanikiluaq area polar bears [have been found] with trichinosis.” (Interviewee 07, Kimmirut)

Lastly, ectoparasites were not observed on polar bear hides.

“I have seen other animals with little bugs on them but never on a bear. If they [polar bears] had little bugs we may not even touch them.” (Interviewee 03, Kimmirut)



Table 9. Types of lesions and syndromes observed in polar bears by participants interviewed in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung (n=35), including a list of possible causes –or differential diagnosis– based on scientific veterinary knowledge.

Observed lesions or syndromes	Possible causes
Fur loss or alopecia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ice-related injuries ✓ Infectious diseases ✓ Endocrine disfunctions ✓ Nutritional deficiencies ✓ Chronic stress ✓ Congenital disease affecting hair development ✓ Disorders of the molt cycle ✓ Pollutants ✓ Mange
Limp or lameness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Traumas ✓ Bacterial diseases that can cause joint/bone infections or arthritis (e.g., <i>Brucella spp.</i>, <i>Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae</i>) ✓ Systemic bacterial diseases causing thrombosis (e.g., <i>E. rhusiopathiae</i>) ✓ Viral encephalitis (e.g., distemper virus) ✓ Protozoan encephalitis (e.g., <i>Sarcocystis spp.</i>, <i>Toxoplasma spp.</i>) ✓ Heavy metal toxicity ✓ Fluoride toxicity
Brownish round spots (about 0,6 cm) in the subcutaneous fat Also observed in seals and whales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Parasites (e.g., granulomas of tapeworm larvae – polar bears serving as aberrant hosts) ✓ Systemic bacterial diseases causing thrombosis (e.g., <i>E. rhusiopathiae</i>) ✓ Hemorrhages
Big white spots on and throughout the liver Also observed also in seals and caribou	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Parasites (e.g., liver flukes, hydatid cysts of <i>Echinococcus granulosus</i>) ✓ Abscesses or granulomas of bacterial origin ✓ Tumors
Greenish lumps in the subcutaneous fat and muscles Also observed in beluga whales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Older traumas ✓ Inflammation of fat tissue
Dull and soft claws with layers of keratin splitting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Nutritional deficiencies ✓ Traumas ✓ Viral infection (e.g., distemper virus) ✓ Congenital defect that affects keratin production
Paralysis of hind legs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Traumas ✓ Rabies ✓ Other encephalitis (e.g., distemper virus, protozoan infections, neurotoxins)

Table 10. Occurrences of lesions and syndromes –except fur loss– observed in polar bears by participants interviewed in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung (n=35), including type of lesions observed, number of contributors reporting the observation (n), timing of observation (when available; otherwise marked as ‘NA’) and detailed description of the observation made by individual contributors. Fur loss observations are reported in Table 11.

Observed lesions or syndromes	N	Timing	Description of occurrence
Limping polar bears	n=3	Early 1990s	One adult male polar bear walking with a limp (the back leg could not bend). Direct observation close to Qikiqtarjuaq. <i>Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung</i>
		2015	One polar bear observed limping, ‘ <i>the back leg joint could not bend</i> ’. Direct observation made in summer. <i>Interviewee 07, Pangnirtung</i>
		Recent years	Knowledge of limping polar bears reported from other hunters. <i>Interviewee 02, Kimmirut</i>
Small brownish round spots in the subcutaneous fat	n=1	NA	A few harvested polar bears with small brown spots (approximately ¼ inch) in the subcutaneous fat. Similar lesions also observed in seals and whales. Direct observation. <i>Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung</i>
Big white spots in the liver	n=1	NA	A few harvested polar bears with big white spots on and throughout the liver. Similar lesions also observed in seals and caribou. Direct observation. <i>Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung</i>
Greenish lumps in the subcutaneous fat and muscles	n=1	2016-2017	Three harvested polar bears (adults, females and males) with greenish lumps in the subcutaneous fat (mostly) and meat. Similar lesions also observed in beluga whales. Direct observation (first time these lesions are observed) and reports of similar lesions from other hunters in recent years. <i>Interviewee 02, Kimmirut</i>
Dull and soft claws with layers of keratin splitting	n=2	Recent years	One harvested polar bear (7-footer) with ‘ <i>weird claws</i> ’ on the rear feet. The hide was easy to clean meaning the polar bear was likely in good body condition. Direct observation made during hide processing (same bear observed by two contributors). <i>Interviewees 01 and 02, Group 4, Kimmirut</i>
Paralysis of hind legs	n=1	1970s	One adult polar bear observed dragging its back legs. Direct observation. <i>Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung</i>

Fur loss lesions or alopecia

Fur loss or alopecia was explored by asking direct questions supported by pictures showing specific fur loss lesions (see Appendix 4, interview guide). Most participants (n=23) had not observed lesions consistent with the pictures shown. However, these contributors had sometimes noticed polar bears with small furless spots on the neck, head and paws associated with scars and injuries, including ice-related traumas. These observations were considered as normal occurrences that were seen in healthy individuals both in recent years and in the past. Adult males in particular were reported to often display furless scars on the neck and head that were likely caused by fighting with conspecifics during the mating season (Appendix 7, Table 5S).

“[Polar bears] have lots of scars in the neck area from fighting, playing around, trying to get a female and these kinds of things.” (Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung)

“I have seen scars maybe [due to] males fighting together...I have seen mostly in males because when they start mating, they fight...and with any polar bears because they use their head and neck to go through the ice.” (Interviewee 07, Kimmirut)

“The males tend to fight [during mating season for the female], that’s why they have no more fur, from fighting. I have caught a polar bear that’s fought another polar bear before, and had no fur, like from the scratches.” (Interviewee 04, Pangnirtung)

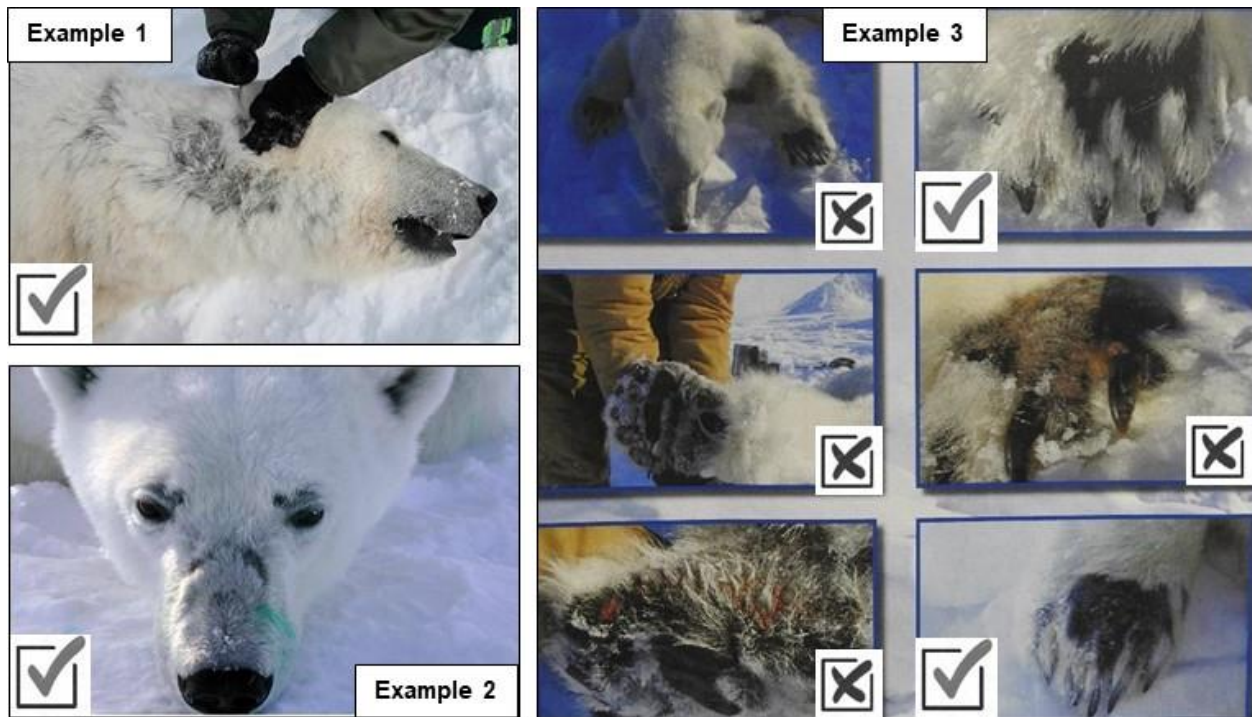


Figure 25. Pictures of fur loss in polar bears. These pictures were used as prompts during interviews in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut (n=35). See Appendix 4 for full picture set used during interviews. Presentations similar to check marked pictures were observed by contributors, while lesions similar cross marked pictures were not observed. Image sources: Atwood et al. 2015 (example 1); USGS (example 2); Government of Nunavut (example 3).

Twelve of the 35 participants interviewed (n=7 in Pangnirtung; n=5 in Kimmirut) reported observing polar bears with fur loss similar to the pictures used, varying in severity and localization. Lesions observed included extensive alopecia localized in the neck, shoulders and body; symmetrical alopecia on the head; and large areas of alopecia on the paws without scars and skin overgrowth (Figure 25). These observations were sporadic and mostly reported as single events (Table 11 and Figure 26).

“I have seen in an old bear something like this [referring to example 1 in Figure 25], they weren’t scars, but the fur was coming off [in the neck area] due to be so old. That was the only time I saw something strange. That bear was a big male, angujuaq...It was some time ago, I don’t remember the year...I have [also] seen areas on the paws with no fur whatsoever, maybe because it was an old bear. There were no scratches, but it was just no fur on it. It was just a male bear, not a big one. I have seen it only one time. It was some time ago, not recent.” (Interviewee 01, Kimmirut)

“In early spring 2007, I saw close to town a mother bear that had two cubs. The cubs were OK, but the mother was so skinny. That was the only [sick bear] I have [ever] seen...it was wobbling and acting like it was [almost] drunk. I have [also] noticed that some part of the fur was missing. The condition of the fur was not normal...it had bold spots on the neck...about 20 cm in diameter and only on one side. [It looked] exactly like this picture [referring to example 1 in Figure 25]” (Interviewee 10, Kimmirut)

“I recall I have seen polar bears with abnormalities twice. [Description of a severely skinny polar bear]. The other one, I don’t remember exactly, but I think [I saw it] right around 2010. It was a cub, atiqtaq. It was the only bear, it was alone [without the mother]. I noticed some abnormalities in the fur with bold spots around the neck. It looked like that one [pointing at example 1 in Figure 25].” (Interviewee 12, Kimmirut)

“I have seen one like that [referring to example 1 in Figure 25]. That was maybe around the 1980s...I was out polar bear hunting [on the north side of the Cumberland Peninsula]. I saw the bear and I got closer. It was a big bear. I saw a bold, naked area [on its neck] and I decided not to kill it. That was not good for nothing...it was not that fat but was not that skinny either. It was a male. [I think it was] smaller than a nukauq. It was around February...I haven’t seen anything like that again. [The hair loss] was mostly on one side [of the neck] and a little bit on the other side too. It was completely black [It appeared even more severe than example 1]. I was thinking that maybe it was scratching all the time, [maybe it was] itchy or something. No [there was no blood visible].” (Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung)

“I saw a polar bear that was harvested, and its side was black. It had a wide area with no fur, and it was all scarred. It was a really poor skin. It was something like that [example 1 in Figure 25] but it was on the side [of its body]. The area was about 20 cm wide.” (Interviewee 07, Pangnirtung)

“I have seen something like this [fur loss on the paw, similar to example 3 in Figure 25] but not too many. Sometimes they hit rocks and they lose the fur.” (Interviewee 09, Pangnirtung)

Wide areas of alopecia or thinning of the fur were only observed on the neck and shoulders (n=10) or on the side of the body (n=1). Gross presentation of lesions was similar to signs of alopecia

described in polar bears of the southern Beaufort Sea, Alaska (Atwood et al. 2015). Earliest observations dated back to the 1980s in Pangnirtung and the 1990s in Kimmirut, while most recent observations were made in 2013-2015 in Pangnirtung and around 2010 in Kimmirut.

Both female, male, adult and young polar bears, including cubs-of-the-year, had been observed with alopecia. In some instances, fur loss was associated with poor body condition, but it was also observed in healthy individuals.

Some contributors considered fur loss lesions as a normal condition in polar bears, especially in adults and likely resulting from ice-related or hunt-related injuries, fighting with other polar bears and, more in general, old age (Table 11). Lastly, one contributor commenting on pictures of fur loss localized on polar bear paws (see example 3 in Figure 25) recalled that sled dogs used to have similar lesions, especially in the spring when rubbing the surface of their paws on the thawing and freezing ice.

*“When the ice is melting, like the first layer is slush, and the top freezes a bit just slightly, a thin layer. Dogs used to hunt and very quite often in the springtime they were going on the slush. So, I think that’s what happens too with polar bears. After a warm sunny day in the springtime, it becomes slushy, and at evening, night-time and early morning that slush freezes. So it can scratch [the fur and skin on the paws], like it used to scratch dogs.”
(Davidee Nowyuk, Pangnirtung)*



Table 11. Occurrences of fur loss (alopecia) lesions observed in polar bears by participants interviewed in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung (n=35), including timing of observation, detailed description of what was observed by individual contributors, localization of fur loss lesion on the animal, interviewee reporting the observation, and code used in Figure 26 for observations associated to a specific location (NA: information not available).

Timing	Description of observation	Area	Interviewee	Code
Around 2010	One lone cub with extensive fur loss area on neck. Direct observation.	Neck	Interviewee 12, Kimmirut	K12
2007	One very skinny adult female with unstable posture and fur loss area on one side of the neck (about 20 cm in diameter). The female had two cubs that looked healthy. Direct observation made in spring.	Neck	Interviewee 10, Kimmirut	K10
1990s	One polar bear hide difficult to clean because a lot of fur was missing on the neck and she had to remove a large area of the hide. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Neck	Interviewee 03, Group 4, Kimmirut	NA
NA	One harvested adult male with fur coming off easily from the neck area and one harvested adult male with furless areas on the feet. Considered to be associated with old age. Direct observation (not recent) made during hide processing.	Neck Feet	Interviewee 01, Kimmirut	NA
NA	A few polar bears observed with alopecia on the neck, head and feet (but without scars and skin overgrowth). Considered a normal condition associated with polar bears going through ice.	Neck Head Feet	Interviewee 01, Group 1, Kimmirut	NA
2013-2015	One harvested polar bear with furless area on the side of its body (approximately 20 cm in diameter). Direct observation.	Body	Interviewee 07, Pangnirtung	NA
2013-2015	One harvested polar bear with symmetrical hair loss on the snout possibly due to an ice related injury and considered normal. Direct observation.	Snout	Interviewee 07, Pangnirtung	NA
Around 2010	One harvested male that was quite skinny and with extensive fur loss on the neck. Direct observation.	Neck	Interviewee 08, Pangnirtung	P08
Early 2000s	One harvested skinny young female polar bear with small area of fur loss close to claws of one foot (approximately 6x1cm - similar to example 3 but not as extensive). Considered to be associated with walking on deep snow covered with ice. Direct observation made in April.	Foot	Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung	P01(a)
1990s	One harvested polar bear with extensive fur loss on neck and shoulders. Observation made by a relative.	Neck	Interviewee 05, Pangnirtung	NA
1990s	One adult male polar bear in good body condition with fur loss on one side of the neck (similar to example 1, but not as extensive). Considered to be associated with fighting with other polar bears. Direct observation made in spring.	Neck	Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung	P14
1980s	One adult male polar bear with extensive fur loss area on the neck and in good body condition. Direct observation made in February along the shore of the Cumberland Peninsula.	Neck	Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung	P01(b)
NA	A few polar bears observed with fur loss areas on the feet (similar to example 3, but without scars and skin overgrowth). Considered to be associated with traumas. Direct observation.	Feet	Interviewee 09, Pangnirtung	NA
NA	Adult or old polar bears with thinner fur on the neck and head, likely caused by fighting with other bears and hunting seals. Direct observation.	Neck Head	Interviewee 11, Pangnirtung	NA

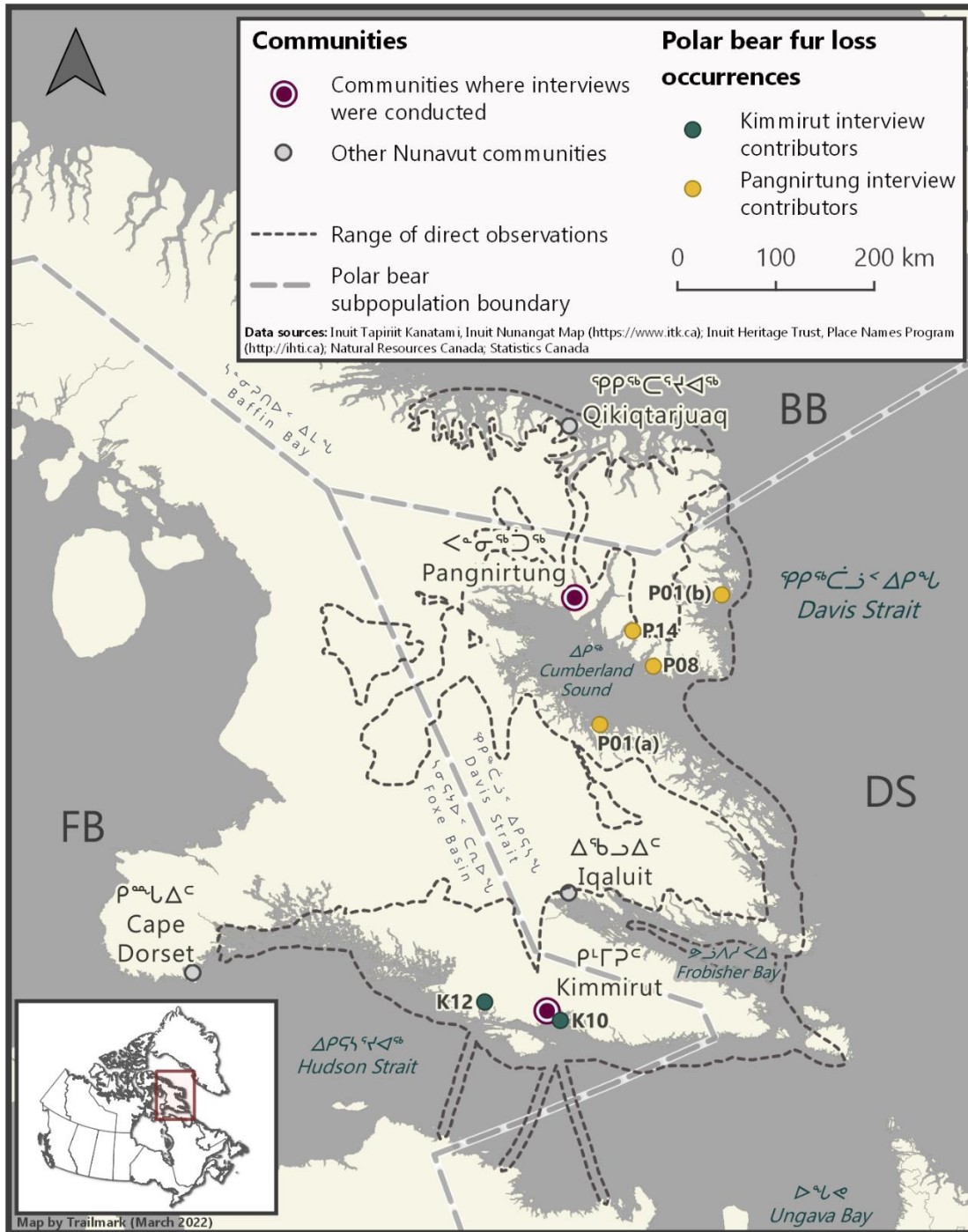


Figure 26. Location of some polar bears with fur loss (alopecia) observed in the Pangnirtung and Kimmirut areas. Codes reported on the figure refer to occurrences described in Table 11. This figure only includes occurrences that were associated to a specific geographic location. Table 11 offers a comprehensive list of polar bear fur loss occurrences discussed by participants that were consistent with fur loss pictures used for probing during the interviews. DS: Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation and management unit; FB: Foxe Basin polar bear subpopulation and management unit; BB: Baffin Bay polar bear subpopulation and management unit.

Anthropogenic waste and other unusual observations

Some contributors (n=7) reported finding anthropogenic waste and/or plastics in the stomachs of some harvested bears (Appendix 7, Table 6S). Participants from both communities described polar bears found with plastics and other waste in the stomach as sick or unhealthy bears. Observations of polar bears scavenging at the dump or found with garbage or man-made items in their stomach were made in more recent years, approximately within the last 10 years.

“[Polar bears] go to the dump. That’s never happened before. Even here sometimes in the fall they go to the dump and anything they can get, they eat...A few years ago we saw a polar bear at the dump in the fall.” (Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung)

“Back then [in the past], when I opened them up I would notice their main diet which is seal meat. That’s what I would notice back then. But nowadays I am noticing leather gloves or other garbage in the stomach. I think that this is happening because they are hungry. [The first time I saw some garbage in the stomach of polar bears] was around 2010.”

“In 2015, I have harvested a bear that had skidoo parts in his stomach. That was the only thing that was in his stomach...I have encountered another bear with skidoo parts inside him. They were both close to my camp. When I noticed that they had skidoo parts inside –plastic, part of the skidoo seat– I would just leave the meat...they were in between a young bear and an adult bear, they looked healthy enough otherwise.” (Interviewee 02, Kimmirut)

“When my buddy opened the stomach to see its content we saw nothing but white plastic shopping bags in there and it was sad and bad to see...that was last summer [2018] July or August. Was very close to town [at the] dump. We were coming back to town and they wanted to harvest it before it hurt somebody. It might have been a young female, maybe three, four years [old]. But we still got the meat.” (Interviewee 06, Kimmirut)

“In the later years I have heard of [polar bears] foraging in dumps but normal bears would have ringed seals in their stomach as opposed to unhealthy ones that would have whatever they could get their paws on.” (Interviewee 05, Kimmirut)

Lastly, when invited to discuss other unusual observations or abnormalities, three participants described injuries or non-healed wounds (Appendix 7, Table 7S). Two participants reported harvested polar bear bears with lip tattoos and ear tags as abnormal events. One participant had seen a bear with abnormal pigmentation of the skin and another one observed a three-legged polar bear. Finally, in Kimmirut, one contributor had observed a male polar bear with half-white and half-black fur, which he described as a hybrid bear or *aktak nanuq*.

“The Elder shot, the defence kill, it seemed to have a wound in the back, maybe that had something to do with being so skinny. It was maybe a [natural] injury or maybe it got away from somebody, somebody maybe shot it, wounded it but didn’t get it. That is possible. It was close to town. There was no Wildlife Officer in town so I had to go take a photo and he had a written statement that is why I know a bit about it. That was about five years ago.” (Interviewee 06, Kimmirut)

“There hasn’t been any change other than one time I harvested a bear with a tag number. That’s the only abnormality.” (Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung)

“I had encountered a polar bear with white [skin on the] paws...all four paws were white and one of the paws had some black spots on it. This got me to think: “Why is this like that?” I have seen this just in one bear...it looked healthy there was nothing wrong with it... It was just the colour of the paws and the [colour] of the nose was normal...I have seen this maybe within the last 10 years...The hide was given to me [to be cleaned] and the hunter didn’t tell me where he got the bear from. He [the hunter even] asked my late father why the bear was like that. He [my father] didn’t know why. This [seeing a bear with white paws] was unusual and my father didn’t know anything about that.” (Interviewee 03, Kimmirut)

“Eight years ago I observed [a polar bear that was] somewhat black and white. The fur looked funny, white on the back and black in the front. It was a half-breed or something. I saw it one time in this area [pointing to Big Island]. We thought it was a mixed breed, a black bear with a polar bear or a polar bear with a grizzly, I don’t know. It was years ago [at the end of] the springtime, turning into summer days. We were going at the floe edge hunting [when we saw this bear]. It was a male, someone said it was about eight feet...It was climbing up and then it went down again. I wish I took a picture but I didn’t. I wasn’t the only one seeing it, also my late parents saw it...The Elders would say in Inuktitut: “We haven’t seen that kind of polar bear before, don’t catch it! You may get sick!” We call it [that kind of bear] aktak nanuq: aktak means black bear and nanuq means white bear.” (Interviewee 13, Kimmirut)

Human-polar bear interactions

During individual interviews, contributors from both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut discussed changes in human-polar bear encounters and interactions. Participants described more frequent encounters with polar bears; changes in how polar bear behave towards humans; increased damage caused to cabins and property by bears; increased concerns over public safety; as well as some strategies put in place by Pangnirtungmiut and Kimmirutmiut to minimize risks associated with polar bear presence both on the land and in communities. Collectively, observations on human-polar bear interactions indirectly corroborate abundance information documented through this study. In addition, information presented here can be useful to co-develop targeted mitigation strategies.

Most participants indicated they encountered and observed more polar bears today than in the past (see also ‘Abundance and demography’ and ‘Habitat and distribution’ sections). Contributors identified four main factors which could explain why human-polar bear encounters have increased in recent decades: an increase in polar bear abundance; greater distances traveled by community members today which increases their chances of encountering polar bears; more intensive use of coastal areas by polar bears as a result of changing sea ice conditions; and a change in the behaviour of polar bears which have become less scared of humans and noises.

“There is more polar bear-human interference now than before also because hunters can travel long distances. So we tend to run into more polar bears as we hunt and the population has grown so much.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

“In the 50s and 60s, there were hardly any polar bears. I hardly saw them maybe because I was not grown up enough to go hunting by dog team. In the 70s, probably they were starting to increase, again that may be because we had more equipment to travel with

[instead of using] dog teams. The equipment allow us to travel further.” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

“I have noticed changes in the ice condition. Way back the ice used to be really thick and as times progress [the sea ice] is getting thinner. The ice is a lot thinner nowadays... This is affecting [polar bear hunting] behaviour. Polar bears normally hunt on the ice and out there the ice is not as stable as it was and as a result the polar bears are coming in the coastal areas, in town areas, looking for food.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

Many participants commented on changes in how polar bear behave in relation to humans. In both communities, several contributors (n=9 in Pangnirtung; n=7 in Kimmirut) reported that polar bears nowadays tend to be less fearful and more aggressive towards humans than they were in the past. Many also mentioned that juvenile polar bears are generally more inquisitive and aggressive than older bears.

“When a bear comes approaching sometimes we have to fend it off and we will fire a warning shot to warn the bear and scare it off. Back then, if you were to fire a warning shot it was likely to scare the bear off. But now if you were to fire a warning shot towards a bear it would just keep approaching. I started to notice this around the year 2000. I think that they are hungry. [I have noticed] this pretty much [in] all the seasons... It looks like there is more young bears than long time ago... and likely the young ones are harder to fend off than adult bears. The young ones have less fear and less experience.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“I have observed and heard outside of the community [that polar bears] are more aggressive and tend to kill humans more often than in the old days... The bears that have really silky and white furs are the aggressive ones, the clean ones. They are called kakirait nanuit. They could be either females or males, they are not too old and not too young.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“The bigger [polar bears] are not so aggressive compared to the smaller ones... It’s kind of like teenagers, when you’re a teenager you don’t really listen to the rules... Polar bears have the mind of a human, like you’re not allowed to bother them as they might fight back like a human would do... Polar bears are getting more and more and they are not scared at all when you shoot at them. Even if you almost shoot them they won’t move, and sometimes they’ll leave but then they’ll come right back.” (Matiusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

Participants offered various explanations as to why polar bears have become less fearful and more aggressive towards humans. Some contributors mentioned that polar bears have become accustomed to being around people and hearing noise from human activity. Others suggested that polar bears are no longer afraid of humans in part due to having been handled in the past for bear research. Some noted that hunger may cause polar bears to be more inquisitive or aggressive. Lastly, two contributors from Pangnirtung also suggested that hunting mostly adult male polar bears (*angujuaq*) could be the reason why polar bears, including juveniles, “would go in places they should not go” and interact more with humans. We also note that an increased number of juvenile polar bears as a function of the population increase could also partly explain contributors’ observations of less fearful polar bears.

“Back then, when you saw a polar bear, they would run away right away, like, they were scared of people back then. And now when they see people, they’re not scared, even if

you try to scare them off, they won't run off. So they're not as scared as they used to be...I think it's because of the biologists who put them to sleep. Like, maybe because of that, they're not as scared as they used to be.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

“When I was young, as soon as [polar bears] see, hear, or smell anything they used to run...They started to run from a long ways away. [People] used to let a few dog loose to stop the bear. Right now, you could drive almost right close to them and they don't even notice you. They're pretty different...Since the 1990s, maybe even earlier than that...Some of them just look towards you and they keep doing their own [things]. I don't know why, they got used to the noise, I guess.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“[Polar bears] aren't scared of noises or people anymore. In the past, they don't even want to see the tracks, human tracks, let alone the man there. As soon as they cross the human tracks they usually run away. But now they can follow the human tracks or skidoo tracks. They're too many noises in this world now. Wild animals are used to hearing noises so they don't get scared anymore with noises. It's with all the animals... and particularly young male polar bears, like four or five years old. I have started to notice this change within the past 20 years.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“It seems like [polar bears] got mad. They like to smash things more than ever: cabins, people leave their skidoos out on the land and polar bears would smashed them. Maybe because they were put to sleep, it seems they are mad at the humans.” (Simeonee Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“At the time I was a boy, polar bears were afraid of humans but now they are not as afraid of humans anymore. Maybe this is happening because they have put them to sleep and they became angry for being handled by humans, so therefore, they became more aggressive...I have noticed this change when they started to tranquilize them in 1979, that is when they started to put them to sleep...My father was one of the people who would go out with the biologists to help tranquillize the bears so that is why I remember.” (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Some people say that [bears] that were tranquillized changed after and became angry but I don't know if that's true. I don't have any proofs...There's more bears coming and they don't seem too scared of people anymore. Maybe it was the case also before, in the past. Maybe we are just seeing more bears and maybe some bears are hungry or more hungry than others and that can change their behaviour.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

“Today, when a polar bear comes, it doesn't get killed. Back then, it had to be killed because if it doesn't get killed they would come back all the time... there was a man who got killed because that polar bear probably kept going back and it wasn't afraid anymore. Any polar bear that comes to camps or places where there's people they should be killed.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

“The angujuaq is the leader and if there are less of them the females and young polar bears would go in places they should not go to.” (Michael Kisa, Pangnirtung)

In both communities, contributors also reported increased damage to cabins, food caches and property caused by polar bears.

“Polar bears have been damaging a lot of cabins in the recent years, coming into camp and damaging cabins. I don’t know why, even when they are not hungry they damage camping areas and I don’t know why...We started to build cabins in the year 2000s... before there were no cabins and everybody was living in tents when they were out camping...[Damage to cabins] mostly happens to some people’s cabins while others in almost the same areas do not get damaged...Bears were coming into camps even when people were camping in tents...Back then it was a problem but not as big of a problem [as it is now].” (Jeannie Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Now, polar bears even break cabins because there are so many. They seem to be getting more dangerous going into cabins trying to look for food...We can’t even have food caches anymore because there’s a lot of polar bears that just go after it. [Once we] left our cache there, went to Pang for a bit and came back and the polar bears had gotten it.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

In addition, participants acknowledged that increased human-polar bear interactions can happen as a consequence of other harvesting activities that can attract polar bears, especially narwhal and beluga whale harvest. In the Pangnirtung area, polar bear tags are usually finished by the time whale harvesting takes place. Contributors from Pangnirtung also reported that in recent years turbot fishing processing practices have changed with more fish scraps left on the ice (tails and organs) with this contributing to potentially attracting more polar bears in the upper Cumberland Sound where commercial turbot fishing takes place in the winter.

Some participants reported that ‘problem bears’ are more likely to be juvenile polar bears which have a more inquisitive behaviour and may be hungry because they are still learning how to hunt effectively. However, participants also reported that bears of any age or sex category can become a ‘problem bear’ when drawn by hunger, which makes them interact with humans more closely than they would otherwise.

Importantly, all individual interview contributors (n=27) highlighted their concern for public safety resulting from increased human-polar bear encounters and more frequent bear aggressions. Many shared the view that polar bears posed a greater public safety concern today compared to the past and pointed to increasing risks of conflicts between humans and polar bears.

“Back in the days when we were hunting animals we were not afraid to be anywhere. We were used to even sleep outside beside our qamutiik [sled] because the bears were not around...At that time we had no worries to encounter a bear or being attacked by a bear.” (Elijah Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Now you can see polar bear [around] like even in the summer. We’re scared to camp, set the tent anywhere. The polar bears are everywhere now. We are an endangered species other than polar bear.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“Since there’s more polar bears now, it’s harder to relax when you’re out on the land. From what I can remember as a little boy, there were barely any polar bears back then, and now there are a lot...It’s hard to relax.” (Leopa Akpalialuk, Pangnirtung)

“When it comes to humans and polar bears, it’s more dangerous nowadays because polar bears attack. And we have heard stories of polar bears attacking and killing humans.” (Abraham Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

Participants highlighted that polar bears are now posing a public safety concern both on the land and in or near communities. Polar bears killed in defense of life and property were described as a recent phenomenon around both Pangnirtung and Kimmirut.

"[I am concerned about] the safety of the town when [bears] came in. When [my neighbours] made a defence kill [in 2015-16] is when I realized about the possibility of them [polar bears] coming into town. And I have heard that polar bears are coming in more into town. My main concern would be about the safety of the town's people." (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

"I am concerned about the community and if a bear comes in on a regular basis then children are endangered because children play outside. This has become my concern for the past ten years...Another concern I have is for those younger boys or younger hunters using only small guns [rifles], like the 222, when they go on the land. That type of gun [rifle] could become dangerous because...the 222 cannot kill a bear even if you hit it in the head and the bear could turn [against you] and end up killing [you]." (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

"When I see people going up to the hills [around Pangnirtung], I hope they have a protection or something like that, you know. I'm always worried about that. And even when my daughter and my people, my families, when they go into the end of the road there for fishing with a rod during summertime, I keep telling them you know, hope you guys have protection...Right now my safety's really concerned because as I said earlier, people say: "No, there's no bears, I have not heard nothing." Well, I said you only got two legs, they got four legs." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Several contributors shared stories of dangerous encounters with polar bears.

"Once I was with my wife and family down here go caribou hunting and a polar bear came to our camp and it was close to killing my family. That happened in early 2000s. My wife is now terrified [of polar bears] after that encounter...Around 2000, I was here to go hunting caribou. I woke up around 4:00 in the morning and the boat was rocking, and there was a polar bear on my boat. We had just cooked seal meat that night and we woke up with a polar bear on the boat. We didn't want to shoot it because there was a big possibility that I was going to shoot the motor. I heard that when you yell as loud as you can, you can scare the polar bear. So I yelled from the top of my lungs and it got scared and it fell off the boat...It was a female and it had cubs, atiqtalaaq." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"We were camping with my sister-in-law, she was sleeping in the tent and we were in a cabin...That's how she grew up too, in summertime to be sleeping in tent. She didn't want to sleep anymore in the tent, because she was hearing these footsteps from polar bear and my dog was barking in the cabin. The next day we were told that there was a polar bear on our area. Not just one time, almost every other year they've been coming...I hear some people [say] they don't like to be sleeping in tents anymore, because polar bears are close and they can come at night where they are camping. Or even in summertime if we are camping down here, we would sleep in the boat anchored, not on the land, anchored in the water." (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

"People get killed by polar bears these days. They are unpredictable so we just have to know them...I know there have been a couple of very serious [incidents here]. One was a tourist who was camping by the river and one was a local guy who was guiding [caribou

sport hunters]. They got attacked by bears and during the night. [Those were] close calls. Those are the ones I know of but in the region last year there have been even a couple of deaths.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

Participants also described how Pangnirtungmiut and Kimmirutmiut are now finding ways to adapt to increased polar bear presence by putting in place strategies to mitigate risks of dangerous interactions with polar bears and minimize damage to property. Some explained that, starting around the 2000s, residents from both communities have started to use more fixed cabins instead of tents when camping on the land.

“I don’t recall when I first noticed defence kills but the bears that come in [the community] are normally killed to make sure that the community is safe from bear attacks and I find that the community is working really well in this area and people defend each other from bear attacks.” (Joe Arlooktoo, Kimmirut)

“Even back then, my mother would tell me to be safe and always carry a gun [rifle], just in case there might be a polar bear. They can just pop up at any time.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“Like for our cabins what we do is we put nails to our cardboard and cover the windows...board it up.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“We always bring dogs when we go out anywhere, mostly for fishing. We always bring two dogs [with us] and when a polar bear is coming in [the camp] they would start barking. We always do that, even if it is only for an overnight [trip]. If we don’t bring a dog we won’t sleep overnight out there. It is too risky! Before when I was a kid they were not as many polar bears as there is now. There is a lot more polar bears now therefore we need to bring dogs [with us].” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

Contributors shared tips on how to handle encounters with polar bears but also emphasized the importance of teaching younger generations about how to coexist with polar bears safely.

“I am not sure if [polar bears] have changed but I know that they have always been known to be dangerous and scary. When we were really young, we would be told how to act when we encounter a polar bear because they’ve always been dangerous and scary...We were always told if a person has a child and you encounter a polar bear, to not look at your child. Because if you look at your child they’ll go after it. And when a polar bear is ready to attack, it stands up. When it’s standing and it goes to you, you pick up [an object], grab it and scream really loud...The loudest sound you can make. I don’t know, if a polar bear is running after you, you got to make a sound, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, and then it can go right back.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

“The only concern I have now is when our young children and our young teenagers go out hunting smaller game at a walking distance from the community. Knowing that the bears are everywhere now, they need to be more cautious. They have to be taught to be more cautious when they are walking away from the community. And they have to be taught more nowadays to make sure they are safe because we are hearing that the bears are attacking humans every now and then since we started having bears around...When we hear that the bear is sighted right near our community or coming into the community, I am

afraid when my small children are out there not knowing if the bear is actually in the community.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

Future of polar bears

Many contributors indicated it was difficult to or would not comment on the future of polar bears. Some explained one cannot predict the future and therefore preferred not to comment on this theme.

“I don’t know [the future]. You don’t know what’s going to happen in the future.” (Matusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“[The future] is what I would like to know too, so I can’t say.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

Participants who discussed what the future may look like for polar bears were not generally concerned about the ability of polar bears to adapt to changing environmental conditions associated with climate change.

“I am not worried about polar bears because they’re healthy and really good. When we hear people say they’re going hungry and dying because of climate change, I think otherwise. They have plenty of food to eat. We hear very often that polar bears are endangered, that when the ice melts they say there won’t be any more polar bears. I think otherwise...because they have plenty to eat...[Polar bears are] better than humans when it comes to hunting because that’s all they do, right? Always looking for food, even if they’re not hungry.” (Abraham Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“I believe a little bit that if there is less ice, [polar bears] get less food but I think that it is an ongoing [aspect] of polar bear life, you know some day they get old but in the last few years we have seen polar bear that come closer to town. They are like human beings: they try to harvest seals and some of them are luckier than others. The unlucky ones tend to [harvest less preys] and that’s when their health starts to kind of deteriorate...In the last few years we have seen polar bears that come closer to town...When there is less sea ice they go close to town for food...but you know, polar bears can catch fish and eat other things other than seal...The ones that I have seen are mostly healthy, there may be a rare one that is a really skinny one. But most of them they look healthy.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

However, one contributor explained that while polar bears were highly adaptable, they may face difficulties finding suitable denning habitat if snow cover continues to decrease. Another noted that polar bear hide quality could be impacted in the future by changes in sea ice availability.

“I am aware of the weather changes today: it is a lot warmer with the climate change. I think the bears will be able to survive the global climate change, maybe because they are top predators. I have not noticed polar bears being affected by climate change. Today there is a lot less snow and I think that polar bears may not have a place to den because of lack of snow. If the bears will be unable to nurse because of lack of snow where they can den, I am uncertain of what would happen to them.” (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

“My only concern is that the ice goes out, the land, you know, and everything goes out and melts a lot faster now. That means [polar bears] are going to spend more time on the land

and...my question is how the skin will turn out in the future, you know. They seem to have been eating more [from the land] than they were before, like eggs.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Several participants from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut shared some perspectives on human-polar bear interactions and how these may evolve into the future. Some indicated that a continued increase in polar bear abundance will pose an increasing threat to the safety of community members.

“It seems like [we’re] getting more and more, another 20 years and we would have polar bears everywhere.” (Simeonie Keenainak, Pangnirtung)

“It will get more dangerous if the [polar bear] population keeps growing and growing.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“Nowadays I am noticing [polar bears] coming into town more and my concern would be what if they start eating people and hunting people.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“For the future, I would be concerned if polar bears are overpopulated that would not be too good for the humans but it is hard to predict the future.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

Several contributors also emphasized the importance of healthy polar bear populations for future generations and maintaining Inuit cultural traditions.

“I hope there will be enough [polar bears] for the future. I know there are, I can say there are more [bears] than there were before. But according to the researchers they’re saying there’s less, but I would say there’s more from my experience. I hope that numbers stay because it’s for the younger generation...At a very young age, men, young teenagers start hunting. They have to learn, they have to, for their kids. There should be hunting, there should be. The numbers shouldn’t be too low. But still, from what I know, there’s a lot more polar bears now.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“For what I have been hearing internationally they are saying that polar bear habitat is [withering] and I guess in the future it may become harder to harvest bears. Although I think that we are going to keep harvesting bears. We may not going to be able to sell the hide but we will still harvest them for the meat.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“I don’t like...polar bears to be [extinguished], I want them to be increased...Same with all animals...We live with, we live on seals and all the wild animals, like polar bear, seal, caribou, fish. We mostly live with, live on those.” (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

Polar bear management and stewardship

During individual interviews, contributors voiced their perspectives and concerns related to polar bear management and stewardship. They also shared their views on existing communications between polar bear researchers and Nunavummiut, and suggested ways to improve knowledge exchange and foster trust building between Nunavummiut, polar bear researchers and wildlife managers.

Concerns over public safety

Concerns over public safety emerged strongly during interviews. When prompted to discuss their concerns about polar bear management, all individual interview contributors (n=27) highlighted that they were especially concerned about increasing polar bear aggressions and human-polar bear encounters that posed a threat to human safety (see also 'Human-polar bear interactions' section).

"Now, there's so many polar bears you hear stories of people being attacked by polar bears in different communities." (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

"My only concern is about the safety of the community and people that go out. The safety is my highest concern. I have this concern since the 90s." (Sandy Akavak, Kimmirut)

"Polar bears have increased in numbers and they start to come to communities more often. This is my concern!" (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

Harvest quotas and hunting regulations

Contributors shared perspectives on harvest quotas and hunting regulations primarily in the context of their concerns over public safety. While many participants acknowledged polar bear management efforts, some felt harvest quotas and hunting regulations should better accommodate increasing human-polar bear interactions and associated safety concerns. Several contributors from both communities also noted that current polar bear management practices differed from how Inuit would traditionally manage their interactions with polar bears. Some expressed the view that Inuit should have greater control over polar bear harvest management in order to keep people safe. The importance of IQ in polar bear management and stewardship was emphasized.

When commenting on the quota system, many contributors recognized that management efforts have been successful in increasing polar bear abundance (see also 'Abundance' section).

"I think the management system is working properly because [polar bears] are increasing, they are not decreasing. People follow the management and listen." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

However, several participants from both communities expressed the view that polar bear harvesting quotas should be increased to address concerns over public safety (n=7 in Pangnirtung; n=3 in Kimmirut), as well as to support healthy seal populations and Inuit food security (n=1 in Pangnirtung). None of the participants suggested a reduction in existing harvest levels.

“[The quota system] has worked pretty well so far because if there were no quotas in the past then we wouldn’t be seeing polar bears as often as we do now. But I think some changes need to be made so that polar bears don’t endanger the lives of human beings.” (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

“Nowadays with the quotas being in place and with sometimes bears coming into camps and into the community and needing to be scared off, they [management partners] would need to work on getting quotas up higher than the normal quota range.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

“It would be nice if there can be more harvesting so the [bear] numbers can decline a bit because for younger generations and like, to whoever goes out hunting it’s worrisome...It can be worrisome to encounter a polar bear, like you want to enjoy yourself out there but on the side of that you have to worry about polar bears coming. I would like that [population] to drop a bit.” (Michael Kisa, Pangnirtung)

“For the sake of the seal pups, the quota should increase...If there is no immediate management put in place to increase the harvesting of polar bears in Nunavut, I am afraid that the seal population is going to be very low. So therefore food security for human beings is going to be endangered, that is what I think.” (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

Some contributors nonetheless emphasized that harvest management should remain sustainable.

“I’d like to see maybe a bit decrease in population for safety reasons but not to the extent [polar bears] would become an endangered species. And hopefully the polar bears can survive whatever the changes we go through.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

Three contributors from Pangnirtung also expressed their lack of support for the quota system in place and suggested reverting to traditional Inuit polar bear stewardship practices to ensure public safety.

“I talked to other people in different communities and they all think that if we did it like back then, like killed polar bears whenever they come and it doesn’t matter how much, it would be safer for everyone. It wouldn’t be as dangerous...Other Elders in other communities think that’s how it should be now because there’s too many.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

“The Inuit knowledge should not be touched. If it’s been touched, Inuit way back then would say don’t...or even today. And they should not put any quotas on polar bears.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

When discussing polar bears killed in defense of life and property, several participants stated that how ‘problem bears’ and defence kills are managed nowadays was not sufficient to keep people safe, goes against Inuit ways, and contributes to making bears less fearful of humans. Many contributors (n=5 in Pangnirtung; n=1 in Kimmirut) specifically explained that “scaring polar bears” that come into camps and communities as opposed to harvesting them –as Inuit traditionally did– was not an adequate way to address concerns over public safety.

“Inuit have a culture. When the polar bear comes into the community...the law will say ‘try to scare them off before you shoot them’. In Inuit law, there’s no such thing as ‘scare them off’. You harvest it. Kill it. Why try to scare it off? He’s coming back anyway. Might end up coming back during the night, not during the day, you know. It doesn’t work really...In the older days, a bear comes into the camp it’s a dead bear. Instead of try to scare it off...That’s not Inuit way. That’s not Inuit law or nothing...When we do that, we just try to making that bear smart who’ll go visit again next time.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“Today, when a polar bear comes, it doesn’t get killed. Back then, it had to be killed because if it doesn’t get killed they would come back all the time and damage anything that’s old. We’ve heard stories...that there was a man who got killed because that polar bear probably kept going back and it wasn’t afraid, anymore. Any polar bear that comes to camps or places where there’s people they should be killed.” (Leesee-Mary Kakee, Pangnirtung)

Some explained that Inuit are often reluctant to kill polar bears in self-defence, thus putting their safety at risk. This tension was highlighted in a story shared by a participant from Pangnirtung.

“The polar bear was very close to one of the tents and the family woke up because their dog was barking. And they woke up and left the tent right away but they had forgotten their baby in their tent and the polar bear was so close they had to kill it to protect their baby. When I heard the yelling, I thought it was because of a wolf. So I grabbed my gun [rifle]. There was other people there with their guns and I kept telling them to shoot [the bear] before it attacks the baby. But the other people kept saying that the government says we can’t shoot them. The polar bear was getting ready to jump on the tent where the baby was. And since no one would shoot it, I had to fight one of the guys who had the gun. And we were fighting over the gun. He got it and had the chance to shoot [the bear] before it jumped.” (Lazarusie Ishulutaq, Pangnirtung)

Several contributors (n=5 in Kimmirut; n=1 in Pangnirtung) also shared the view that defence kills should not be subtracted from community harvesting quotas. Some suggested that hides from polar bears harvested in self-defence should be returned to the hunter rather than being kept by the local Wildlife Officer (n=2 in Kimmirut; n=1 in Pangnirtung).

“Back in the old days, any polar bear was harvested without having to have a tag. Nowadays with the tags and quotas in place, it is very difficult. Bears come in and out and having no tags and having to encounter a bear it is not a very pleasant experience. Having to defend your life and cannot kill a bear because of the quotas or the tags being used up [makes things] much more difficult now than in the past...Defence kills should not be used [to determine] the quota for the next hunting season and the hide is taken away...They should make change in these areas, too.” (Eliyah Padluq, Kimmirut)

“When we harvest a ‘defence kill’ that comes from the quota, the hunter doesn’t get to keep the hide. The hide should be given to the person who killed the bear for defence.” (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

“[Defence kills] should not come out of the quota system. Because it’s self-defence. When that happens, you lose your quota, that polar bear skin. The polar bear is usually taken, skinned by the Wildlife Officer. We don’t want anybody to take what we catch, if we want

to use it. Because it's not endangering the polar bear. If we've only got a few polar bears, yes get it out of the quota, but there's so many polar bears." (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

When discussing hunting regulations, two contributors from Kimmirut suggested extending the current polar bear harvest season into the summer, when human-bear interactions are likely. Some contributors (n=2 in Kimmirut; n=1 in Pangnirtung) also expressed a desire to harvest polar bear cubs¹².

"Some of the management decisions are not too accurate. During the summer time when it is not harvest season the bear will come up to the community and has to be chased away. But then when it is chased away it'll come back and it has to be called a defence kill. Why can't we have the year round quotas or something similar in place? Because if we could hunt the bears during the summer season we won't be too afraid...Why can't they have something put in place for the summer too? Maybe that way we won't be too afraid to be out [on the land]." (Akego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

"If the management could include summer harvesting quotas that would be beneficial, as well as to include in the management to harvest cubs. I heard Elders saying that they would like to have cubs and I would like to experience that myself too, the taste of the meat of a cub...Long before I was born they did harvest cubs and my grandparents used to mention that they would love to be able to harvest cubs." (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

Five participants (n=3 in Pangnirtung; n=2 in Kimmirut) further suggested changes to sex-selective harvesting practices¹³ that would lead to an increase in the amount of females harvested.

"I know they're protecting [female polar bears] for the future but if [hunters are] not going to get females, [polar bears are] just going to grow...more numbers. Because just males are being harvested. I feel there are more polar bears around because cubs are growing up...More males are caught than females. There are being more and more polar bears." (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

Throughout discussions related to harvest quotas and hunting regulations, participants emphasized the importance of Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit in polar bear management and stewardship.

"I think Inuit IQ should be used to manage [polar bears]. IQ should be given a chance like science knowledge that has been ruling polar bear quota. I think IQ should be put in place to manage the polar bear population as much as science has been used for quite some time...I think IQ should be given better consideration for managing polar bear populations." (Johnny Mike, Pangnirtung)

¹² The harvest of polar bear cubs and family groups is permitted in Nunavut under certain conditions. Hunters must request and obtain a permit in order to be allowed to harvest polar bear cubs. Some contributors were not aware of the existence of this provision which speaks to the need for greater information dissemination on this topic among Nunavut harvesters.

¹³ Interviews were conducted in 2019 soon before the polar bear harvest sex ratio was adjusted to one male for every female (1:1) across Nunavut.

Communication

Many participants from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut expressed their interest in scientific research conducted on polar bears. However, while acknowledging communication efforts made by polar bear researchers to date, several participants from both communities stated that they would like to receive or have access to more information about scientific research conducted on polar bears. Many highlighted that polar bear research communication with community members could be improved (n=8 in Kimmirut; n=6 in Pangnirtung).

"I did not receive information from scientists, I have never talked to a scientist before. [When I was part of the bear survey], I was just counting the bears and I did not receive information back. We were just counting and they did not forward the conclusions. They didn't tell me." (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

"I think that scientists do provide good information because that's their duties to do, whenever they do science they should share all the information so that everybody is aware. Or at least give them to the HTOs and they can provide them to the public." (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

"Because scientists don't report to us directly, we hear the information through the news first before the information comes back to the community...They seem to conduct studies more often by helicopter and then we would hear back information through the news first before we are given [information] to us directly." (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

"Whenever we harvest a polar bear, we let the HTO know, we give them samples, all the samples that they require. Other than that, I don't know of any other reporting system...If [communication] was better, then the community would be more aware of what the situation is, the community as a whole...I don't know what's already happening now, but that information needs to be shared with not only the HTO but with the community itself, through maybe community consultations or community information sessions." (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

Perspectives shared by participants highlighted that improving polar bear research communication was particularly important given the presence of some community mistrust towards scientific research methods and polar bear researchers, and the existence of divergences between scientific and Inuit observations.

"People down South say that the polar bears are becoming extinct, that is because they have never been up here and when they are counting the population, they do not check all the places. They just go to some places but not all." (Matusie Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

"And information [from polar bear scientists] is sometimes provided and sometimes it's not really true at all. That's my concern. Number of bears are not going down. They're not starving yet. The population's still going up so which just means [bears are] still eating good...I have heard so many times on the news or talking to the people that polar bears are not actively hunting in open water. To me, that's not so...That's not true...I see [polar bears] all the time and then when I hear on the news that there is no ice, that polar bears will be starving, they'll be all gone, no way. Where do they get that information from? It's not true. Someone is giving out not true information at all to the world. It's really wrong." (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“People that count the bears and study the bears they do not normally consult back to the town’s people...When they do bear observations in the summertime, if they say that the numbers are declining that’s where I would debate. Sure they are white and easy to be seen in the summer time but some of them can also make themselves dirty to camouflage. I think that people that survey the area by helicopter there is a certain percentage that they don’t see, compared to what we see. Polar bears are capable of camouflaging themselves, rolling around dirt and mud to [disguise] their white presence. I have seen a bear that looked almost like a rock...I am kind of on defence when they are stating what they see compare to what I see.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“Scientists who don’t live in our communities and who live down South say that they have a lot of knowledge about our animals but yet the Inuit are the ones who would know more because we are in the community and are the observers of our animals. We are telling, you know, what we know. But the scientists who come up will say ‘I know these’. But we say no, you don’t.” (Itee Temela, Kimmirut)

Many contributors (n=9 in Kimmirut; n=4 in Pangnirtung) offered concrete suggestions for improving communications and fostering trust building between community members, polar bear researchers and wildlife managers. Several participants highlighted the need for polar bear researchers to share more information with and seek input from community members. Some suggested that information on polar bear research could be made more readily available to community members –including youth– through different media (e.g., community radio, reports, social media, community meetings, school presentations) in both English and Inuktitut.

“Scientists could help out by providing documentation of their studies or [communicating information through] the local community radio.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

“We hear information from the scientist through the radio but they don’t give reports...[I would like] if they could keep us informed about what they did. I like to know what is going on in my surroundings, so if I have to do a lot of reading I can do so. If they could [provide reports] to the community that would be helpful, in Inuktitut...If they report back to me in English, I will have to have someone help me.” (Akeego Killiktee, Kimmirut)

“[Researchers should be] providing documentation of what they know [more widely] even videos.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

“[Scientists can improve the communication of information about bears with me and the community] by making [information] more readily available online...[They] can give us the links of the websites where we can look [the information] up.” (Anonymous 02, Kimmirut)

“Right now we have Facebook...to find out now which community [has] been interacting with the polar bears [and when bears] are coming into the community. We find out now a lot faster than before.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

“I don’t know if scientist have met with the member of the public each time or if they ever have. I think that they should inform the public themselves [through] community meetings.” (Jawlie Akavak, Kimmirut)

“What scientists can share? What they know, what they’ve done, what they’ve studied. And maybe [share their knowledge] even to the high school. If they can come and share

what they've learned and what's going on, the students will know what's happening to the polar bear population up here.” (Meeka Alivaktuk, Pangnirtung)

“If the scientists themselves cannot come to the community, [they can] work with the HTO and then they will pass [the information]. What information they got, they can pass it onto the community with the local radio station or something like that...What is taken from the North should come back to the community as information.” (David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)

Participants also mentioned that they were particularly interested in obtaining scientific information on the health, abundance and distribution of polar bears.

“[I am interested to know] if [polar bears] are sick or not, you know? And we could give [samples] to them [researchers] so they can find out if something is wrong with the bear or anything like that. That's important.” (Peter Kanayuk, Pangnirtung)

“[I am interested to know about] their health because they're our meat, like we only hunt [polar bears] for food, not just for fun.” (Geetee Maniapik, Pangnirtung)

“I have strong concerns there because our Elders say polar bears hunt even better in the summertime because that's when they're building up the fat for the winter, right, and there's no ice during the summertime unless there's that multi-year ice coming in. So there has to be better knowledge, this needs to happen.” (Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)

“I think that looking at the health of polar bear would be very helpful and I have just heard that some polar bears may have more chances of getting PCBs [contaminants]. It would be interesting to receive more information about that.” (Anonymous 03, Kimmirut)

“I would be interested in knowing if they are declining [or] if they are still the same. If they are more healthy or if they are less healthy. This would be good to know.” (Anonymous 01, Kimmirut)

“I would like to know the population numbers of polar bears...I think I have the right to know the population numbers, the health [of bears] and what management does.” (Ejetsiak Padluq, Kimmirut)

Several contributors emphasized that relationship building and creating opportunities for dialogue between science and IQ was key to improving knowledge exchange and fostering trust building between Nunavummiut and polar bear researchers. Some encouraged polar bear researchers to engage more with Nunavut communities in order to develop greater mutual understanding and ensure that accurate information was shared.

“The scientists have to work with community members to give accurate information.” (Kooyoo Padluq, Kimmirut)

*“I think there should be, like I said earlier, a better relation between the researchers or the scientists and the people in the community so that information is accurate and that the community knows what the scientists know because we often say ‘this is the truth because this is what we’re hearing’ or ‘this is our knowledge’. If we’re not hearing the scientist side then the truth may not be the whole truth...Because we’re not hearing what they’re saying...There’s always studies saying that polar bears are decreasing and that they’re becoming endangered and all that but us, we’re seeing more [polar bears]. So there has to be better communication...between the two so that the information is accurate.”
(Anonymous 04, Pangnirtung)*

*“All the information are in the community...[Scientists should] work with the people along the coastline of Baffin Island. That’s where the bears are. And the kids start seeing polar bears when they are still on their mother’s back. So that’s a good information...If scientists work together [with communities] I know more people will listen or myself, I would.”
(David Kooneeliusie, Pangnirtung)*



CONCLUSION

This study explored the detailed historic and contemporary knowledge held by Nunavut Inuit about polar bear ecology and health, as well as the importance of *nanuq* to Inuit and perspectives on polar bear management and stewardship.

Overall, interview contributors from Pangnirtung and Kimmirut reported that polar bears they encounter are today generally healthy. Observations suggestive of a healthy polar bear population included: an increase in polar bear abundance systematically reported by participants over their lifetime, no change in cub productivity and survival reported over time, females with two cubs being most frequently observed, and rare reports of polar bear disease or non-hunting related mortality. However, in recent years, contributors pointed to some subtle changes –which could be early signs of change– in polar bear health, including a slight decline in polar bear fatness and overall health noted by some participants and occasional reports of hair loss (alopecia). Participants had also observed changes in polar bear prey availability and habitat condition over time, including changes in sea ice quality and quantity and a major decline in the abundance of ringed seal (the main polar bear prey) observed around both Kimmirut and Pangnirtung. At the time interviews were conducted, such changes were not reflected in observations related to cub productivity and survival, which had remained stable according to contributors from both communities. Contributors emphasized that *nanuq* is a resilient and opportunistic predator that is highly adaptable to changes in prey availability and habitat conditions. Regular documentation of Inuit observations will be required to understand how polar bear population health, including body condition status and population demographics, evolve over time.

Importantly, results from this study highlighted public safety concerns arising from increased human-polar bear interactions and encounters. Public safety both in the community and on the land was unanimously raised by participants as a primary concern that should be addressed. Testimonies from project contributors suggested that polar bear management today must find ways to address public safety concerns, while ensuring that polar bears persist into the future and remain available for future generations.

This study illustrated that Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit offers unique year-round historical and contemporary ecological observations which can enhance our collective understanding of *nanuq*, and provides key insight and perspectives on polar bear management and stewardship. Polar bears experts interviewed demonstrated a strong ability to detect and observe ecological changes over time and recall unusual events; they also identified polar bear health indicators employed to guide their harvesting and consumption decisions. Furthermore, this report explored the specialized knowledge held by Inuit women and men, who can both make unique contributions to our understanding of polar bear health. Collectively, our findings therefore highlight the substantial contributions that IQ holders can make to polar bear research, monitoring and adaptive co-management.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit emphasizes the importance of maintaining respectful relationships between humans and polar bears and reminds us of our collective responsibility towards *nanuq* and future generations. To this end, generating opportunities for knowledge and information exchange among Nunavummiut, polar bear researchers and wildlife managers will be important. We therefore hope this work can serve to inform polar bear management and decision-making, as well as ongoing and future community-based monitoring and research efforts in Nunavut and beyond.

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APPENDIX 1. Contributing authors – biographies

Biographies and pictures are provided below with permission. Please refer to 'Contributing authors' section for a comprehensive list of contributing authors.

KIMMIRUT

Jawlie Akavak



Jawlie was born on April 6, 1951 right on the other side of the bay of Kimmirut (at that time named Lake Harbour). Jawlie lived all his life in Kimmirut and vividly recalls that the community was quite different when he was a child. In the winter, only 20 people lived in the community. In the summer, other Inuit living in outpost camps further away would come into town and, for a week or two during sealift time, the population of Lake Harbour would double. Although Jawlie does not consider himself a polar bear hunter, he has been observing polar bears all his life. He has been regularly travelling on the land and harvesting country food since his youth, and continues to do so today. When he goes on the land, Jawlie always brings along his dogs that alert him and his family when polar bears are close by, and help them to stay safe while traveling and camping on *nuna*.

Sandy Akavak



Sandy Akavak was born on June 14, 1941 in the outpost camp of *Nuvuktiqpaaraluk*, the “outermost point on the land”. He was raised on the land. During his childhood, he was always on the move traveling between his family’s summer, spring and winter camps. When his father starting working with the RCMP in 1947, he and his family relocated to Kimmirut. His father helped RCMP officers travel from place to place by dog team and boat, and Sandy followed along. In 1967, his father retired and Sandy took over the job, becoming an RCMP officer himself at a time when the last few dog teams were used to travel. Sandy has been mainly based in Kimmirut ever since, and worked for a few years in Iqaluit and Pangnirtung in the 1970s. Similar to his father, his job was to help RCMP officers travel on the land and between communities. Back then, there was no

Conservation Officer; the RCMP was responsible for polar bear management, including quotas. In the late 1960s, Sandy remembers that there was a quota of only three polar bears for the Kimmirut area. He vividly remembers the first polar bear he harvested in 1962 as it was the same day his daughter was born. At that time, he sold the hide –a 9 footer– for \$50 in Iqaluit, which is much lower than prices obtained in the 1980s and beyond. Although Sandy does not harvest polar bears anymore, he still enjoys travelling on the land and harvesting country foods.

Rosemary Allen



Rosemary was born in 1964 in an outpost camp near Qikiqtarjuak. At the age of two, she went to Toronto for health reasons and then moved to Inuvik as her father was working for the DEW line sites. Rosemary moved back to Qikiqtarjuak in 1979, and then to Kimmirut in 1984 where she has lived ever since. In 2018, she started to clean polar bear hides. She has prepared two polar bear hides to date.

Joe Arlooktoo



Joe was born on the land in one of the earlier Hudson's Bay Company trading posts located on the north side of Frobisher Bay. His father worked for the Company, and travelled with Joe and his family. At the age of three, Joe moved to Kimmirut with his family; they travelled all the way by boat crossing Frobisher Bay first, and then following the coast up to Kimmirut (at that time known as Lake Harbour). Joe and his family lived in Kimmirut for about ten years, then moved to Cape Dorset, and two years later returned back to the Kimmirut area. At that time, Joe was a young boy eager to learn more about his culture, and how to hunt the 'Inuit way'. In the outpost camp of *Qijujuaq*, he learned the traditional lifestyle living in sod houses made with moss, soil, and a bit of drift wood. There, he also learned how to hunt seals on his own in a kayak.

In the early 1960s, he moved to Kimmirut and has lived in the community ever since. Although Joe now does not actively hunt polar bears anymore he still goes out on the land, and uses the hide of the last polar bear he harvested as a warm mattress to sit on in the *qamutiik*. Joe holds a wealth of knowledge about *nuna* and its wildlife. He is eager to pass on what he has learned over his lifetime to the young Nunavummiut, tomorrow's leaders.

Joannie Ikkidluak



Joannie was born on June 10, 1945. He grew up in an outpost camp in the Markham Bay area. At that time, he was traveling by dog team, by boat, and also walking long distances on the land.

Joannie recalls seeing his first polar bear in the 1970s. He harvested a polar bear for the first time in 1987 –this bear was a 13 footer which was going after the bait he had used for his trapline. Since then, Joannie has been polar bear hunting almost every since then. He was a board member for the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board for a number of years.

Akulujuk Judea



Akulujuk was born in 1949 in Kimmirut. She started cleaning polar bear hides in the early 1970s and has been cleaning polar bear hides up to this day.

Akeego Killiktee

Akeego Killiktee was born on September 5, 1952 in an outpost camp located in *Kugalik*. She grew up on the land living with her family in *Qijujuaq*, a place named after a tree log. She moved to Kimmirut in 1979 and has been living in the community since then. In her adult life, she has enjoyed living on the land especially during the spring. Akeego has been cleaning polar bear hides since 1979. She has cleaned and stretched so many hides that she is not even sure how many she has done to this date. She now wishes she had counted them from the start! Today, Akeego enjoys traveling on the land whenever she has the opportunity and she is thankful whenever she can eat country foods.

Mikidjuk Kolola



Mikidjuk was born on November 19, 1949. He grew up in an outpost camp in the Kimmirut area and started to travel on the land at the age of nine.

In the 1950s, Mikidjuk never heard anyone talking about polar bears in the Kimmirut area. He recalls observing his first polar bear in the early 1960s when he used to camp in tents during the warmer season. At that time, Mikidjuk was not worried about polar bears but nowadays travelling on the land can be dangerous due to the presence of polar bears.

Mikidjuk is a polar bear hunter who enjoys travelling on the land and observing wildlife.

Pitsiula Michael

Pitsiula was born on January 18, 1965 in Iqaluit. He spent his childhood in Kimmirut and lived in an outpost camp in the Markham Bay area from 1977 to 1990 – going back to the community by boat and skidoo during that time. Pitsiula then moved to Cape Dorset in 1990, and back to Kimmirut in 1993 where he has lived ever since.

Pitsiula started observing polar bears around 1970s, and regularly travels to his preferred hunting grounds in the Markham Bay area. He also occasionally travels to the south shore of the Meta Incognita Peninsula.

Pitsiula harvested his first polar bear when he was 16 years old. Since then, he has participated in many polar bear hunts and has been helping with polar bear sport hunts in Kimmirut.

Saimata Onalik



Saimata was born in a tent on the shore of Lake Harbour on July 11, 1958. She has cleaned three polar bear hides over her lifetime.

Eliyah Padluq

Eliyah was born in an outpost camp on March 12, 1941. Eliyah grew up on the land and throughout his childhood he lived with his family in over seven different camps located along the south shore of Baffin Island, on Meta Incognita peninsula, and on Big Island. Eliyah has lived in the Kimmirut area all his life and he knows the land surrounding Kimmirut as if it was his backyard! In his lifetime, Eliyah has harvested over 30 polar bears: the first one was “at a time when counting time was not needed” and the last polar bear he harvested was just last year, in 2018. Eliyah continues to enjoy traveling on the land and the ocean and harvesting wildlife, including the mighty polar bears, up to this date.

Ejetsiak Padluq

Ejetsiak was born on April 1966 in the outpost camp of *Qijujuaq*, about 55 km east from Kimmirut. He lived in *Qijujuaq* with his family until 1982. His grandfather was the leader of the outpost camp; when he passed away in 1982, Ejetsiak moved to Kimmirut with his family where he has lived ever since. Ejetsiak is an avid hunter. He has been harvesting polar bears since the age of 17 and even lost count of how many he has harvested.

Jeannie Padluq

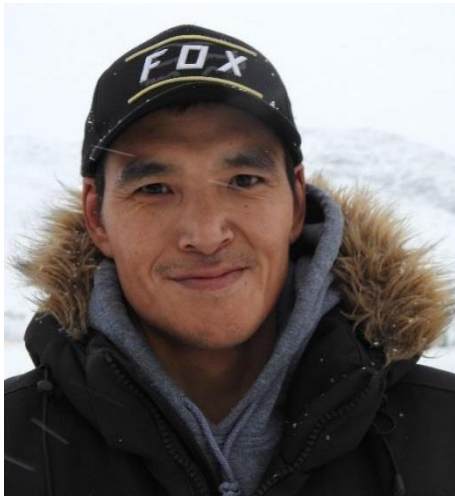


Jeannie Padluq was born on June 9, 1949 in Kimmirut right in town where the nursing station is now located. She grew up in Kimmirut and *Itinnaapik*, a camp close by town at the mouth of the harbour. Throughout her life, Jeannie has cleaned and prepared over 60 polar bear hides and she does it up to this date. Jeannie is very active in the community. She very much enjoys going to the school and sharing her knowledge with young Kimmirumiut. Amongst other things, Jeannie enjoys going out on the land. She likes going to lakes “especially if they have fish”.

Kooyoo Padluq

Kooyoo was born in Iqaluit. He grew up on the land in the outpost camp of *Qijujuaq* until he was 16, and then moved to Kimmirut with his family. Since then, he has been living in Kimmirut. Kooyoo loves country foods and regularly goes on the land to harvest seals, caribou when possible, fish, birds, whales, bird eggs, and polar bears. He has been working at the Hamlet for over 30 years.

Davidee Temela



Davidee was born in Kimmirut in 1984. Since the early 1990s, he has been travelling on the land with his father, observing and harvesting wildlife. Today, Davidee is a very active harvester who provides country food for his family.

Isaac Temela



Isaac was born on November 24th, 1978 in Iqaluit, at that time known as Frobisher Bay and still part of the Northwest Territories. Isaac has lived in Kimmirut since his early childhood. He started hunting at the age of twelve using an old fashion Chipmunk .22 rifle. Even before then, since he was nine, Isaac has been mining soapstone in the Markham Bay area. Every summer, Isaac goes together with other miners from Kimmirut and Iqaluit to *Tatsittut* (Inuktitut name for Markham Bay): the place of mist and fog. He has been doing so for over thirty years and sometimes he has traveled by tugboat to bring the mined soapstone from Kimmirut to Iqaluit. Isaac harvested his first polar bear when he was sixteen years old in a cold day in January. He enjoys his land and observing all the wildlife that lives in it, including the majestic polar bears.

Itee Temela



On September 2, 1948, Itee Temela decided it was time 'to see the world' once her mom was in Kimmirut during one of the regular trips she was doing from the outpost camp of *Ukialivilut* where she was living with her family. Itee grew up on the land, in *Ukialivilut* during her early childhood and in *Qijujuaq*, closer to Kimmirut, in her young adult life. She still goes to *Qijujuaq* every fall to wait for the whales to come back; four years ago, she visited *Ukialivilut*, a place where she holds strong connection to, since her mother was buried there.

Itee is still an active hunter and goes regularly out on the land to harvest country foods. Seals are her favourite. Since her childhood, she has been helping scraping and stretching polar bear hides and she still does it today.

PANGNIRTUNG

Leopa Akpalialuk



Meeka Alivaktuk



Meeka was born in *Nunataq* and lived there until she was eight years old. From there, her family moved to and lived at another camp for two years before Meeka and her family were relocated to Pangnirtung by the federal government. In 1969, Meeka went to residential school in Churchill, Manitoba, for one year. She lived in Iqaluit from 1994 to 1996 to receive training for a job at a school.

After polar bear quotas were established, Meeka was the first woman in her community to harvest a polar bear (in the 1980s). At that time, she had to travel further from the community to harvest polar bears than where people travel to harvest them today. Although she has not harvested polar bears since, she has cleaned many hides over her lifetime and is experienced with polar bears through that work. She also participates in polar bear hunts with other community

members. Meeka enjoys traveling on the land to go hunting (for seals, beluga and caribou) and fishing almost every year. Two years ago, she built a cabin and has been traveling there mostly in the summertime.

Leesee-Mary Kakee



Leesee-Mary was born in an igloo and grew up in *Ujjuituq* (“place of bearded seal”) until she was nine years old. She began hunting with her father at a very young age. In the summertime, she would go fishing and seal hunting with her father. Leesee would also accompany her father whenever he went polar bear hunting: “My father wanted to leave me behind when he was going after the polar bear, but I wanted to go so badly I cried.” She was eight years old at the last time she went polar bear hunting with her father. When she was 14 years old, Leesee moved to Pangnirtung. At that time, she and her father stopped hunting. She would travel back and forth between areas where each side of her parents’ family lived. She would travel by foot or boat in the summer, and dog team in the winter and spring. She moved to Pangnirtung in 1962 and has lived there since.

In her lifetime, Leesee has helped cleaned polar bear hides on two occasions. Today, she still actively travels on the land. She has a cabin that is accessible by boat in the summertime.

Peter Kanayuk



Peter Kanayuk was born in 1951 at *Usualuk*, an outpost camp located close to Pangnirtung. He spent his childhood and early life in *Qimmisuuq* on the south shore of Cumberland Sound. Peter grew up on the land, hunting with his family and travelling by dog team. He remembers a time when many dogs in camps were sick and dying; because of that, families were forced to relocate to Pangnirtung. His family was one of the last few to be relocated to Pangnirtung in the mid-1960s. After attending residential school in Manitoba, Peter worked briefly for the RCMP. He then settled permanently in Pangnirtung where he became a heavy equipment operator.

Peter has spent his life hunting and traveling on the land surrounding Pangnirtung. He has been hunting polar bears since he was about 20 years old and continues to go hunting with his son-in-law. He travels on the land year-round and has had to scare polar bears away from approaching his camps. Throughout his lifetime, he has gained considerable experience observing, hunting, and butchering polar bears.

Abraham Keenainak



Abraham was born on the land and moved to the *Nunataq* area, where he lived until he was 21 years old. When he married, Abraham moved to *Iqalulik* and lived there for about five years before moving to Pangnirtung in the late 1960s. In Pangnirtung, he was introduced to the snowmobile; up until then he had only travelled by dog team. Abraham worked for the Hudson Bay Company for about five years, trading sealskin, polar bear hides, as well as wolf and fox pelts. He then worked as a heavy equipment operator.

Abraham caught his first polar bear when he was in his 30s, and harvested his last polar bear in 2018. He has caught six polar bears over his lifetime. Today, in the spring and summer, Abraham goes camping on the land to hunt caribou, seal, fox, walrus and polar bear, as well as goes fishing. He also harvests beluga and narwhal. He has seen

bowhead whale on his trips but has never harvested one himself. Since retiring in 2006, Abraham has had more time to go hunting: "The only thing that stops me from hunting is bad weather!"

Simeonee Keenainak



Simeonee learned how to hunt polar bears from his father in the 1960s, and has spent most of his time camping and traveling on the land around Pangnirtung and Iqaluit. Until the 1980s, he worked as an RCMP officer, moving from community to community every two years. In the past, he would travel by dog team. Today, he travels by boat and skidoo, depending on the season. He has travelled on the land wherever he has lived.

Simeonee is experienced with all of Cumberland Sound, from wildlife to sea ice and travel conditions. His first polar bear hunt was with his father, and since then he has gone hunting for polar bears around Pangnirtung and Iqaluit; his most recent harvest was in 2005.

In addition to polar bears, he has harvested a range of wildlife – "anything that moves" – across broad areas where he has lived. He continues to go camping all year round. In addition to hunting, Simeonee also observes and encounters wildlife through photography. Since 2017, he has been the Chairperson of the Pangnirtung Hunters and Trappers Organization.

Michael Kisa



Michael Kisa was born during the summer in a sod house at *Qarmakuluk*. After his mother passed away during childbirth, his godmother brought him to Pangnirtung. He has lived there since, although he lived in a camp with his parents for three years when he was a teenager.

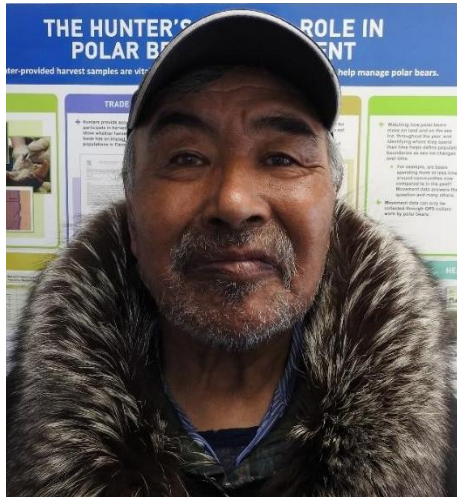
In the 1990s and 2000s, Michael worked as a Conservation Officer in Pangnirtung. He would spend time tracking polar bears and measuring their tracks. Michael caught his first polar bear at 19 years old and has harvested approximately 15 polar bears since. He harvested his last polar bear two years ago. Michael has also had three personal encounters with polar bears. Today, he enjoys travelling by boat to catch fish and narwhal.

David Kooneeliusie

David was born on *Nunataq*, just outside of Pangnirtung. He and his family have lived in many places, including Ikaluktutiak (Cambridge Bay), Qikiqtaq, Pelican Island, North Pangnirtung Fjord, and Qikiqtarjuaq. He went to residential school in Churchill, Manitoba, from 1965 to 1968.

David learned how to hunt and butcher polar bears at a young age from his father. He also worked for Parks Canada for 25 years. During this time, he became experienced with observing polar bears through bear surveys and research by helicopter and snow machine. These surveys included making observations at dens, recording tracks and sightings, and mark-recapture. David was transferred to Pangnirtung in 1997, where he started working full time. He has lived in Pangnirtung since then, apart from traveling for Parks Canada training. After moving to Pangnirtung, he has not been hunting as much, except to teach his children how to hunt. David retired in 2009.

Lazarusie Ishulutaq



Lazarusie was born on the land in *Usualuk* in 1948. He grew up on the land in Cumberland Sound, traveling with his family by dog team between winter, summer and spring camps. He also grew up hunting seal and caribou amongst other country foods. The first polar bear he saw was in the 1950s and, back then, it was a rare event. Lazarusie lived many years in *Qipisa* (an outpost camp located on the south shore of Cumberland Sound) harvesting seals to sell their skin. When the sealskin market collapsed in the early 1980s, he was forced to relocate to Pangnirtung. That was also the time when polar bears started to increase in the area.

Lazarusie has experience with hunting, butchering and living with polar bears. He has harvested over 10 polar bears since the 1970s and continues to harvest them today (last harvest in 2017). Because of his experience, he guides sport

hunters on their polar bear hunts around Pangnirtung. Lazarusie has also harvested other wildlife such as seals, caribou, fish, walrus, beluga, ducks, and he continues to travel in the Cumberland Sound year-round. He shared insights about relationships with polar bears that were gathered from both his own observations and the experience of family members.

Geetee Maniapik

Geetee Maniapik was born on the north side of Cumberland Sound, and lived there until she was four or five years old. Her father would travel by dog team at least once a year along the north side of Cumberland Sound, where her mother's parents were living. Geetee moved to Pangnirtung when her parents had to relocate into a settlement. She also lived at a permanent camp on the land near Pangnirtung, where she would travel back and forth to the community. She lived for a couple of years in Iqaluit around 1966 and would travel there by boat. She moved to Pangnirtung permanently in the 1970s, when her father had tuberculosis.

Over her lifetime, Geetee has cleaned or helped clean over thirty polar bear hides. Geetee started working on polar bear hides at a very young age while helping her grandmother and sister clean hides. Geetee has also hunted three polar bears. Today, she harvests seal, beluga, and fish. In the spring, she goes fishing almost every weekend.

Matiusie Maniapik



Matiusie was born on 20 January 1950 in the outpost camp of *Qipisa* on the south shore of Cumberland Sound. His family then moved north to the outpost camp of *Iqalulituuq* in the upper part of Cumberland Sound, and Matiusie grew up there until he was a teenager. Around 1966, the government relocated him and his family to Pangnirtung where he has lived since.

Matiusie spends time on the land hunting caribou and fishing and has different cabins that he uses according to the hunting season. He had been hunting polar bears since he was 19 years old, and has harvested over seven polar bears in his lifetime; his last polar bear harvest was in winter 2015 at the dump in Pangnirtung. Since polar bears hide prices have declined about five years ago, Matiusie has lost interest in polar bear hunting. However, he is still aware of

polar bear hunting activities taking place around Pangnirtung. He enjoys traveling year-round on the land and observing and hunting other wildlife.

Johnny Mike



Johnny Mike was born in Pangnirtung in 1955. He lived in the outpost camp of *Illungajuk* in the mid-1960s in the upper part of the Cumberland Sound. He has lived mostly in Pangnirtung except for brief periods in the 1970s, late 1990s, early 2000s, and from 2016 to 2018, when he was located mostly in Iqaluit. During those periods, he still travelled frequently to Pangnirtung. Johnny also lived for a short time in Qikiqtarjuak.

Johnny served as MLA of Iqaluit and Minister of Environment for the Government of Nunavut between 2014 and 2018. He is an active and experienced hunter and enjoys travelling regularly within the Cumberland Sound to harvest and observe different animals (seals, walrus, caribou, beluga, narwhal, and fish): "That is my experience and it is quite of an experience!" He began hunting polar

bears in 1992, when he shot his first young female in self-defence while caribou hunting, and continues to harvest polar bears whenever he has the chance. He has harvested bears on the north and south of Cumberland Sound, as well as around Iqaluit while living there in 2004. Johnny shared his knowledge about polar bears, which he learned from his own observations, as well as from his family and Elders.

Daivee Nowyuk



Daivee was born in *Qipisa* and lived there until 1980, when he was almost 30 years old. His family was one of the last to remain on the land. Daivee moved to Pangnirtung in the early 1980s and has lived there since. When he first moved into the settlement, there was a school and hospital (due to many people getting sick). The Hudson Bay Company was also purchasing pelts and furs at the time.

Daivee is an active polar bear hunter and goes polar bear hunting whenever he has the chance. He harvested his first polar bear at a young age, when polar bear hunting was rare. He has harvested five to six polar bears over his lifetime, with his last harvest four years ago. He continues polar bear hunting when he gets the chance. In addition to polar bears, Daivee often goes turbot fishing, as well as general fishing, clam digging, seal hunting, berry picking, and caribou hunting. He also participates in whale hunts with other hunters from the community.

Anonymous

The project contributor was born in and has lived most of her life in Pangnirtung. As a child, she spent some time in Igloolik and Iqaluit. While growing up, her family always harvested polar bears and she remembers hunting polar bears with her family around Pangnirtung.

Since 2008, she has cleaned over eight polar bear hides for her family and other community members. She has also harvested one polar bear (in 2014). Over her lifetime, she has harvested various wildlife (caribou, seals, fish, ducks, beluga and narwhal) and has encountered polar bears when travelling on the land, whether by skidoo or boat. Her husband and sons hunt polar bears and, as a family, they encounter polar bears on the land throughout the year. Today, she still travels on the land near Pangnirtung, depending on the season.

APPENDIX 2. Project team

Dominique Henri – Environment and Climate Change Canada



Dominique is an environmental social scientist with expertise in traditional/local knowledge research. Through her work, she strives to support community-identified research priorities and wildlife co-management in Inuit Nunangat. As project co-leader, Dominique contributed to project initiation and design, funding applications, fieldwork, data analysis, results sharing, and overall project management. She lives in Montréal, QC.

Matilde Tomaselli – Polar Knowledge Canada



Matilde is a veterinarian with expertise in participatory wildlife health surveillance and participatory epidemiology. As project co-leader and community research lead, Matilde contributed to funding applications, project design and execution, including data collection, analysis and results sharing. She conducted all the interviews with community-based researchers from Kimmirut and Pangnirtung. Matilde recently relocated to Prince Edward Island from Cambridge Bay, NU where she worked and lived since 2013.

Markus Dyck – Government of Nunavut



Markus is a polar bear biologist. He led the initial community engagement, contributed to project design and funding applications, and provided assistance in project execution.

Naomi Akavak – Kimmirut

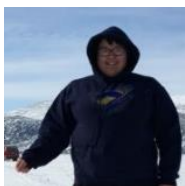


Naomi is a community-based researcher and interpreter with expertise and interest in oral history. She facilitated and translated interviews conducted in Kimmirut and contributed to report validation and results sharing in her home community.

Pudloo Pitsiulak – Kimmirut

Pudloo is a community-based researcher and youth interested in learning about Inuit Qaujimajatugangit. He facilitated and translated interviews conducted in his home community.

Doreen Kanayuk – Pangnirtung



Doreen is a community-based researcher and youth interested in learning about Inuit Qaujimajatugangit. She facilitated and translated interviews conducted in Pangnirtung and contributed to report validation and results sharing in her home community.

Rosemary Kanayuk – Pangnirtung



Rosemary is a community-based researcher and youth interested in learning about Inuit Qaujimagatugangit. She facilitated and translated interviews conducted in her home community.

Board members of the Mayukalik Hunters and Trappers Organization – Kimmirut



Board members contributed to project design and offered guidance throughout the project.

Pitsiulala Akavak – Kimmirut

Pitsiulala is a former Manager at the Mayukalik HTO. She contributed to project planning and logistics in her home community.

Board members of the Pangnirtung Hunters and Trappers Organization – Pangnirtung



Board members contributed to project design and offered guidance throughout the project.

George Qaqqasiq – Pangnirtung

George is a Manager at the Pangnirtung HTO. He contributed to project planning and logistics in his home community.

Pamela Wong – Trailmarks Systems

Pamela is a researcher trained in polar bear biology and social sciences with expertise in traditional/local knowledge research. She contributed to data analysis and report writing.

Evan Richardson – Environment and Climate Change Canada



Evan is a polar bear research scientist that has worked across the Canadian Arctic in support of polar bear conservation. He contributed to research design, offered input during the preparation of this report and reviewed the final draft.

APPENDIX 3. Invitation letter and consent form

Invitation Letter

Dear _____

You are invited to participate in the research project *Inuit knowledge about polar bear health for the Davis Strait polar bear population*. The main goal of our project is to document Inuit knowledge about polar bear health, abundance and distribution to support management decisions for the Davis Strait polar bear population. This research has potential to assist your community in communicating Inuit perspectives on polar bear health and hunting.

The project is being conducted by Environment and Climate Change Canada and the Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment. This research is supported by local HTOs in Iqaluit, Kimmirut and Pangnirtung. It is also partly funded by the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board.

Procedures

To fully participate in an interview, you will need to provide approximately two hour(s) of your time. The discussion will be audio recorded, photographed, and notes will be taken. We will be meeting at _____ on _____ at _____.

You will offered the amount of \$_____ for your participation in the interview. Light refreshments and snacks will be provided.

The information and opinions that you share during the interview will be included in the results of this project and will be shared publicly in the form of reports, publications, or related project outputs (e.g., maps, posters, presentations, news items, postings on the internet). During analysis of the interviews, original audio, photo, transcript, and/or map recordings will be securely stored at both Matilde Tomaselli and Dominique Henri's offices. Following analysis, with your permission, this information will also be stored in this community and made publicly accessible for heritage, education or research purposes.

Contact information

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, or the consent you have provided, please contact Matilde Tomaselli, Dominique Henri or your local HTO.

Matilde Tomaselli (Lead Researcher)
Polar Knowledge Canada
matilde.tomaselli@polar.gc.ca
CHARS campus, Cambridge Bay, NU
(867) 391-0056

Dominique Henri (Project Leader)
Environment and Climate Change Canada
dominique.henri@canada.ca
105 McGill Street, 7th Floor, Montreal, QC
(514) 496-9024

Thank you for your participation!

Consent Form

I have received the invitation/information letter that goes along with this consent form. I understand the interview will be audio recorded, and that photographs will be taken with my permission. I understand that the information I share during the interview will be used by the research team in reports and publications related to this project.

I have been fully informed of the objectives of this project. I understand these objectives and consent to being interviewed for the project. I understand that steps will be undertaken to ensure that this interview will remain confidential unless I consent to being identified. I also understand that, if I wish to withdraw from the study, I may do so without any repercussions. However, withdrawal from this study cannot happen after publication of the information documented through this project.

I would like my name and the information I provide used as follows (please tick four boxes):

<input type="checkbox"/>	I want to be identified by name, image and/or voice in research findings, reports and publications related to this project.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I wish to remain anonymous. My name, image or voice will not be used in communicating the finding of this study.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I want to provide a brief personal biography to the research team and I give permission for it to be included in any reports and publications related to this project.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I DO NOT want to provide a brief personal biography to the research team.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I want to provide a photograph of myself to the research team and I give permission for it to be included in any reports and publications related to this project.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I DO NOT want to provide a photograph of myself to the research team.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I want my original audio, photo, transcript, and/or map recordings to be publicly accessible and stored for future use in this community for heritage, education or research purposes.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I DO NOT want my original audio, photo, transcript, and/or map recordings to be publicly accessible.
Participant consent: _____ (print name) _____ (sign name)	
Verbal consent, check here: <input type="checkbox"/>	
Date(s) of consent: _____	
Witness signature: _____	

APPENDIX 4. Interview guide – individual interviews

Questions included in the interview guide were designed with the primary objective of collecting robust information that can (a) help understand polar bear health over time within the study area, (b) complement existing scientific information, and (c) allow for comparisons with other traditional knowledge studies conducted on polar bears for the Davis Strait subpopulation.

Interview questions were co-developed among project team members. Feedback and input was also provided by other polar bear researchers with the intent of making this project relevant for a wide range of stakeholders.

It is important to note that the interview guide was used as a flexible support tool. Themes were explored with contributors in such a way that their narrative guided the interview. Interviews were also customized to capitalize on the experience of contributors. Contributors could add or skip topics depending on their expertise.

The abridged version of the interview guide is presented below.

SECTION 1. PROJECT INFORMATION

Project intro and team introduction.

SECTION 2. GENERAL INFORMATION AND LIFE HISTORY

2(1) Personal information.

SECTION 3. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POLAR BEARS

3(1) Are polar bears important to you? Why?

3(2) What have you used polar bears for throughout your lifetime?

SECTION 4. EXPERIENCE WITH POLAR BEAR HUNTING AND LAND USE

4(1) Have you ever hunted polar bears or participated in a polar bear hunt?

4(2) Apart from hunting polar bears, have you done any activities that allow you to see polar bears?

4(3) Can you show us on the map the area(s) of land and ocean where you regularly travel to and you are most familiar with (no matter if it is for hunting polar bears or other activities such as fishing, seal hunting, egg picking or camping)? Can you tell us when do you do these activities over the different seasons?

SECTION 5. POLAR BEAR HEALTH AND ECOLOGY

5(1) How do you know that a polar bear is in a good shape or healthy?

5(2) In your opinion, what are the types of things you look for to know that polar bears are doing well? (i.e., what factors make polar bears healthy)

5(3) Do you think that polar bears around this community are doing well or are healthy?

5(5) Can you describe what polar bears do and where they are at different times of year?

5(6) Are you seeing any changes in what polar bears do and where polar bears travel now compared to the past?

5(7) Over the time you have spent in this community, has the number of polar bears changed (increased, decreased or remained the same) according to your observations?

5(8) Over the last 10 years, has the number of polar bears changed (increased, decreased or remained the same) according to your observations?

5(9) Do you see the same number of cubs, young and adult polar bears as in the past?

5(10) Do you think that the number or size of the family groups have changed from the past?

5(11) Where do polar bears den and why do they go there? Can you show us on the map where you have seen dens?

5(12) Have you observed any changes in dens?

5(13) Have you observed changes in how many cubs female polar bears have compared to the past?

5(14) Have you observed changes in how many cubs survive after their first years?

5(15) Have you observed any changes in how polar bears behave in the mating season?

5(16) How do you know if a polar bear is fat or skinny (assess fatness)? Are the polar bears that you see/hunt now are as fat as the polar bears you saw/hunted in the past?

5(17) Over the time you spent in this community and surrounding area, have you observed any changes in the behaviour of polar bears?

5(18) Can you describe what polar bears eat (their diet)?

5(19) Do you see differences between what males and females eat? Between adult bears and younger bears?

5(20) Have you noticed any changes in what/where polar bears eat now compared to the past?

5(21) Have you noticed any changes in the number or health of the animals that polar bear eat?

5(22) Have you ever seen polar bears eating other polar bears? Do you see it more or less now than in the past?

5(23) What makes a good polar bear habitat (or place to live)? Why?

5(24) Have you noticed any changes in polar bear habitat?

5(25) How would you describe a sick bear? Have you ever seen a sick bear?

5(26)* Have you ever seen anything strange in the polar bears that you have observed or hunted so far?

5(27) Have you ever seen a dead polar bear which had not been intentionally harvested?

5(28) Apart from hunting, are there any other causes of death for polar bears that you know of?

5(29) Have you seen any other changes related to polar bears that you would like to talk about?

SECTION 6. GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT POLAR BEARS

6(1) Do you have any concerns related to the polar bears around this community?

SECTION 7. MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

7(1) What do you think about the current polar bear management system?

7(2) Are there traditional ways (values/practices) about harvesting bears? Are these still being used since quotas came in?

7(3) Do you think polar bear population boundaries for the Davis Strait population accurately represent polar bear movements in this region?

7(4) Have you received information from scientists who conduct research about polar bears?

7(5) How do you think the future looks like for polar bears and people?

SECTION 8. FINAL QUESTIONS

8(1) Is there anything else that you think is important and that you want to tell us about polar bears?

8(2) Who else in the community is knowledgeable about polar bears?

8(3) If you were interviewing other Nunavummiut about polar bear, is there a question you would ask them that you are curious about?

8(4) That is all the questions we have for you. Do you have any questions for us?

SECTION 9. CONCLUSION

Thank-you note, honorarium and other.

*Pictures used to probe on observations of lesions and abnormalities for question 5(26).



Alopecia or hair loss on body – Example 1

From:

Atwood et al. 2015. Prevalence and spatio-temporal variation of an alopecia syndrome in polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) of the southern Beaufort Sea. *Journal of wildlife diseases* 51(1): 48-59.

<https://doi.org/10.7589/2013-11-301>



**Alopecia or hair loss on face
– Example 2**

From:

USGS Technical
Announcement: Polar Bears in
Alaska Observed with Patchy
Hair Loss and other Skin
Lesions. <http://www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife-management/studies-and-research-projects/polar-bears/polar-bear-health>



**Hair loss, overgrown skin
and bloody lesions on the
paws – Example 3**

From:

Communication prepared by
the Department of Environment
of the Government of Nunavut
posted at the Amarak Hunters
and Trappers Organization,
Iqaluit, NU.

APPENDIX 5. Participatory exercises – group interviews

Group interviews were performed after individual interviews and were designed with intent to: (1) corroborate and refine qualitative information documented through individual interviews; and (2) document complementary quantitative information to improve the assessment of polar bear health and interpret IQ in context.

A series of participatory exercises was designed using methods and techniques from the participatory epidemiology tradition and adapted to the wildlife research context (see Mariner and Paskin 2000; Tomaselli et al. 2018). Various themes were explored through participatory exercises (Table 1S). Here we provide a description of the main exercises and techniques used during group interviews (for more information on participatory epidemiology methods see references provided above). Proportional piling was one participatory exercise that was utilized – either alone or in combination with other types of exercises– to generate quantitative information (Figure 1S and Table 1S).

Table 1S. Themes discussed and associated participatory exercises employed during group interviews conducted in Kimmirut.

Themes	Associated participatory exercises
Participants' range of direct observations and travel intensity	Mapping exercises
Polar bear relative distribution	Proportional piling & mapping exercises
Polar bear relative abundance	Proportional piling, drawing & temporal line exercises
Seal relative abundance	Proportional piling, drawing & temporal line exercises
Polar bear cub productivity and survival	Proportional piling exercises with visual cues
Polar bear body condition (fatness)	Proportional piling exercises with visual cues
Polar bear general health	Proportional piling exercises
Polar bear diet	Proportional piling exercises & seasonal calendar with visual cues

In general, participatory exercises were performed by all participants from a group with the objective of collaboratively 'solving' the exercise, reaching consensus and providing a common answer when possible. Mapping exercises designed to explore the geographic range of participants' direct observations were the only exercises performed individually. Importantly, quantitative results generated by combining information provided by each group were validated with study contributors in feedback sessions to ensure sure summary results accurately reflected participants' observations.

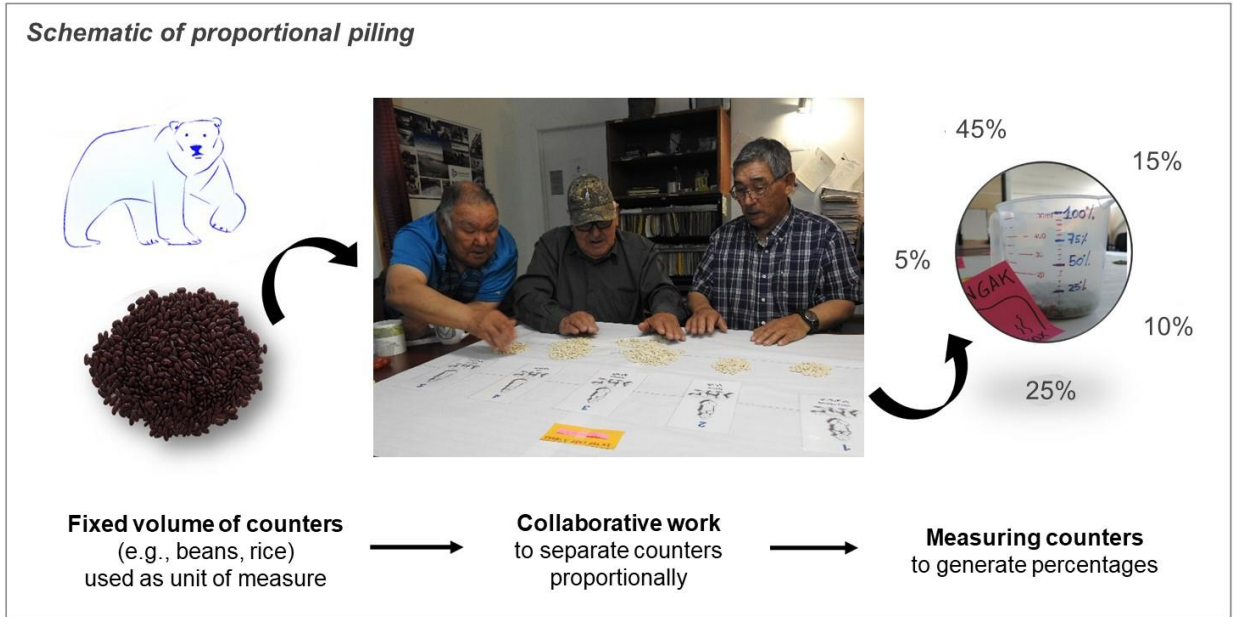


Figure 1S. Schematic of the proportional piling technique. One group of participants (from left to right: Mikidjuk Kolola, Sandy Akavak, Joannie Ikkidluak) solving together a participatory exercise on polar bear body condition using the proportional piling technique. A fixed volume of counters (0.5 kg of beans) was used to generate proportions. Beans were then measured using a measuring cup to generate percentages. When proportional piling was used in combination with mapping exercises (i.e., polar bear relative distribution exercises), a smaller counter (rice) was used to account for map size. Grains of rice were counted manually to generate percentages. Figure adapted from Tomaselli et al. 2018 (Appendix B).

Participants' range of direct observations and travel intensity – mapping exercises

First, we determined the spatial extent of the ecological observations of group interview contributors (or 'range of direct observations') over four predetermined time periods: (1) during the 1960s; (2) during the 1990s; (3) around 2005; and (4) over the last three years (2016-2019). These time periods were used to optimize complementarity and comparability with scientific data available for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation. For each time period (as applicable depending on contributors' age), individual participants were asked to draw on a topographic map the areas or routes they had regularly travelled through. A maximum of four hand-drawn maps were generated per contributor, representing the temporal evolution of individual travel habits or areas of observations (Figure 2S). Hand-drawn maps were then transposed in QGIS and ArcGIS and combined for each group and time period to create maps representing: (1) the geographic range of direct ecological observations for all participants interviewed; and (2) travel intensity within this range (see Figure 7).

We note that maps representing the range of direct ecological observations of individual contributors were also obtained during individual interviews. Individual interviews maps were combined with group interview maps to display the overall 'range of direct observations' (see Figure 6) which provides the spatial context for interpretation of the information documented through this study.



Figure 2S. Example of hand-drawn maps representing the geographic range of direct observations for three group interview participants over three time periods.

Polar bear relative distribution – proportional piling & mapping exercises

For each group of participants, hand-drawn maps representing the geographic range of participants' direct observations were produced. This information provided the basis for determining polar bear relative distribution using proportional piling exercises conducted collaboratively by each group. Counters (grains of rice) were used to represent polar bears. Participants were free to determine the total number of counters to use for each exercise but had to place them on a topographic map in a proportional way, such that more counters corresponded to more observations of polar bears. A maximum of four maps were generated per group, representing the temporal evolution of polar bear relative distribution within participants' range of observations and providing insights into differences in polar bear relative density at different locations (Figure 3S).

After the exercises were completed, maps were photographed, and grains of rice used in each map were counted manually so that proportions could be drawn. Maps were transposed in QGIS and ArcGIS and counters substituted with data points. For each time period, final polar bear relative distribution maps were produced in ArcGIS using the kernel density estimation method (see Figure 13). By having the 'range of direct observations' clearly delineated for each group of participants within our distribution maps, we were able to account for differences in observations across groups. In particular, we were able to discriminate between areas where polar bears were not observed (corresponding to zero number of counters) versus areas where participants did not go (corresponding to data not available) (see Martinez-Levasseur et al. 2017).

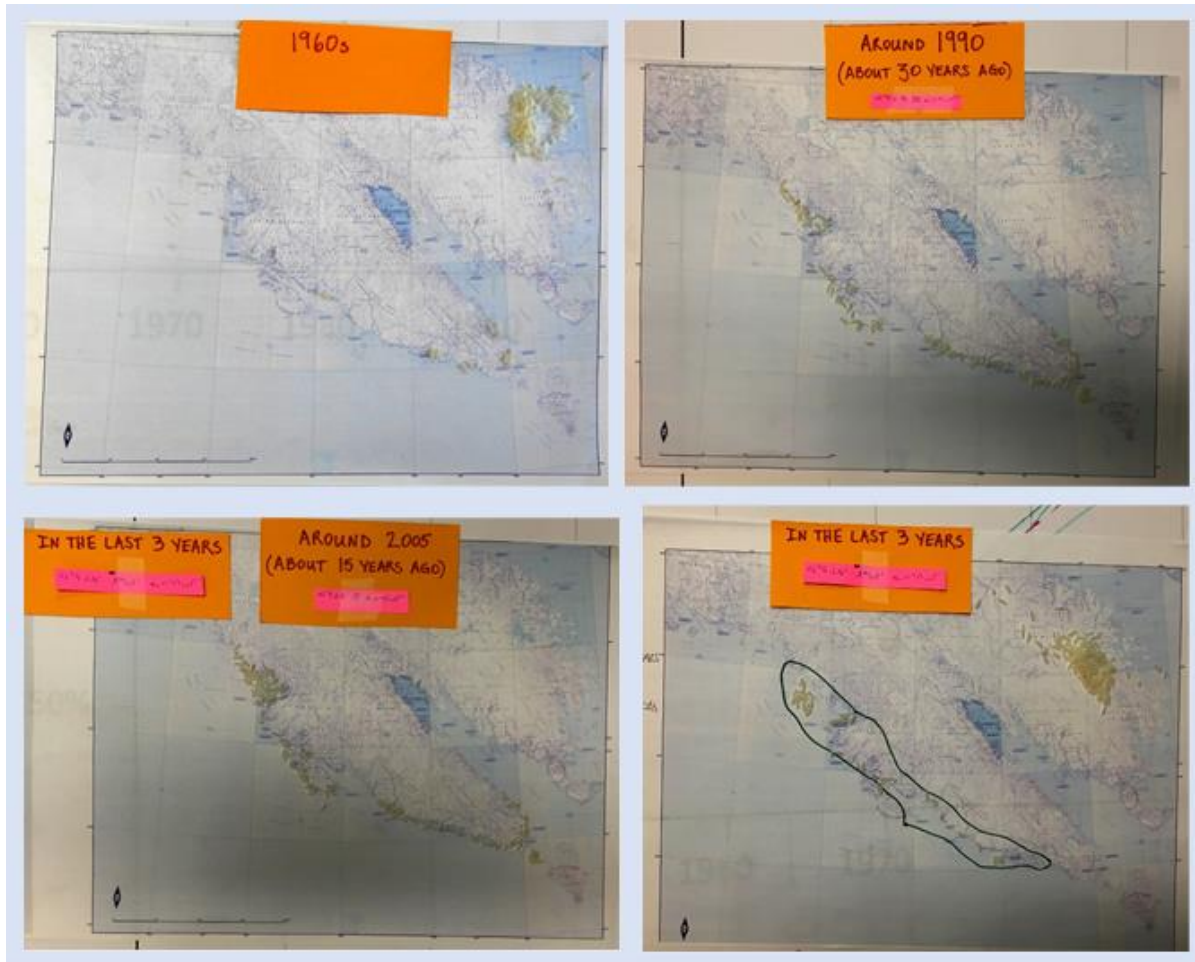


Figure 3S. Examples of polar bear relative distribution maps generated during group interviews. The last map of the set (bottom right corner) also shows the geographic ‘range of direct observations’ of a group marked as a polygon. The piles of rice on the top right corner of the first and last maps correspond to unused grains of rice, while in the second and third maps all the rice provided (100 grains) was used to complete the exercise.

Polar bear and seal relative abundance – proportional piling, drawing & temporal line exercises

Contributors expressed changes in the relative abundance of polar bears and seals they had observed over their lifetime by drawing a trend line along a timeline which was modified according to participants’ age and experience on the land (Figure 4S, A). Proportional piling was used in combination to the drawing exercise to corroborate results or facilitate the execution of the exercise as needed. Through discussions, participants from each group reached consensus on the relative proportion of polar bears they had observed over specific time periods. Data points were extrapolated from the final graphs drawn by each group. To summarize results, group values were then averaged generating trend lines representing the relative abundance of the local polar bear and seal populations.

Polar bear cub productivity and survival – proportional piling exercises with visual cues

In this study, cub productivity and cub survival were estimated using the indicators ‘COY litter size’ (number of cubs-of-the-year per female) and ‘yearling litter size’ (number of yearlings per female) assessed over the same time periods.

Proportional piling exercises were repeated for three time periods (during the 1990s, around 2005, and over the last three years [2016-2019]) in order for participants to express any changes in cub productivity and survival observed over time. For each time period, two separate series of exercises were conducted: one for family groups with COYs to assess the relative proportion of cubs produced per females and one for family groups with yearlings to assess the relative proportion of cubs that survived their first year (Figure 4S, B). For each exercise, contributors divided fixed volume of beans to represent the relative proportions of polar bear females observed with one, two or three COYs, or one, two or three yearlings.

For clarity, pictures were used throughout the exercises to ensure consistency of responses as we found no direct equivalence between Inuktitut and English terms to describe polar bear age classes (see Appendix 6 for Inuktitut polar bear terminology).

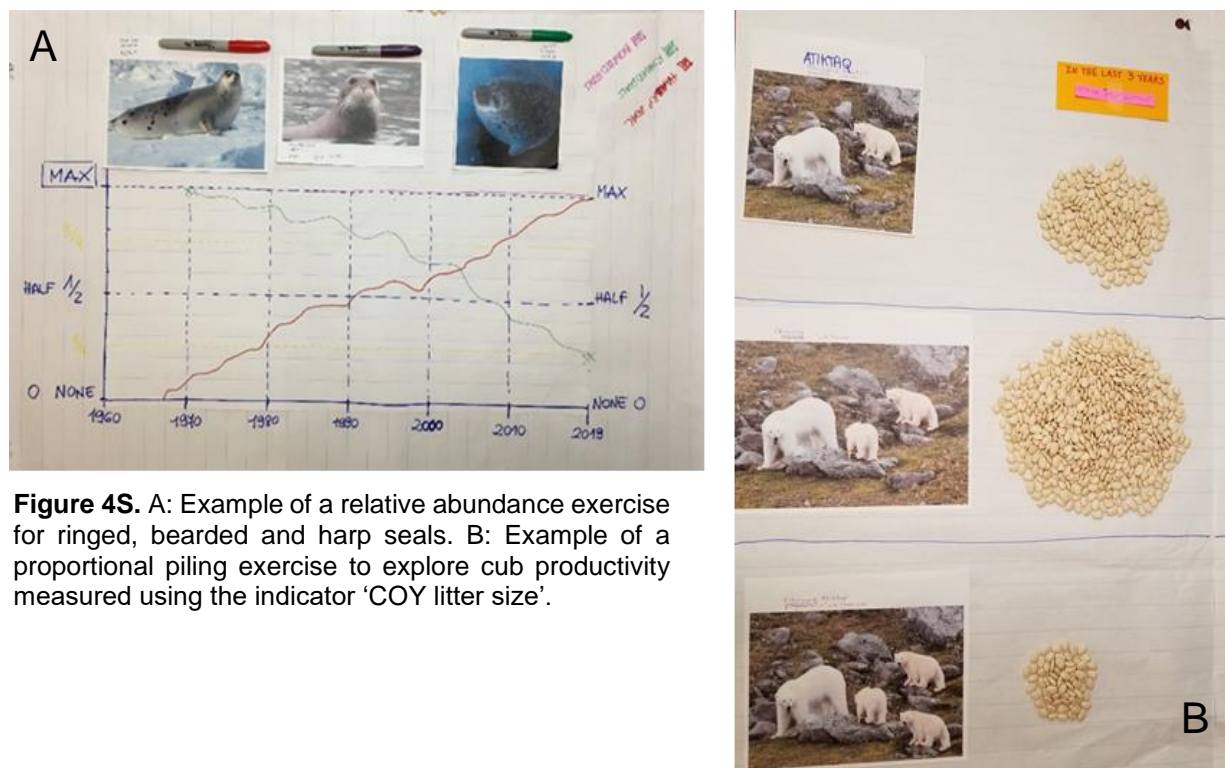


Figure 4S. A: Example of a relative abundance exercise for ringed, bearded and harp seals. B: Example of a proportional piling exercise to explore cub productivity measured using the indicator ‘COY litter size’.

Polar bear body condition (fatness) and general health assessment – proportional piling exercises with visual cues

Contributors expressed the relative proportion of polar bears they had observed per five body condition types (‘very skinny’, ‘skinny’, ‘average’, ‘fat’, ‘very fat’) using a fixed volume of beans. Through discussions, each group reached consensus on the proportion of beans to allocate under each body condition type. The exercise was repeated for three time periods (during the 1990s,

around 2005, and over the last three years [2016-2019]) in order for participants to express any changes observed over time. Polar bear pictures used to illustrate body condition types were the ones employed as part of the Government of Nunavut polar bear harvest monitoring program; most contributors were therefore familiar with pictures used.

For each time period, proportional piling exercises were also used to determine the relative proportion of 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy' polar bears. Through discussion, each group reached consensus on the proportion of beans to allocate under each category. Beans were then measured to generate percentages.

Polar bear diet – proportional piling exercises & seasonal calendar with visual cues

For this exercise, participants had to first select preys or diet items they considered relevant for polar bears from a selection of pictures provided. Contributors could also add additional items that were not available in picture format by writing them on post-it notes. After a list of polar bear diet items was finalized, participants collaborated to express the relative proportion of each item in the annual polar bear diet by dividing a fixed volume of beans (Figure 5S). Due to time constraints, this exercise was not repeated for different time periods; however, qualitative information on changes in polar bear diet was documented by asking participants whether the relative proportion of each item had significantly changed over time. Finally, a seasonal calendar exercise was utilized to explore the seasonal availability of prey or diet items for polar bears (Figure 5S, C). During the exercise, qualitative information on changes observed in different wildlife species were also documented.

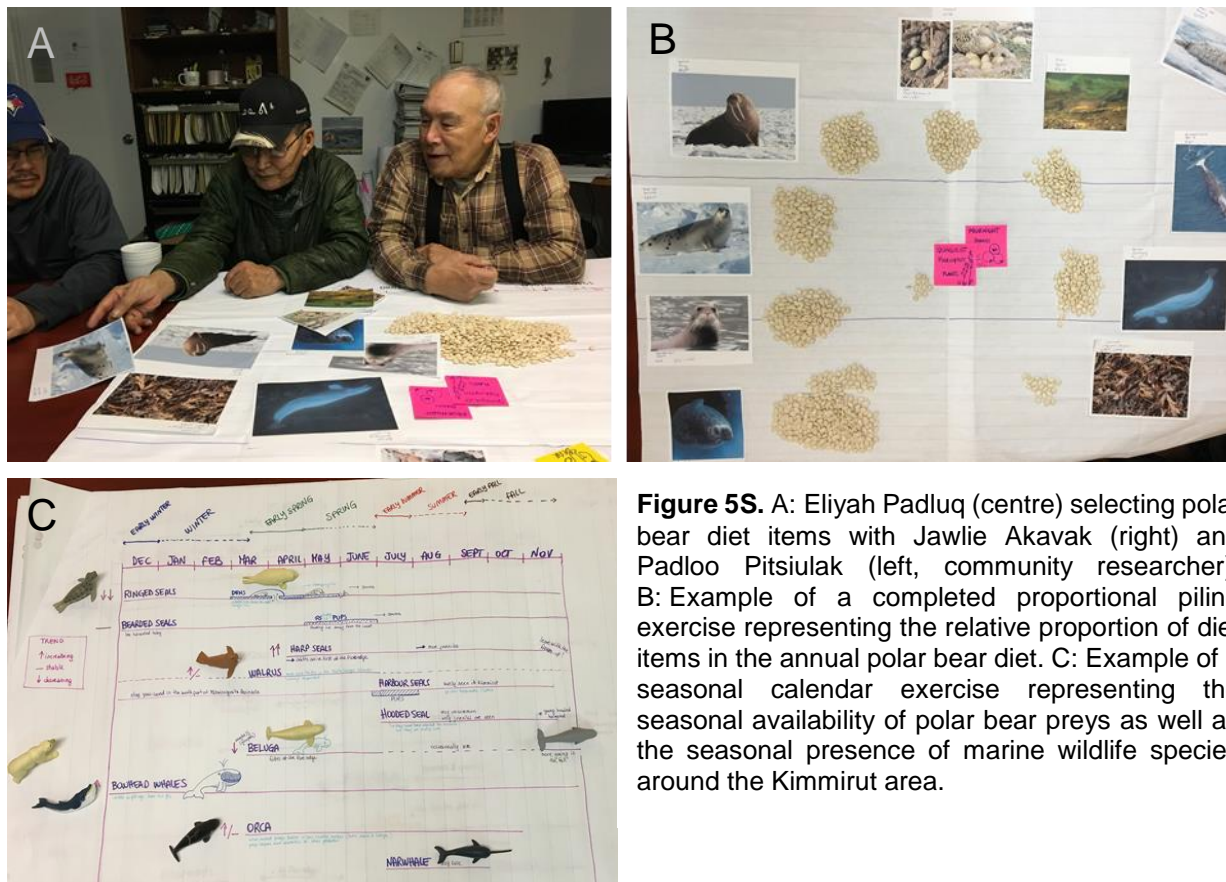


Figure 5S. A: Elijah Padluq (centre) selecting polar bear diet items with Jawlie Akavak (right) and Padloo Pitsiulak (left, community researcher). B: Example of a completed proportional piling exercise representing the relative proportion of diet items in the annual polar bear diet. C: Example of a seasonal calendar exercise representing the seasonal availability of polar bear preys as well as the seasonal presence of marine wildlife species around the Kimmirut area.

APPENDIX 6. Glossary – Inuktitut polar bear terminology

Table 2S includes some Inuktitut terms employed by interview contributors to describe polar bears of various age and sex classes. The terms presented are by no means exhaustive. ‘K’ refers to terms in use in Kimmirut and ‘P’ to terms used in Pangnirtung.

Table 2S. Inuktitut polar bear terminology.

Inuktitut term	Description
<i>Term related to life stage</i>	
K/P – Atiqtalaq	Smallest cub (new born); first period outside of the den; it is implied that female is present.
K/P – Atiqtaq	Cub of the year; it is implied that female is present.
P – Atiqtaminiq	Young bear without its mother; either female or male; young bear which is not as small as <i>atiqtaq</i> .
P – Avinnaaku	A cub who is alone but that should be with its mother.
K – Nalimutigik K/P – Naliqtigik	Cub that is the same size as its mother; grown cub; either male or female; it is implied that female is present.
P – Nukatugaq, akunaqijuq	Juvenile bear; either male or female.
K – Kakiraq	Juvenile or young adult bear (intermediate age) with white clean fur; either male or female; tends to be aggressive.
K/P – Nukauq	Adult male but smaller than <i>angujuaq</i> .; adult male which is not fully grown.
K/P – Angujuaq	Big adult male bear (with long neck).
K – Arnaq / P – Arnaluk	Female.
P – Atiqtalik	Female with cubs.
K – Atausilik	Female with one cub.
K – Marruulik	Female with two cubs.
K – Pingasulik	Female with three cubs.
P – Atiqtaituq	Female without cubs; female which did not get pregnant, lost cubs or is too old to have cubs.
<i>Term related to morphological characteristics</i>	
K – Salluminaaluk / P – Angusuiq	Skinny bear.
K – Qunijuminaapik	Nice fat bear.
K/P – Tulajuituq	Very big polar bear that rarely comes on land and stays at sea; grey fur on back; long fur on front legs; biggest adult male.
P – Tigagutilik	Bear with long fur on front legs.

APPENDIX 7. Mortality, disease and abnormal occurrences

Table 3S. Direct and indirect observations of non-hunting related mortality of polar bears documented through interviews in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung (n=35), including description of occurrences by participants and possible explanation for what was observed. NA: information is not available.

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
2019	One juvenile male found dead, floating in the water with a severe trauma on the head (either cause of death or happened after death). He skinned the bear and provided hide and samples to the wildlife officer. Direct observation made in summer.	Interviewee 01, Group 4, Kimmirut
2005	One adult found dead, possibly from starvation. Direct observation made in summer.	Interviewee 11, Kimmirut
1990s	One adult found dead, possibly from starvation or old age. Direct observation made in spring along the shore of White Strait.	Interviewee 13, Kimmirut
1960s	One cub found dead, partly scavenged. Direct observation.	Interviewee 12, Kimmirut
Long time ago	One dead polar bear found at the end of the Meta Incognita Peninsula. Observation reported by an Elder long time ago.	Interviewee 02, Kimmirut
2017	One dead polar bear “a fair size animal not a cub” observed in the water. Direct observation made in the summer.	Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung
Known in the past but increasingly observed since early 2000s and the past 5 years	Two females (possibly more) killed by males while protecting their cubs. Direct observations (one occurrence also referenced by Interviewee 08), inference by observing lone cubs, and knowledge shared by Elders.	Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung
2015	One juvenile male polar bear found dead in the water close to shore in the upper Cumberland Sound. Observation made around May by a relative.	Interviewee 05, Pangnirtung
2013	One polar bear eating another polar bear. Observations made by other hunters (event referenced also by interviewee 06).	Interviewee 08, Pangnirtung
	One big male washed up ashore close to Qikiqtarjuaq. Direct observation in spring.	
Early 1990s	One yearling killed and partly eaten by another polar bear. Direct observation made in the fall.	Interviewee 07, Pangnirtung
	One adult killed by an avalanche. Observation made by a relative.	

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
NA	One polar bear carcass found on the land. The carcass was very old since the bones were clean and white. Direct observation.	Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung
NA	One polar bear found dead with a whole in the head, possibly due to attack by another polar bear. Observation made by another hunter.	Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung
NA	One dead polar bear eaten by another polar bear. Direct observation made on Kekertukdjuak Island.	Interviewee 02, Pangnirtung
NA	One polar bear carcass found on the land. The carcass was very old since the bones were clean and white. Observation made by relatives.	Interviewee 05, Pangnirtung
NA	One dead polar bear found in walrus gathering area, possibly due to attack by another polar bear. Direct observation.	Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung

Table 4S. Direct and indirect observations of ‘very skinny’ or starving polar bears documented through interviews in Kimmirut and Pangnirtung (n=35), including timing and description of occurrences with possible explanation provided by participants. NA: information is not available.

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
2014-2015	One starving and “dying” bear observed in the community and one very hungry, and possibly starving, polar bear observed close to the community. Direct observations.	Interviewee 07, Kimmirut
2012	One sub-adult looking severely skinny and dizzy (possibly due to starvation) with no fur loss. Direct observation.	Interviewee 12, Kimmirut
Early 2000s	One starving adult female that was very weak with “only skin and bones and sunk in the snow”. Direct observation.	Interviewee 02, Kimmirut
1990s onward	A few sick skinny polar bears observed since he has been an active hunter (from the 1990s onward). Direct observations.	Interviewee 02, Group 4, Kimmirut
1979	One very skinny or starving polar bear. Direct observation made during hide processing (first hide she ever cleaned).	Interviewee 04, Kimmirut
NA	A few very skinny polar bears observed, likely from sickness or starvation in all his time traveling on the land. Direct observations.	Interviewee 05, Kimmirut
NA	Very skinny polar bears observed about six times over the last 40 years. Direct observations.	Interviewee 11, Kimmirut
NA	One starving female polar bear.	Interviewee 01, Group 1, Kimmirut
NA	Starving polar bears described as “polar bears that died”. Stories reported from Elders.	Interviewee 08, Kimmirut
2015	One very skinny adult possibly because of old age. Direct observation in the winter.	Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung
Around 2010	One very skinny male hunted close to the community in the summer. Direct observation.	Interviewee 10, Pangnirtung
Early 2000s	One very skinny adult male. Direct observation made around March in the upper Cumberland Sound.	Interviewee 08, Pangnirtung
1990s	One big adult polar bear very skinny possibly because of old age. Direct observation.	Interviewee 03, Pangnirtung

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
1950s onward	Some very skinny, slow moving polar bears looking sick. Direct observation made in summer.	Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung
1980s onward	Some very skinny starving polar bears, generally juveniles, barely moving. Direct observation made mostly during summer months.	Interviewee 02, Pangnirtung
NA	One very skinny adult " <i>just covered with skin</i> ". Direct observation in the summer.	Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung
NA	Some very skinny bears observed. Direct observation.	Interviewee 09, Pangnirtung

Table 5S. Direct and indirect observations of minor fur loss lesions in polar bears from the Kimmirut and Pangnirtung areas documented through interviews (n=35), including timing and description of occurrences with possible explanation provided by participants. These observations were not consistent with fur loss pictures used for probing (see interview guide, Appendix 4) and were considered normal occurrences by contributors. NA: information is not available.

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
2019	One harvested female “ <i>looking nice and healthy</i> ” with small fur less area on one foot (3 cm in diameter). Direct observation.	Interviewee 09, Kimmirut
2010s	One harvested male with small furless spot (a few cm wide) on the top of the neck right behind the head. The area was small so that she was able to patch the hide. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 03, Kimmirut
2010	One harvested male with scars, likely caused by fighting with other polar bears or breaking through the ice. Direct observation.	Interviewee 07, Kimmirut
NA	One harvested polar bear with small fur loss in some areas of the feet. Direct observation made during hide processing. Observation is not recent.	Interviewee 01, Kimmirut
NA	Many harvested males with scars around the neck, likely due to fighting with other bears during mating season. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 03, Kimmirut
NA	Many harvested polar bears with small loss of hair on their hides likely the results of scars. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 04, Kimmirut
2010 onward	Some harvested polar bears (mainly males) with scratches usually around the head and neck, likely due to fighting with other bears during mating seasons. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 12, Pangnirtung
1990s-2000s	One harvested male with fur loss (small spots) and scaring, likely due to fighting with other bears during mating season. Direct observation.	Interviewee 04, Pangnirtung
Mid-1995	Two males with marks on the snout and open wounds, caused by fighting during mating season. Direct observation.	Interviewee 08, Pangnirtung
NA	Many polar bears observed with scars likely caused by fighting with other bears or hunting on the ice and considered a normal occurrence. Direct observation.	Interviewee 06, Pangnirtung
NA	A few polar bears, mainly males, observed with small fur loss areas on the neck or body, possibly caused by ice when seal hunting and/or fighting with other bears. Direct observation but doesn’t remember the timing.	Interviewee 09, Pangnirtung
NA	Polar bears observed with small fur loss, likely due to scratches. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 10, Pangnirtung

Table 6S. Direct and indirect observations of anthropogenic waste or plastics in the stomach of harvested polar bears from the Kimmirut and Pangnirtung areas documented through interviews (n=35), including timing and description of occurrences. NA: information is not available.

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
2018	One young sub-adult female harvested at the dump (summer months) with plastic bags in its stomach. Observation made by another hunter.	Interviewee 06, Kimmirut
2015	Two harvested sub-adults with plastic and snowmobile parts found in their stomach, looking healthy otherwise. Direct observation close to his camp.	Interviewee 02, Kimmirut
2010 onwards	Some harvested polar bears with garbage (leather gloves and other items) in their stomach. Direct observation.	Interviewee 10, Kimmirut
Recent years	A few polar bears harvested close to the community with garbage in their stomach. Direct observations made recently and also made by other hunters.	Interviewee 05, Kimmirut
NA	Some harvested polar bears found with plastic and garbage in their stomachs. Observations made by other hunters.	Interviewee 07, Kimmirut
Recent years	Some harvested polar bears with food from the dump in their stomachs. Direct observation made recently.	Interviewee 01, Pangnirtung
Recent observation	One polar bear harvested in the Qikiqtarjuaq area found with a t-shirt in its stomach. Observation made by a relative.	Interviewee 07, Pangnirtung

Table 7S. Direct and indirect observations of other abnormalities or unusual events observed in polar bears from the Kimmirut and Pangnirtung areas documented through interviews (n=35), including timing and description of occurrences with possible explanation provided by participants. NA: information is not available.

Timing	Description of occurrence	Contributor
2015	One harvested polar bear (defence kill) quite skinny and with a wound, possibly from gunshot or natural causes. Direct observation.	Interviewee 06, Kimmirut
2011	Male polar bear (eight-footer) with half-white and half-black fur. Direct observation made on Big Island.	Interviewee 13, Kimmirut
2010s	One harvested polar bear with white paws and one harvested bear with a cut on the front paw. Both looked healthy otherwise. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 03, Kimmirut
1995	One polar bear with three legs observed running away, otherwise healthy. Direct observation.	Interviewee 12, Kimmirut
Early 1990s	One big polar bear found dead and likely shot: <i>"It was shot by helicopter or something...it had a huge hole and nobody had that kind of gun [in the community]"</i> . Direct observation made in summer in the Glenooe Island/Strathcona Island area.	Interviewee 13, Kimmirut
NA	Sometimes harvested polar bears observed with non-healed wounds, likely caused by other polar bears or walrus. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 04, Kimmirut
NA	A few harvested polar bears with lip tattoos and ear tags. Direct observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 04, Kimmirut
1990s	One harvested polar bear with bear fat and skin in stomach (cannibalism). Direct observation.	Interviewee 08, Pangnirtung
1980s	One harvested male that looked somewhat sick with yellowish fur and the skin of the paws quite rough with scratches. Observation made during hide processing.	Interviewee 10, Pangnirtung
NA	One harvested polar bear with ear tag. Direct observation.	Interviewee 14, Pangnirtung



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