

Five lessons from five weeks in Ulukhaktok

Linnaea Jasiuk



Photo credit: Linnaea Jasiuk

Last summer Linnaea Jasiuk travelled to Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories where she lived and worked for two months as part of the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR) funded project IK-ADAPT (www.ikadapt.ca). Her objective was to document the perspectives of community members on ethical considerations for the collection and dissemination of Inuit knowledge in research, particularly when using multi-media techniques such as film or audio recording. This was her first time above the Arctic Circle and her first time living in an Inuit community. These are some of the ‘lessons’ that she learned.

1. Get outside more

I would consider myself a fairly “outdoorsy” woman. I play lacrosse outside several times a week, in the winter I enjoy spending a day on the ski trails or

snowshoeing, and when my workday permits me to step away from my desk I am sure to step outside for some “fresh” air. However my satisfaction with my “outdoorsy” lifestyle was dismantled rather quickly after arriving in Ulukhaktok. Life in the North occurs primarily outside. While the midnight sun and ‘Inuk time’ mean that your day may start at any one of the 24 hours, once you are up, you are outside; socializing, fishing, playing at the playground, fixing equipment, or out on the land or water. Living in Ulukhaktok with Ulukhaktomiut (people of Ulukhaktok) made me realize that I may not be as “outdoorsy” as I had once thought. What this really emphasized for me was that whether it is nature and the outdoors, good coffee, or anything else that is so regular in my daily life it could easily go unappreciated, it is important to not take these things for granted.



2 a.m. hike to look over Ulukhaktok.



Photo credit: Linnæa Jasinik

2. Always carry snacks

You never know when, for example, beluga whales will swim by and the entire community will erupt into chaos: brothers off to notify each other, wives bustling about to pack thermoses with tea and coffee, boats being loaded with gas and supplies, and then racing out to open waters like a charging cavalry. If you are not ready in the 5 minutes that it takes for all of this to occur, you will be left behind. You don't want to be the one running down to the shore, pulling on your second boot just in time to watch the last boat speed off. Extraordinary events, like the arrival of whales, are unpredictable, so you need to be ready every day and willing to take chances. And remember — always carry snacks!



3. If you think you're dressed warmly enough . . . you're not

One day I decided to 'carpe the diem' and join some friends from the community at 11:00 pm to go fishing for what I thought would be only an hour or two given how late it was. Thank goodness that after learning lesson #2, my pockets were full of snacks and I was prepared, or so I thought, for such an

occasion. Like a magician I pulled from my bag an extra sweater, extra pants, extra socks, mittens and a toque, but then there was engine trouble. I waited on shore for my friends to prepare the boat and as I waited the cold slowly crept into my stationary body. After about an hour of trying to get the engine running, I didn't think we would still be going — which was fine with me since by this point I couldn't feel my toes — but no, my friends were determined to go fishing. It is difficult to complain about a boat trip along the spectacular shoreline of Victoria Island, but there were no fish (well I thought there were no fish) and the cold that set in on the shore was here to stay. There I sat, rod in hand, and the longer I sat the colder and more disheartened I became. Then without warning my line gave a tug, and then another one, and another, and another and then it zig-zagged wildly through the water. I had hooked my first Arctic char! Hooking a char was like instant warmth through my body, but now I know that until a char is hooked, three layers of clothing is better than two, and four layers is even better than that!! Oh, and also that patience is a virtue — a char will eventually come!



A boat sits ready for easy cast-off should whales swim by.



Photo credit: Linnaea Jasiuk

4. Arctic char tastes best

I am a seafood and fish lover and thought that I had experienced it all, and then the char started to run and I got my first taste. It is easy to get lost in the juicy, flakey, tender meat that when cooked right melts in your mouth, but there is something more to char that I learned to appreciate. Fishing, preparing and sharing char is a process, rooted in cultural values and expressed in community pride and happiness. Some of my fondest memories from my time in Ulukhaktok are of walking to the dock at any time of day and finding at least half a dozen people with rods in hand and lures in the water. Sometimes it felt like a community event with dozens of people at the dock and along the shore: little ones, Elders, and everyone in between, all sharing in the delight of the midnight sun and the char. It was quite an experience to walk down to the dock and be able to smell the fresh caught fish, coffee, and marshmallows all cooking over a fire, to hear the buzz of town gossip, children's laughter and excited shouts as a fish is hooked, and to see so many community members sharing and enjoying the time spent with friends and family. This is when the char, or any meal for that matter, tastes best.



5. Sharing is caring

Sharing food is an integral part of Ulukhaktok's culture and social fabric. There is a pride in sharing with Elders, family and friends, and the kindness of reciprocity is evident everywhere in Ulukhaktok. What brought me to Ulukhaktok, however, was to examine the exchange of knowledge which is also an integral part of Inuit culture. Knowledge and skills are transmitted among generations through observation, stories and apprenticeship, with young people working and learning alongside their teachers. This learning environment was a world away from the lecture theatres and classrooms I left behind at the University. Nothing was asked for in return for the lessons I saw being shared; they were for the benefit of the teacher, student and the community as a whole, ensuring that traditions and culture continue. ●

Linnaea Jasiuk graduated from the University of Guelph after studying Environmental Biology. Linnaea is continuing to study the environment and Ulukhaktok while pursuing her Master's Degree with the University of Guelph's Geography Department. She grew up in Orangeville, Ontario and has travelled across Canada and to the Yukon, Europe, Brazil and a large portion of the United States. This, however, was her first trip to Canada's Arctic.

Arctic char drying in the sun and becoming the treat known as 'biffy'.



Photo credit: Linnæa Jasiuk

Two young Ulukhaktomiut fishing at the shore.



Photo credit: Linnæa Jasiuk

Learning to hunt by first learning to catch butterflies.