The Inuit: Northern Living

A Reading A–Z Level U Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,834

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Written by David Meissner

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Level U Leveled Book

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Correlation

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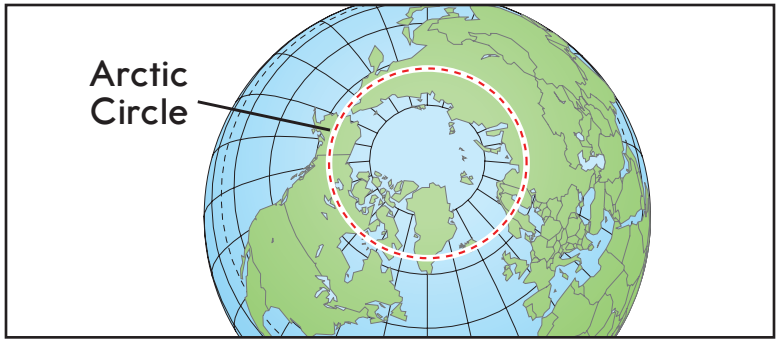
Inuit Words in English

Many Inuit spoke a language called Inuktitut. Some of the words they used are now words that we use in English.

igloo: a dome-shaped house built from blocks of snow

kayak: a light and narrow boat, like a canoe but with a covered deck

parka: a warm, hooded jacket



The Arctic is the circular area around the North Pole.

The Frozen North

There is a place on Earth where it is always cold. The ground is frozen and the land is flat. For much of the year, it is covered in a white blanket of snow.

This land is so far north that during the winter, the sun doesn't come above the horizon. The land remains dark twenty-four hours a day. But during the summer, the Sun is always above the horizon. It is light outside twenty-four hours a day. That's why this place, the Arctic, is sometimes called the "Land of the Midnight Sun."

If you visit the Arctic region, you'll feel how cold it is. The temperature on an average winter day is about –34° Celsius (–30°F)! Each year, between 38 and 229 centimeters (15–90 in) of snow fall. For many months, the Arctic's rivers, lakes, and seas freeze over. *Brrr!*

So if it's that cold and snowy, how can anything survive in the Arctic? The land is mostly barren **tundra** where even trees cannot grow. But some plants can take root in the far north. These are low-growing mosses, shrubs, and tiny flowering plants.

Animals have also found ways to live in the Arctic. Salmon, lake trout, and Arctic cod are fish that swim in the cold waters. Whales, seals, walruses, and polar bears live in and around the sea. Layers of fat beneath their skin serve as warm **insulation**. Wolves, foxes, and **caribou** roam the tundra. Their thick coats of fur help keep them warm. In the summertime, ducks and geese **migrate** to the Arctic to build nests and raise their young.

Caribou are a type of wild reindeer that live in North America.

So if plants and animals can survive in the far north, what about people? How would you stay warm during the cold, dark winters? How would you stay protected from the icy winds and snowstorms? How would you find food?

People have lived in and near the Arctic for thousands of years. Before there were stores, fancy jackets, or electricity, these people survived in the frozen north. They built houses from driftwood, earth, whalebones, and snow. They burned whale fat to heat their homes. And they wore animal skins and fur to brave the harsh cold. The hearty people of the far north of North America used to be commonly known as the Eskimo, but we now know them by their preferred name, the Inuit (IN-yoo-it).

An Inuit woman

The Inuit are Native Americans. This means that their **ancestors** lived in North America since long before Europeans came to the Americas. Over time, the Inuit spread out to live in many different areas. Some of them lived just south of the Arctic where there were trees. There they could build houses out of wood. But many Inuit lived far to the north, where there were no trees. They built houses of whale bones, hides, earth, and they sometimes built shelters out of hard-packed snow.

This book is about the traditional way the Inuit lived. It does not describe how every Inuit person lived, but gives an overview of how many of them lived for many years. You will read about igloos, dogsleds, ice fishing, and more. You will even find out what games the Inuit played on cold winter days. And in the last chapter, you will read about the Inuit who still live in the far north today.

Many People, Many Names

For many years, all northern Native Americans were called *Eskimo*. But many tribes do not like this name because it was given to them by other tribes, some of whom were their enemies. *Eskimo* means "eater of raw meat." Some Alaskan tribes still call themselves *Eskimo*, but most northern people prefer the general term *Inuit*. Some people prefer their specific tribal name, rather than a general name. And tribes in Siberia are not called *Inuit*. They have their own names.

Staying Warm

The Inuit knew how to stay warm in freezing conditions. For clothing, they wore the skins of Arctic animals. Inuit women cleaned these skins and sewed them into pants, socks, boots, and gloves. The most important article of clothing was the **parka**, which was a thick, hooded jacket.

Caribou skin was a popular material because it was lightweight, yet warm. When there wasn't caribou skin, the Inuit used skins from foxes, seals, and polar bears. They decorated their clothing with beads and carvings. Some Inuit used goggles to protect their eyes from "snow blindness," or eye damage from the harsh sunlight reflecting off the white snow and ice. They carved these goggles out of wood and bone. Then they cut small slits to see through. These goggles worked like sunglasses.

The goggles carved out of wood protect this hunter's eyes from snow blindness.

Inside an igloo, an Inuit shows a traditional toy.

Inuit houses were an essential part of staying warm. The Inuit used the best building materials they could find in their environment. Some Inuit were lucky enough to have driftwood, rocks, and **sod**. Caribou skins helped to insulate the walls. To heat and light the insides of their homes, the Inuit burned oil lamps. This oil came from melted animal fat, usually from seals, walruses, or whales. The lamps' wicks were made of moss and grass.

When the Inuit could not find wood, rocks, or sod during the long and snowy winter, they used snow and ice to build houses. People today call these snow houses **igloos**. Most people are fascinated by igloos. Not many of us can imagine living in a house built just from blocks of ice and snow. Wouldn't it be like living in a freezer? And wouldn't an igloo melt from the heat inside?

Some Inuit lived in igloos all winter long. These igloos were so tall that adults could stand up inside them. People slept, ate, and gathered in the igloo's main room. Many igloos had side rooms for storage. And sometimes underground passageways connected neighboring igloos.

The weather outside was so cold that igloos did not melt in the winter. But on the inside, igloos could be quite warm. Long entrance tunnels (just big enough to crawl through) kept out the wind and the cold. Oil lamps, cooking fires, and body heat warmed up the main room. Adults and kids slept on snow platforms covered with animal skin. Some igloos had "windows" made from clear lake ice. Caribou or seal skins lined the inside walls and kept the snow and ice from melting by trapping the heat inside.

Building an igloo: The Inuit cut out blocks of hard snow with a long knife. Then they stacked the blocks in a circle that spiraled to close at the top.

Venturing Out for Food

The Inuit developed creative ways of traveling. In the winter, teams of dogs pulled sleds through the snow. The sleds rested on skis made from wood and whalebone. In the summer, the Inuit walked over land to gather berries, seaweed, bird eggs, and wild vegetables.

Winter travel by dogsled

When the winter ice thawed, the Inuit also traveled by boat. A common boat for one or two people was called a **kayak** (KIE-yak). Kayaks were like narrow canoes with covered tops. Paddlers sat in small openings. They attached waterproof jackets made of seal intestine around the edges of the openings to prevent water from getting inside. Kayaks were made so well-balanced that if they tipped, paddlers could easily roll over until they were right-side-up again.

Summer travel by kayak

The frozen tundra ground was not good for growing crops like corn, beans, or wheat. There were no stores to buy goods. Therefore, the Inuit had to travel by foot, sled, and boat to find food. They found most of their food by hunting and fishing.

The Inuit cut holes in the ice to catch fish in the cold water below.

Sometimes the Inuit hunted on land, and other times they hunted on the sea. Seals and caribou were their primary targets. Hunters used harpoons, darts tipped with poison, and bows and arrows. They speared whales, caught foxes in traps, and fished through holes in the ice.

But the **resourceful** Inuit didn't kill animals just for food. They used all parts of the animals to make tools, weapons, clothing, and shelter. For example, when the Inuit killed a whale, they first ate its meat. Then they melted the whale fat into oil to heat and light their homes. Finally, the Inuit carved knives and tools out of whalebone.

INUIT RESOURCE MENU

Animal	Food	Other Uses
Whale	Whale meat	• fat for light, heat, and cooking • bones for knives
Seal	Seal meat	• skins for boots • intestines to waterproof kayaks
Caribou	Caribou meat	• skins for warm parkas • skins to sleep on
Walrus	Walrus meat	• skins for blankets • ivory tusks for carvings

Work and Play

Inuit men spent much of their time hunting, fishing, and making tools. Women often cooked, skinned animals, and sewed skins into clothing. The kids helped out with these chores until they were old enough to do them alone. There was no such thing as "school" for kids.

The Inuit enjoyed playing games and using their imaginations. Harsh winter storms could keep them inside for days at a time. So people told stories, sang songs, danced, and played drums made of animal skin. Sometimes they even wrestled and played tug-of-war.

Inuit children take part in a traditional race under fishing nets.

A girl is tossed high into the air in a traditional blanket toss.

Kids played with dolls, bows and arrows, and leather balls. They also decorated pins, combs, and goggles with carvings that looked like animals. Fathers often made "story knives" for their daughters. Girls used these story knives to draw pictures in the snow and dirt. They sat in circles with friends and made up stories based on the pictures.

Surely one of the favorite games for kids was the "blanket toss." In this game, one person lay on a blanket made from walrus hides. Then all at once, everybody pulled the blanket tight. This was like a trampoline that sent people flying into the air! Sometimes they landed on their feet, and other times they did flips.

The Inuit Today

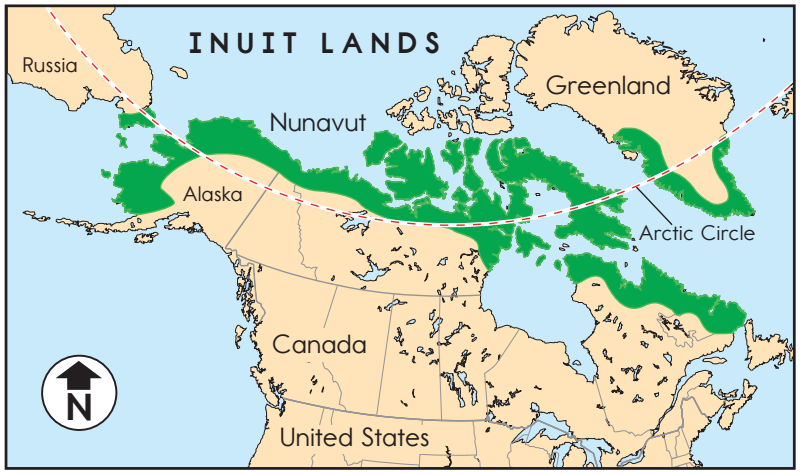
In the last three sections, you read about traditional Inuit ways of living. This is how many of them lived for thousands of years. Yet over the last few hundred years, things have changed. Today there are airports, TVs, and computers in the Arctic.

Now the Inuit are trying to find a balance between the modern world and traditional ways. Many Inuit prefer houses with electricity instead of dark igloos. But modern houses cost money. And to make money, Inuit people have to find jobs. This means that many Inuit spend their days at jobs other than hunting and fishing. There are also fewer wild animals than before. This makes it harder to hunt.

The Inuit still eat seal, caribou, and whale meat, but they also buy food at the store. They pay money for things like fruits, vegetables, and potato chips.

Today, land in the frozen north is divided between different countries. The Inuit live in the northern parts of Canada, Greenland, Russia, and the United States. In 1999, Canada made a territory for the Inuit called *Nunavut*. *Nunavut* means "Our Land." Its official languages are Inuktitut, English, and French.

Now there are also schools in the Arctic. Children spend their days reading and writing instead of fishing and sewing. Inuit elders sometimes visit schools to teach the children Inuit traditions. They help students carve wood, sew animal skins, and tell stories. The elders want kids to remember how their ancestors lived for thousands of years.



Today over 100,000 Inuit people live in the northern parts of four different countries.

If you visited the far north today, you would need to bundle up. Maybe you'd wear a warm jacket, or two or three. If you went in the wintertime, it would be dark in the middle of the day. It would be freezing cold for days and weeks and months. A visit to the Arctic might make you wonder how people can survive in such a harsh environment.

During your visit, you would meet Inuit people. You would see how they have blended traditional ways with modern living. For example, you might see an Inuit man wearing blue jeans and a caribou skin parka. You might ride on a sled that is pulled by a snowmobile instead of dogs. Or you might see seal hunters wearing sunglasses instead of wooden goggles. And before going home, you might buy a piece of Inuit art, such as a little animal carved out of stone. It would be a souvenir to help you remember your visit to the far north.

Inuit carving

Explore More

1 At the Library

Ask your librarian where you can find books about the Inuit and the Arctic.

2 On the Web

A. In the address window, type: *www.google.com*
B. Then type: *Inuit.* Click on "Google Search."
C. Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
D. When you want to explore other links, click the back arrow on the top left.
E. Or try some different searches: *Eskimo, Arctic, Nunavut, tundra.*

3 Try Inuit Storytelling!

Whether it's sitting around a fire or talking on the bus, people have always loved to tell stories. The Inuit used to make up stories from the pictures they drew in the dirt and snow.

Try Inuit storytelling with your friends! All you need is a stick. Sit in a circle and use the stick to draw pictures in the dirt or snow. Next, make up a story about the pictures. Then hand the stick to the next person. He or she can add on to your story or make up a new one. If you let your imagination run wild, you'll probably come up with some pretty interesting (and funny) stories!

Glossary

ancestors *(n.)* relatives who lived a long time ago (p. 7)

caribou *(n.)* a large North American deer with wide antlers (p. 5)

igloos *(n.)* dome-shaped houses built from blocks of snow (p. 9)

insulation *(n.)* material that holds in heat, preventing warmth from escaping or cold from entering (p. 5)

kayak *(n.)* an Intuit word for a canoelike boat that is moved by a paddle (p. 11)

migrate *(v.)* to move from one habitat or region to another at a certain time each year (p. 5)

parka *(n.)* a warm, hooded jacket (p. 8)

resourceful *(adj.)* able to find clever ways to overcome difficulties (p. 13)

sod *(n.)* the top layer of the soil, including the roots of grass (p. 9)

tundra *(n.)* flat, treeless Arctic region where the ground is always frozen (p. 5)