

## Cultural Significance of Polar Bear Harvests

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For many, defining culture is difficult. In fact it is simple. The actions that allow groups to continue to exist successfully throughout an extended period of time are integral elements of culture.

Today's indigenous groups of Alaska exist as a result of thousands of years of employing complex understandings of immediate environments. Resource management strategies are not new concepts to us. If a resource was not properly managed, societies dispersed or ceased to exist.

Historically, polar bears provided Alaska's northern people with a much needed supplement to dietary incomes when other resources were difficult to secure. This relationship between Alaska's indigenous people and polar bears is a critical link between pre-historic and contemporary Alaska Native populations.

However, today's modern groups do not exist merely as a result of the polar bear's contribution to nutritional needs. The Alaskan polar bear was also a significant component of the political, spiritual, and social organization for Native groups. Historically, leaders of Inupiaq groups throughout Northern Alaska asserted their elevated status through their experiences and abilities gained from harvesting polar bears.

The spiritual significance of the polar bear still exists today in the reverence practices many Native groups continue to observe after harvesting a polar bear. Because of the similarities of morphological structure between humans and bears, many believed the polar bear was an intermediary between humans and the afterlife. Polar bears were advocates for a hunter's future successes, and were determined by the respect shown for the bears by the hunters in the way they were hunted, processed, and treated after death.

In many villages the taking of *nanuuq* was a significant rite of passage for young male hunters. Often their status within a community was determined by their ability to harvest a polar bear. These rites of passage were not only central to the individual hunter, but the resulting ceremonies were carried out in the most important aspect of Inupiaq culture; community gatherings inside the community house (*kazgi*), further affecting social structures which still exist today in modern community relationships.

The members of the Alaska Nanuuq Commission takes this opportunity to restate the importance of continuing a subsistence polar bear harvest for the well-being of contemporary and future Alaska Natives.