

# Vanishing ice has Alaska native people worried about their culture

By Oliver Milman, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.22.16

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Children play a game of Red Rover along a raised wooden sidewalks - used to help stabilize the ground - on June 29, 2015, in Newtok, Alaska. Newtok, which has a population of about 375 ethnically Yupik people, was established along the shores of the Ninglick River, near where the river empties into the Bering Sea, by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1959. Andrew Burton/Getty Images

In recent years, the Earth has been getting warmer. Temperature changes have been especially extreme in the Arctic. The Arctic, which covers the northernmost parts of the planet, is usually very cold. It has been getting warmer, though. Life for the Yupik people who live there has been getting harder as a result.

Much of their lives takes place among the sea ice. Sea ice is sheets of frozen ocean water. As the temperatures have gone up, the ice has melted. With less sea ice, people there are having trouble finding food and staying safe.

Even their language is now being affected.

## **Native Yupik Are Losing Some Words**

The Yupik are a native people of western Alaska. They have dozens of words for different kinds of sea ice. Some of these words are falling out of use, however.

One word that is heard less often these days is “tagneghneq.” It means “thick, dark, ice.” The reason is simple. As temperatures have risen, tagneghneq has disappeared. As a result, the word is disappearing too.

As more ice melts, life will only get harder for Arctic people. There are 31 Alaskan towns and cities that are currently in danger. Many of the people who live there will have to move.

“In December, we normally have waters covered in ice but right now we have open water out there,” said Vera Metcalf. She leads the Eskimo Walrus Commission. Her group works to protect 19 communities along Alaska’s western coast.

## **"The Ice Is Melting Earlier And Earlier"**

The amount of Arctic sea ice fell to a record low in November. The ice has been worn down by the warming air, warming seas and changing wind patterns.

Less sea ice makes life especially hard for hunters. The walruses they hunt live among the sea ice. As the ice disappears, so do the walruses. This makes it hard to find food. Hunger is now a problem facing many families in the Arctic.

The Arctic is warming twice as quickly as rest of the world. There are “early signs” that the warming is speeding up, according to Jeremy Mathis. He leads the Arctic program at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

“For people who live in the Arctic, there is no question about whether their environment is changing,” he said. “The ice is melting earlier and earlier and coming back later and later in the year.”

## **Towns Might Be Safer If They Move**

Ice locked deep in the ground is melting, causing buildings to sink. Communities are seeing their coastlines wear away. They are more exposed to storms, too. There is less sea ice to protect them from bad weather.

Several Alaskan towns are thinking about moving. Two coastal villages, Shishmaref and Kivalina, have voted to relocate. A third, Newtok, has already begun moving.

“These communities need to be moved as soon as possible before a large storm hits,” said Victoria Herrmann. She leads the Arctic Institute. She and her team have been studying temperature changes in the Arctic.

Unfortunately, there is not much support for Arctic people. The United States also does not have a system to deal with so many people who have to relocate. In American politics, climate change does not get a lot of serious attention.

Meanwhile, people in the Arctic are faced with very difficult choices. “Having to move elsewhere is unimaginable,” Metcalf said. “But we may have to consider it, for the sake of our children and grandchildren.”

## Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST explains what is causing ice to melt in the Arctic?
  - (A) Temperature changes have been especially extreme in the Arctic.
  - (B) The Arctic, which covers the northernmost parts of the planet, is usually very cold.
  - (C) As the temperatures have gone up, the ice has melted.
  - (D) As more ice melts, life will only get harder for Arctic people.
  
- 2 Read the section "Native Yupik Are Losing Some Words."  
Which paragraph explains WHY some Yupik words are disappearing?
  
- 3 How does the information in the section "The Ice Is Melting Earlier And Earlier" support a MAIN idea of the article?
  - (A) It explains how melting ice affects Arctic people.
  - (B) It explains how warm the Arctic is becoming.
  - (C) It explains what time of year the ice is forming and melting.
  - (D) It explains what the warning signs of Arctic warming are.
  
- 4 Which of the following details from the article is MOST important to include in its summary?
  - (A) The Yupik are a native people of western Alaska. They have dozens of words for different kinds of sea ice.
  - (B) There are "early signs" that the warming is speeding up, according to Jeremy Mathis.
  - (C) Two coastal villages, Shishmaref and Kivalina, have voted to relocate. A third, Newtok, has already begun moving.
  - (D) She and her team have been studying temperature changes in the Arctic.