

In warmer Greenland, shoot the dogs, drill for oil

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In this July 21, 2011 photo, Inuit hunter Nukappi Brandt aims his rifle to shoot a seal, which dived underwater before he could get off a shot, as his daughter Luusi, 8, keeps low inside their small boat outside Qeqertarsuaq, Disko Island, Greenland. Brandt, 49, has been a hunter since age 14, and said roughly 20 years ago, when winter sea ice became too thin to support dogsleds, seal hunting ceased to be a sustainable way of life here. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

(AP) -- The old hunter was troubled by the foreigners encroaching on his Inuit people's frozen lands.

"The Inuit say that they are going to heat the `siku' (the sea ice) to make it melt. There will be almost no more winter," the elder says of the southerners in Jean Malaurie's "Last Kings of Thule," the French explorer's classic account of a year in the Arctic.

The year was 1951. A lifetime later, another Inuit hunter looks out at Disko Bay from this island's rocky fringe and remembers driving his dogsled team over the solid glitter of the siku all the way to Ilulissat, a town 90 kilometers (50 miles) across the water.

"The ice then was 1 to 2 meters thick," Jakob Jensen, 65, recalled of those winters past.

"Now, it's a few centimeters. It's very thin and you can't go on dogsled."

The winter sea ice that defined Greenlander life for millennia is melting, and it's the southerners who did it, as Malaurie's Inuit foretold long before science showed industrial emissions were warming the planet.

The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world, and "Greenland is experiencing some of the most severe environmental impacts," social researcher Lene Kielsen Holm concludes in a preliminary report on a north-to-south survey of Greenlanders.

Those impacts are broad and deep.

For a village society whose dogsledding ice hunters long supplied it with seal and [walrus](#) meat and fish in winter, the "dark months" are now a time of enforced idleness, limited travel and emptier larders. On land, the thawing permafrost underfoot is leaving houses askew and broken. [Climate change](#) touches the animals, too: Greenlanders find lean [polar bears](#), unable to stalk seals on sea ice, invading their settlements for food.

And the very sound of Greenland is changing. Where villages once echoed to the howl of huskies, that old call of the wild has been muted. Dispirited hunters up and down the west Greenland coast, unable to feed winter game to their sled dogs, have been shooting them.

The 900 people of Qeqertarsuaq, Disko Island's main town, now have about 300 dogs.

"That's half of what it used to be," said Jensen's neighbor Johan Lindenhann, chairman of the local hunters-fishers association.

Climate change has brought new sounds, too - of oil drilling. Northwest of here, in the open sea of Baffin Bay, Scotland-based Cairn Energy this summer is drilling an exploratory well.

Geologists see good prospects for oil and gas off Greenland's shores, and for valuable mineral deposits onshore, from gold to zinc. The more open waters and more ice-free terrain make the work of finding them easier.

The 56,000 Greenlanders, 89 percent of them Inuit, sense the potential for gain, along with the reality of loss from the warming.

"On the positive side, I can point to emerging economic possibilities, potential income," Anthon Frederiksen, minister for domestic affairs, nature and environment, said in an interview in Nuuk, seat of this Danish island's self-rule government.

But this son of a hunter added, "Fishing and hunting is our mainstay at present, and we're very concerned about the negative effect this change will have on them."

Here on Disko, an Arctic island the size of Puerto Rico with barely 1,000 inhabitants, the dilemma is clear.

"If they find a lot of oil, it would be a big change and mean jobs for Greenlanders," said Lindenhann, 62. "But I'm afraid of pollution."

A spill, hard to combat in icy, stormy waters, could devastate fragile

marine life. "We heard about what happened in the Gulf of Mexico," the old seal-hunting hand said.

People here on the central west coast have relied on that marine life for perhaps 5,000 years, prehistoric remains show.

Today, Qeqertarsuaq's neat, peak-roofed wooden houses, in bright red, blue and green, cling to a shelf of rock wedged between the iceberg-dotted sea and the brown basalt cliffs of an island born of volcanos. Far above mossy slopes, atop heights reaching to 1,200 meters (4,000 feet), lies a huge permanent ice cap.

In this remote and beautiful spot, the Danes for more than a century have maintained a small scientific station, a post whose data tell the story of warming:

From 1991 to 2009, Disko Island's mean annual air temperature rose 4.5 degrees C (8.1 degrees F). The permafrost thawed 1 centimeter (0.4 inch) deeper each summer. And the sea-ice season shrank by half.

Older townspeople say the deep-winter cold of decades back - down to minus 30C or 40C degrees (-22F or -40F degrees) - has given way to lows of -20C (-4F). Sea ice still forms but one or two months later, in January or even February. And it's too thin and dangerous, and is gone much earlier.

Disko Bay hunters can no longer lay seal nets under the ice in the 24-hour winter darkness. They no longer drive dog teams to shoot the sea mammals at breathing holes, or drop long, many-hooked fishing lines through the ice, or hunt for narwhal and beluga whales that favor the ice edge in the spring.

"It was better 20 years ago when you could see many, many seals and

whales closer to the town. They stuck to the ice. With all the seals and whales back then, there was more money," said Nukappi Brandt, 49, a full-time hunter since his teens.

Brandt shoots seals from a boat in the warmer months, but that doesn't make up for winter's lost time. Retired hunter Jens Svendsen, 74, explained, "In the dark months the ice is too unstable for the sleds, and it's too dark to navigate by boat." Ice chunks can wreck their small outboards' propellers.

The dwindling supplies of traditional food hit older Inuit most.

"They prefer to eat Greenlandic food every day, and if they can't get it, they have to buy it at the store and it's expensive," said Svendsen's wife, Maaliannguaq, 70.

At Qeqertarsuaq's market, frozen narwhal meat was going for the equivalent of \$78 a kilogram (\$35 a pound). An imported substitute, beef steak, cost \$42 a kilogram (\$19 a pound).

"We may see former hunters and fishermen and their families having poverty problems and nutrition problems," said researcher Kielsen Holm, whose study was conducted for the transnational Inuit Circumpolar Council and the Greenland Organization of Fishermen and Hunters.

"They're eating more pork and fast food, and there are more and more people with diabetes," she said.

Budgets are also strained by the softening [permafrost](#), which is deforming roads here that townspeople can ill afford to repair. In the far northern village of Qaanaaq, foundations are sinking and heaving under houses, splitting joints.

"You can see it everywhere," Qaanaaq resident David Qujaukitsoq said by mobile phone. "There are holes in the walls, so it's cold in the winter, and some people are abandoning their houses."

In mastering the planet's harshest environment, the Inuit proved themselves masters of adaptability. But climate is changing too fast, and a once-nomadic people who would pack up and follow their prey are today too tied down.

"We're not as mobile as we used to be," Kielsen Holm said. "You can't change traditions from year to year, and this is how changes are happening."

The important cod fishery, for example, has improved in northern areas but worsened in the south. What will happen next year?

"Climate change is hitting hard on everyday life," Alfred Jakobsen, managing director of the national fishermen-hunters group, said in Nuuk. "They are going through very, very hard times."

The government stakes a lot on offshore oil, since one big strike could eliminate its need for \$600 million in annual subsidies from Denmark, allowing Greenlanders to consider national independence. But Cairn Energy announced Aug. 3 its latest prospect had turned up dry, and it was moving drilling to its West Disko Area, over the horizon from this island's unspoiled shores.

As their seas warm, the oilmen encroach, and the dogs fall silent, many here feel they're sliding headlong into the unknown.

To return to what they knew, Disko Islanders can retreat to the little Qeqertarsuaq Museum facing the harbor, where the walls are hung with dozens of small sketches and watercolors by Jakob Danielsen, an

early-20th-century islander who depicted in primitive but precise style his life as a hunter.

In Danielsen's world, under a twilit sky in ice-choked waters, the kayaking villager strikes home again with his harpoon to the walrus's heart. The sharp-eyed seal hunter, prone on a frozen sea, takes aim at his distant prey. Fearless dogs surround a white bear as their master raises his gun. And the siku always comes, and stays.

Still sturdy and active at 65, Jakob Jensen, who himself got a polar bear last year, said he hopes what Greenlanders are seeing is a cycle, that the winter [sea ice](#) will return.

But he seems to sense it won't, that the sleds will become museum pieces, that driving the dogs 10 hours over the ice to Ilulissat will remain a fading memory.

"The past few years the weather has been changing rapidly," the old hunter said. "It's possible that the traditions will just slip away."

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