

Last Days of the Ice Hunters

▲ Urging his dogs forward, a Greenland hunter races across sea ice that gets thinner every year.

- 1 Jens Danielsen kneels on his dogsled as it slides along the rough edge of a frozen sea. “*Harru, harru,*” he calls out **urgently**. “Go left, go left. *Atsuk, atsuk.* Go right, go right.” The 15 dogs in his team move carefully. Despite freezing temperatures in late March, the ice has broken up, making travel dangerous. “The sea ice used to be three feet thick
5 here,” Danielsen says. “Now it’s only four inches thick.”

As big as a bear and with a kind, boyish face, Danielsen is a 45-year-old ice hunter from Qaanaaq, a village of about 650 people whose brightly painted houses cover a hillside

overlooking a fjord.¹ He’s heading toward the ice edge to find walruses, as hunters of Inuit **ethnicity**

- 10 have done for as long as memory. With his extended family and 57 dogs to feed, he’ll need to kill several walruses on this trip.

Normally the ice comes to northwestern Greenland in September and stays until June. But during the past
15 few years, the ice has been thick and the hunting good for only three or four weeks. The ice shelf gives hunters **access** to the walruses, seals, and whales they hunt. Without it, hunting becomes nearly impossible. In one recent winter, Qaanaaq’s hunters found themselves without **sufficient** food to feed
20 their **starving** dogs. The hunters asked for help, and the government responded with money while fishing **corporations** assisted by sending fish by airplane.



- ▲ Hunters approach a walrus they have just killed. One walrus can feed a hunting party for four days. “Not long ago we hunted walruses from kayaks,” says Danielsen, “but they killed too many of us.”

¹ A **fjord** is a narrow body of water cut into a valley by a glacier.

25 Today fewer than 500 ice hunters are able to
live by hunting alone. They travel by dogsled,
wear skins, and hunt with harpoons.² At the
same time, they also use **guns**, cell phones,
and watch TV. “This changing weather is bad
30 for us,” Danielsen says, scowling.³ “Some [of
our] people have to go other ways to make a
living.” His wife, Ilaitsuk, who used to go
with him on these hunting trips, has had to
take a job at a day-care center in Qaanaaq to
35 help pay their bills. The government now
funds job training programs to help ice
hunters find other employment.



▲ An ice hunter drags his dogs toward the sea ice. Sometimes the dogs sense the ice is too thin, and try to pull the hunter back.

Warmer weather does provide some opportunities. **Quantities** of valuable fish that
prefer warmer water are increasing, and melting ice has uncovered some of Greenland’s
40 valuable natural **resources**—minerals, metals, and gems.⁴ Electric power plants may soon
be built on rivers filled by melting ice. But the last ice hunters may not be able to get
used to working as fishermen, in mines, or in power plants. As Danielsen says, “Without
ice, we can’t live. Without ice, we’re nothing at all.”

² A **harpoon** is a long, pointed weapon with a rope attached to it, which is used to hunt large sea animals.

³ When someone **scowls**, an angry expression appears on their face.

⁴ A **gem** is a jewel or stone that is used in jewelry.



▲ An ice hunter wears a polar bear skin to teach his dogs not to be afraid of the bears. “Without knowing the polar bear’s ways,” says ice hunter Mamarut Kristiansen, “I would have died out here many times.”

◀ Avigjaq Kristiansen, aged 15, left school to become an ice hunter. In 2004 he killed his first polar bear. “He has the will to be a great hunter,” says Danielsen. But warming temperatures may mean the end of the ice hunters’ lifestyle.