Endangered whales, endangered humans: Wildlife management in the Canadian Arctic

Dr Martina Tyrrell *reveals the tensions that exist when conservation policies conflict with traditional ways of life on Hudson Bay.*

In 2005, at the start of my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship, I set out to conduct anthropological research into the impacts of marine mammal conservation practices on the lives and culture of Inuit in the Canadian Arctic. Over the course of the past three years, this research has taken me to the Canadian Inuit homelands of Nunavik and Nunavut for extensive periods of fieldwork. Focusing specifically on beluga whales (*delphinapterus leucas*), my work on this topic has thus far compared beluga management regimes across the Arctic, and explored the history of wildlife management in the Canadian Arctic, internal colonialism as a framework for understanding relations between Inuit and agents of government, and the role of fledgling Inuit governance in developing wildlife conservation strategies appropriate to Inuit culture and world view. My research has also explored the material and emotional impacts of beluga whale management on Inuit communities, and it is this aspect of my work that is presented below.[1]

Introduction

For many of the world's 150,000 Inuit, who live in small remote villages across the circumpolar world from eastern Siberia to Alaska, Canada and Greenland, beluga whale hunting is a socially, culturally and economically important part of life. Belugas are small white whales, averaging 3.6 metres in length (Figure 1). Inuit value them nutritionally for their skin, blubber, meat and internal organs, as a source of subsistence food for both people and sled dogs. Beluga hunting is part of a complex set of social activities involving extended families and communities, and includes the informal training of young hunters, the manufacture and maintenance of hunting tools and equipment, and the distribution, sharing, processing and consumption of the harvest.

Like all animals, belugas are believed by Inuit to be sentient beings, and therefore appropriate relationships of respect must be

Figure 1: *Beluga whale in Hudson Bay. Photo: Martina Tyrrell.*

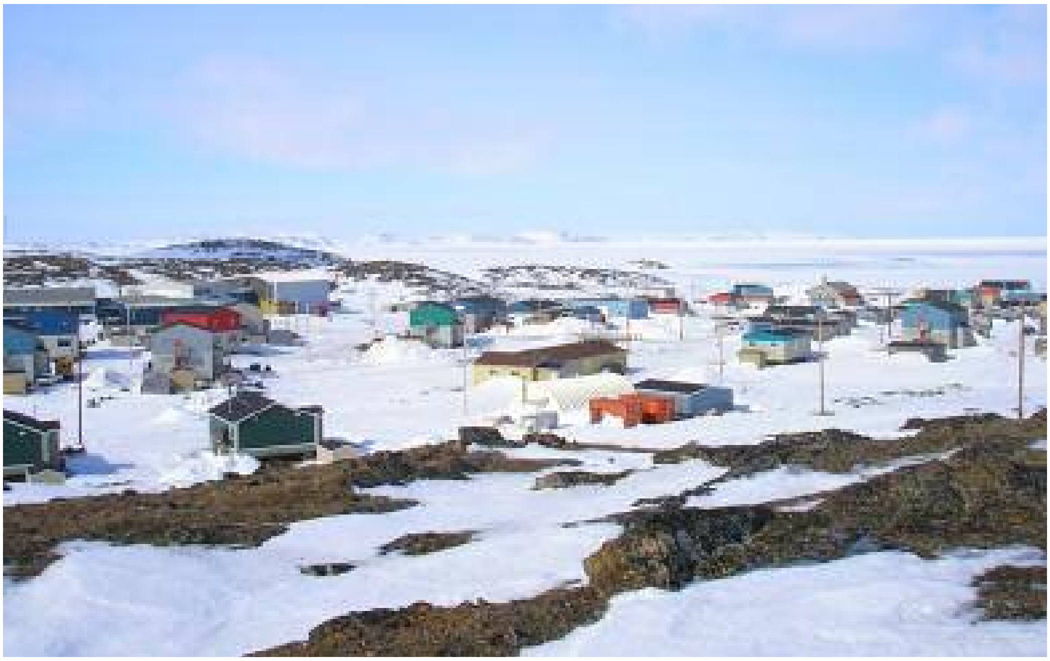


Figure 3: *The Nunavik village of Quaqtaq. Photo: Martina Tyrrell.*

maintained between Inuit and belugas in order to ensure the continued participation of belugas in the hunt. Expert Inuit hunters also possess a deep empirical knowledge of these animals, founded on the hunters' seasonal engagement with them in the marine environment and through the sharing of knowledge and skill within the home and wider community. This practical knowledge of belugas is inseparable from cosmological beliefs concerning the relative roles of humans and animals.[2]

In recent decades, beluga whales have been subject to scientific research and conservation management practices. For Inuit, the scientific management of wildlife is highly problematic, in part because research and management techniques are seen to transgress these respectful human–animal relationships, and in part because the management of wildlife is seen as an intrusion into Inuit customary laws and practices.

Perhaps the most contention surrounds the conservation management of beluga whales in the waters around the Inuit region of Nunavik, in northern Quebec, Canada (Figure 2). Over the past decade, the federal Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans has placed ever tighter restrictions on Inuit hunting practices, dictating the number of whales that may be harvested in any given year, setting open and closed hunting seasons, and setting guidelines for appropriate hunting methods and the training of novice hunters.[3]

Inuit view the imposition of these management practices as having adverse economic, nutritional, social and cultural impacts. Many Inuit are distrustful of the federal government and frame the current management of beluga whales within the context of other perceived wrongs perpetrated against them by the federal government throughout the twentieth century, such as the slaughter of sled dogs by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the residential school system, and the relocation of Nunavik Inuit to the High Arctic.

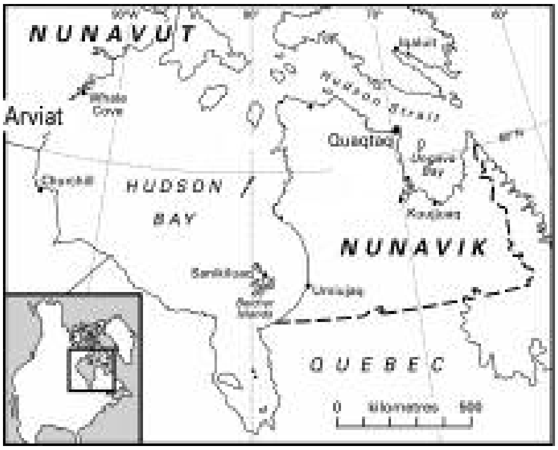


Figure 2: *Map of Hudson Bay and Nunavik.*

In spring 2006, funded by a British Academy Small Grant, I conducted anthropological research in the small Nunavik village of Quaqtaq (Figure 3). This village of 400 people is situated where the northwest coast of Ungava Bay meets Hudson Strait. Prior to 2000, Quaqtarmiut (the people of Quaqtaq) harvested an average of 33 whales per year,[4] but since 2001 the legally permitted harvest has fallen from 35 to 8 whales. Using a combination of in-depth interviewing and participant observation techniques, I gained an understanding of Inuit perceptions of beluga whale management and its cultural, economic and emotional repercussions.

Belugas and Inuit life

It is no coincidence that the Quaqtaq village logo is of a beluga whale arching its back out of the water. Iconography of the beluga is to be found everywhere across the village, from the town hall, to children's drawings adorning the walls of the local school, to mugs for sale at the co-operative store. Quaqtaq identity is intimately linked with belugas.

Beluga whales migrate past Quaqtaq twice each year – in spring they are hunted from the ice floe-edge, and in autumn from the shoreline. Traditionally, the entire com-munity participated. Women, small children and the elderly watched on as men and boys hunted whales, and then everyone participated in flensing and distributing the harvest (Figure 4). Quaqtarmiut pride themselves on their knowledge of belugas, distinguishing animals in the water by age, sex and origin.

In Quaqtaq, the entire beluga is valued as a source of food. *Maktaq*, the thick white skin and subcutaneous fat, is consumed fresh, or is fermented and frozen for use throughout the year (Figure 5). *Misiraq*, the rendered fermented fat of the whale, is used as a condiment, comparable to southern use of ketchup or mayonnaise. Beluga meat is eaten fresh, or is fermented, frozen or dried for later use, while the intestines are split, cleaned, boiled and dried. Belugas are a highly nutritious food source, rich in protein, iron, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamin C. Despite only two short hunting seasons each year, belugas are an essential year-round food source, and participation in all aspects of the hunt – from the preparation of hunting equipment all the way to feasting on the harvest – are seen as integral to family and community life.

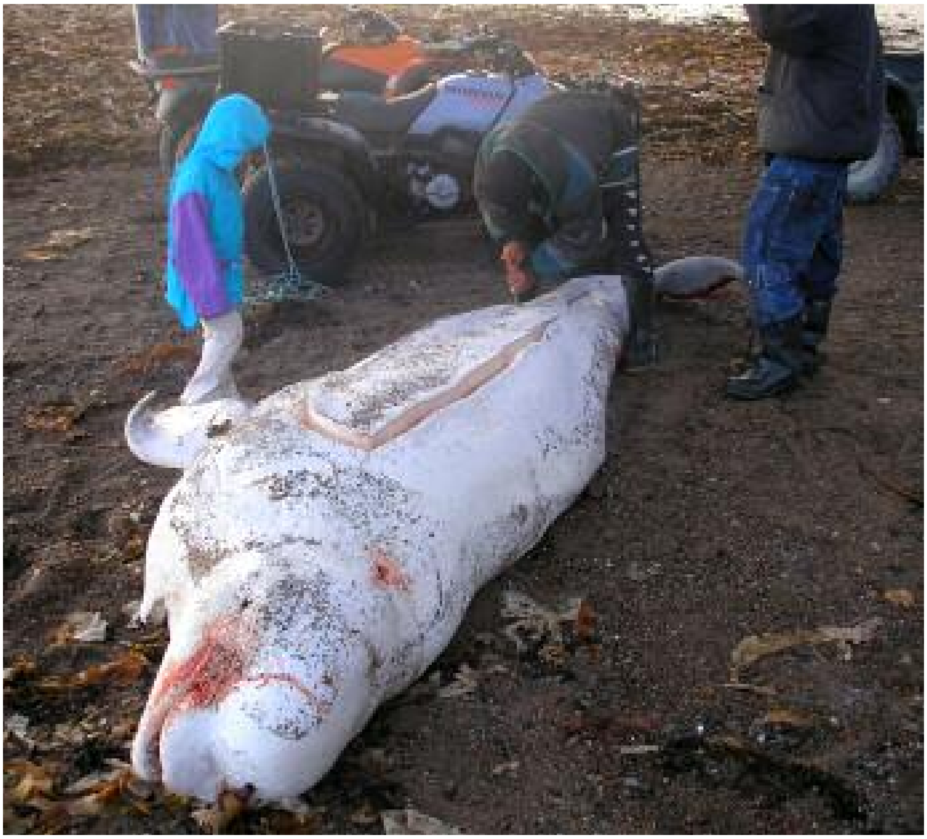
The people of Quaqtaq refer to belugas as ‘neighbours’ who visit at certain times of the year, and they are accorded the same respect one shows a human neighbour. These ‘neighbours’, therefore, are more than a source of food – they are willing participants in the social and material reproduction of village life.

The conservation of belugas

From the 1750s to the 1900s, belugas were hunted intensively by commercial whalers from Britain and the USA. Marine biologists believe that belugas have never recovered from this prolonged and large-scale slaughter[5] and that whales are in further jeopardy due to contemporary environmental concerns such as climate change, industrial contaminants in the food chain, and the effects of large-scale dam-building projects on beluga estuary habitats. Biologists are also concerned that the ongoing (albeit small-scale) subsistence hunting of belugas by Inuit is a further impediment to their recovery.

Since 1996 beluga hunting in Nunavik has been subject to wildlife management laws. The quota for how many whales may be taken changes from year to year. Some Inuit communities in Nunavik consistently reject these quotas, their hunters risking prosecution, hefty fines and imprisonment, arguing that the rules are inconsistent and do not reflect the reality of how many whales there actually are. Inuit pride themselves on their knowledge of beluga whale behaviour and demographics, gained from their long-term engagement with these animals, and argue that marine biologists spend far too little time in the field, and when they do conduct research they fail to take the advice of expert Inuit hunters as to the most opportune times and places to assess beluga numbers. As a result, Inuit argue, marine biologists have drawn up conservatively low estimates of how many belugas there are, and it is these estimates upon which wildlife management law is based.

The people of Quaqtaq have attempted to adhere to the rules of management, as the local wildlife officer believes that if Inuit can demonstrate to policy-makers that they can



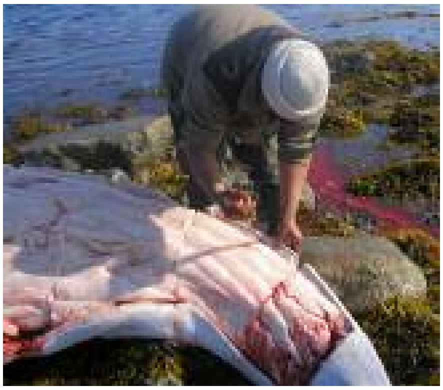


Figure 5: *Removing strips of maktaq.*
Photo: Martina Tyrrell.

Figure 4: *Flensing a beluga whale.*
Photo: Martina Tyrrell.

follow the rules of management, then the policy-makers will eventually leave them alone to get on with managing their own whales. As a result, Quaqtaq has felt the brunt of these management laws.

Impacts of beluga management

Since the imposition of these hunting laws, beluga hunting no longer occurs at the traditional hunting locations along the coastline, families no longer move to their hunting cabins at these places, and women, children and the elderly are effectively excluded from participation in the hunting complex. Beluga hunting now occurs in only one location and at one time of the year – from the beach in front of the village each autumn. By hunting together in this manner hunters reduce the risk of inadvertently surpassing the quota by hunting at the same time in different locations.

In the past, beluga season might last for many weeks, with hunters taking care to choose which animal to harvest based on age, size, etc. Now the quota is often filled in one day. Hunters stand shoulder to shoulder along the beach, their rifles aimed at the water. As the quota is currently set at only 8 whales, no hunter wants to risk being absent from the hunt and missing out on a share of the small harvest for his family. However, some people have dissociated themselves from the hunt because of this:

> My husband didn't get any whales last year. He's the type who wouldn't go down there when there's so many people and they try to fight over it.

The enskilment and enculturation of young people has also suffered. Before the quota, boys were involved in the hunt from a young age, and making mistakes and learning through trial and error were part of the process of growing into a competent and successful hunter. But with such a small quota, each family now relies on its most skilful and experienced hunter, and young unskilled boys are a hindrance:

> One time a whale came and [my son] shot it and caught his first whale. But now you're not able to teach them when everyone's rushing down [to the beach] and trying to get their whales. You have no time to say, 'OK, shoot it now.'

The reduced availability of beluga means that Quaqtarmiut must now rely more on store-bought food. The tiny co-operative store is stocked with over-priced foods flown in from southern Canada, often of low nutritional value with high fat and food additive content. Replacement foods such as beef or chicken are prohibitively expensive for most:

> If they're going to take away our food source, then they need to replace what they took away from us by providing the people with the opportunity to get nutritious food.

There are also cultural and emotional impacts, as many Quaqtarmiut express feelings of deep sadness and loss. Once the quota has been filled hunters say they have no option but to stand by and watch as thousands of belugas migrate past their shores:

> After the quotas had finished last year they just had their cameras down there and everyone was like a *qallunaq* [person of Euro-American origin] taking pictures. No guns. We were just watching the whales and there was nothing in our freezer for winter. That was sad.

Conservation or cultural imperialism?

As indigenous subsistence hunters with a long tradition of beluga hunting, most Inuit believe they are being punished for exercising their right to hunt belugas in their own culturally appropriate way. They are angry at being told where, when and how to hunt, and see these rules as a direct attack on their way of life. Inuit contextualise this management of belugas within a framework of political and ideological imperialism, expressing distrust towards the government:

> They talk about the whales becoming endangered, but what about Inuit? I think we will become endangered. We will be white people in Inuit bodies. I think that's what they want – that we all become vegetarians and wear synthetic clothing.

However, in December 2006 Nunavik took its first steps towards levels of political autonomy similar to its neighbouring Nunavut Territory. With the establishment of a regional government, and the emergence of forms of wildlife management that are more inclusive of Inuit culture and values, it is hoped that scientists will now be obliged to pay greater attention to the knowledge of Inuit experts and find ways to engage with Inuit for the mutual benefit of both Inuit and their beluga 'neighbours'.

Notes

1 This article is, in part, an extract from M. Tyrrell, 'Nunavik Inuit perspectives on beluga whale management in the Canadian Arctic', *Human Organisation*, 67:3 (2008), 322–334.

2 M. Tyrrell, 'Sentient beings and wildlife resources: Inuit, beluga whales and management regimes in the Canadian Arctic', *Human Ecology*, 35:5 (2007), 575–586.

3 Ibid.

4 V. Lesage and D. W. Doidge, *Harvest statistics for beluga whales in Nunavik, 1974–2004* (Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada Science Advisory Secretariat, 2005).

5 M. O. Hammill, V. Lesage, J.-F. Gosselin, H. Bourdages, B. G. E. de March and M. C. S. Kingsley, 'Evidence for a decline in Northern Quebec (Nunavik) belugas', *Arctic*, 57:2 (2004), 183–195.

Dr Martina Tyrrell was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow 2005–2008. She is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Reading. Dr Tyrrell gave a presentation on her research at the 2008 British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Symposium.