



Encyclopedia of Life

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Bowhead Whale Podcast

Balaena mysticetus

Writer Karen Romano Young takes an icebreaker to Barrow, Alaska, to join in the festival of Naluqatak and learn about the intimate relationship between the Inupiat Eskimos and the bowhead whale. Listen as she tells Ari Daniel Shapiro how the whole community turns out for whale hunt, how the bowhead nourishes the Inupiat, both physically and spiritually—and how the hunt is proving to be an unexpected gift to scientists.

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is: One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

That's the sound of an icebreaker slicing through the ice off the northern edge of Alaska, near the town of Barrow. It comes to us from Karen Romano Young – a children's book author and illustrator, and a science writer. On a trip she made there in June, she recorded stories of the Inupiat Eskimos that live in Barrow, and their relationship with the bowhead whale.

Young: If you could come to Barrow, if you could see what a hard life it is, how little opportunity there is to get food...You could see how the people live – how generously and how very, very central the whale is to that.

Ari: The bowhead whale, or *Balaena mysticetus*, is massive: a mouth the length of a mini-van, blubber that's up to two feet thick...

Young: And they have this very, big strong skull to break up through the ice from underneath it.

Ari: The Inupiat community of Barrow: its existence – really its whole rhythm – is tied to the bowhead whale. Take the springtime when the ice can extend for up to ten miles from the shore.

Young: You've got 6 to 7 men in a small sealskin boat about the size of a canoe.

Ari: Wait, so they're on the ice with the, with the...

Young: They're sitting on the ice with the boat angled down toward the water so that as soon as someone sees signs of a whale, they just –whew– they slide right down the ice into the water. And then they paddle. And they fire this little – they call it a bomb – into the whale and the aim is to kill it immediately.

Ari: And how does a small, little canoe bring a whale back onshore?

Young: Well, they, they attach the lines to it and then it's dragged back in through block and tackle. And then everyone pulls, pulls. It can take a couple of days to bring the whale out of the water. Yeah, it takes them a couple months for them to really butcher everything thoroughly, and getting it ready to give away to the community.

Ari: This giving away of whale meat happens during Naluqatak – which translates to “the festival of the whale.” There's food and dancing, and they even toss the whaling captain, his wife, and others up into the air using a sealskin blanket like a trampoline, which is what you're hearing right now. It was recorded by the BBC.

Listening to Karen, it really struck me...how the Inupiat hunters – who risk their lives in the hunt – will share the whale like this, never asking for anything in return. That whale can feed all of Barrow for up to a year and a half. During her visit, Karen spoke with Roy Ahmaogak who hunts bowhead whales.

Young: So you all don't sell food to each other?

Ahmaogak: We don't sell food whatsoever. It's just not a right thing. It's our nature to give – it's called sharing. In return, when you give something, you're not expected to receive anything back other than respect. You know, a captain himself – when they catch a whale, they don't own the whale. They're just in charge of distributing the whale, of feeding the community.

Ari: The Inupiat don't just share whale meat with each other. They're also sharing information about the bowheads with scientists. Like how many whales there are, and what their behavior's like. As for the hunt, the Inupiat are eager to explain what it's all about to people not from Barrow...so they can make up their own minds about whale hunting.

Young: I really changed my thinking on this, Ari. I just thought that – when I went in that this is wrong: we should not be hunting for whales. But after talking to people there, and hearing how it's not just their tradition – it's their way of life. Everyone there depends on whales. They do it very respectfully in the way that's gonna cause the least harm. For the Inupiat to be taking 40 whales a year is completely sustainable in a population of 13,000.

Ahmaogak: It provides sustenance for the body and soul.

Ari: For the body and soul, Ahmaogak says. Sometimes the Inupiat hunters have intimate encounters with these whales. Karen spoke with Ahmaogak's son...Benny Hopson...who remembers a story from his great-uncle.

Hopson: My grandpa's brother – he's seen a bowhead right in front of their ice camp. They were gonna try to get it, but then they noticed something funny about it. Like it kept tipping over. And then they noticed a baby whale come out.

Young: And they saw a baby whale be born... It certainly seems appropriate that the animal that you know the most about and that you care the most about is the one that is central to your life in every – in every way, physically and spiritually.

Ari: Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. For the Encyclopedia of Life, I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Meet the Scientist

Meet author Karen Romano Young, who traveled to the Arctic as part of the Impacts of Climate Change on the Eco-Systems and Chemistry of the Arctic Pacific Environment (ICESCAPE) expedition.



Where do you work?

I am out and about a lot visiting scientists and the places where they work. I do my writing and artwork in my barn studio at my home in Connecticut.

What do you study?

Right now I'm doing research for a book on dog behavior and articles on beluga research and the Gulf of Mexico oil spill; finishing a children's book about the experience of diving in the submersible Alvin; and writing a fiction story about a family of abominable snowmen.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

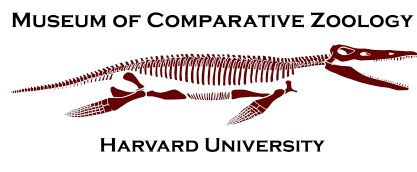
Author, illustrator, deep-sea diver.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

Make things: painting and collaging, sewing, knitting, drawing. I love to swim and snorkel and have been learning scuba. Yoga. And I live for long walks in the woods or on the beach with my two dogs.

What do you like most about science?

The people who are involved in it. Scientists are passionate, excited, hard-working adventurers, and I think their world is the most interesting and thrilling.



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