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■ **NEWS:** Nunavut May 04, 2015 - 6:59 am

Learning on the land: elders and youth build igloos in Kugluktuk

"If there is the right snow and the right spot, I could build one on my own"

JESSE AJAYI



With the help of expert iglu builders, students from Kugluktuk High School spent the early months of 2015 building an iglu village outside of town. (PHOTO BY JESSE AJAYI)

Special to Nunatsiaq News

KUGLUKTUK — Organizers of a new project in Kugluktuk are hoping to combine two important goals — economic development and the preservation of traditional skills.

And these all centre on the iconic Inuit snow house: the igloo.

The new project, which involves after-school and weekend trips on the land to construct igloos using traditional techniques, arose from a partnership between the Kugluktuk High School and Nunavut's Department of Culture and Heritage, which provided funding.

Haydn George, the high school principal, hopes the igloos will have tourists sleeping in them as part of the hamlet's economic development plan to create culturally-based tourist opportunities.

The project aims to bridge the gap in land skills and knowledge between younger and older generations by bringing youth and elder experts together out on the land. The youth see land skills as an important part of their culture and are eager to learn.

"Most of us have barely done it before. There are quite a bit that are interested in it," said Bryson Egotak, a youth who participated in the project.

The high school principal agreed. "They have a natural interest in their own culture and history," he said, "and this is giving them an opportunity to explore it."

The igloo colony, located about 10 kilometres north of Kugluktuk, expanded as the number of youth involved in the project grew.

More than 30 youth have visited the colony since the program began in January, heading out on the land on snow machines and qamutiks for trips that paired ice fishing and igloo building.

Traditional skills-building provides a different set of opportunities than typical after-school programs,

because it connects youth to their ancestral culture, George said.

The students' enthusiasm for traditional skills was critical to the project's success.

"Seeing the students thoroughly enjoying themselves, and being interested in finding the snow, cutting the blocks and building the igloos — that's the best thing, their natural interest," said George.

Hands-on learning also helps to develop real skills and that can only be accomplished on the land.

"You can't teach it in a classroom, you can't teach them how, you have to feel for the snow," said Jorgen Bolt, a land expert who participated in the project.

The key to building a solid igloo, he says — and developing a "feel" for the snow — lies in selecting the right materials.

"You need to find fairly consistent snow, a good 18 inches of consistent snow," said Bolt. "You use the harpoon with the head missing to feel for layers of snow and you can feel the layers as you punch through the snow, and you don't want any layers at all."

Hidden layers of snow can result in sections of the igloo sliding away, he said.

"We use the freshly fallen snow on top that's loose to fill the holes and glue the snow blocks together, and within minutes that block is solid," said Bolt.

Few hunters and adventurers still build igloos as regular shelter, but that doesn't mean the skills aren't useful today, he said.

People sometimes combine traditional and modern technology when they're on the land.

"We don't just build an igloo now, we pitch the tent and build snow blocks around it to insulate the tent," said Bolt.

Mastering winter skills builds confidence that enables Kugluktuk youth to explore more of the land, he added.

Having the survival skills "gives you the confidence to be able to go out anywhere," Bolt said. "When you have that confidence you don't have to worry about 'oh what if I break down or run into the storm or get lost.' I don't have to think about that, I know I can survive."

Some young people, unfortunately, never venture far beyond the built-up area of the community, missing opportunities to see important cultural sites, like the historic Bloody Falls, Bolt said.

Egotak has participated in seven igloo-building trips over the past six weeks. He has been working to finish the igloo he started when he was just learning how to cut snow blocks.

"I think it's pretty awesome that we have these trips because you need to know how to build an igloo if you get lost with a snowmobile on the land," he said. "If there is the right snow and the right spot, I could build one on my own."

After the hard work of cutting snow blocks and fitting them together into the base of the igloo, Egotak's favourite part is the joy that comes from finishing the job. "You get to play with the snow and see the snow go over your head once you put on the roof."

The last trip out on the land wrapped up April 25. The hamlet and high school are currently exploring funding options to continue the program next winter.



Edward Haviyok inspects the main igloo on a recent trip out to expand the igloo colony. (PHOTO BY JESSE AJAYI)

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(4) Comments:

#1. Posted by Dave on May 04, 2015

Great to see the community joining together and even better seeing the school getting. This helps in so many ways when a community works together. Congratulations!

#2. Posted by Nuka on May 04, 2015

Way to go Kugluktuk! its great to see young people learning how to make survival shelters! well done!

#3. Posted by Angut on May 04, 2015

Giving youth something nobody can take from them. Experience and confidence...what a great adventure. They'll make good hunter's out of our youth.

#4. Posted by Bob on May 04, 2015

This is a great venture in every way. So important for the youth of Kugluktuk to have pride in their culture. So important for the adults to encourage and facilitate this education. Kudos to the principal Haydn George and the Department of Culture and Heritage for seeing the importance and potential of making this effort. I may have to revisit Kugluktuk to spend a night of two in an igloo.



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Lisa Gregoire, Assistant Editor E-mail: lisag@nunatsiaq.com
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