

Newtok Planning Group

A Brief History of the Settlement of Newtok and Village Relocation Efforts

"The most striking feature of the Nelson Island area is the fundamental dependence of its inhabitants on the products of the rivers and the sea, both traditionally and at present. Their way of life is inexorably bound up with the seasonal cycling of fish and game. Although communities have solidified in the last 30 years, to some extent obviating the need for the seasonal migrations, the places people have chosen to settle are precisely those which have in the past supplied, and continue to supply, ready access to subsistence resources."

- Ann Fienup-Riordon, *The Nelson Island Eskimo*

Newtok (in Yup'ik, *Niugtaq*, which means rustling of grass) is a traditional Yup'ik Eskimo village located on a sweeping bend of the Ninglick River, north of Nelson Island near the Bering Sea. The village is located within the boundaries of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge on the soggy, lowland plain of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, one of the largest river deltas in the world. A pilot's perspective of this region reveals a vast, treeless delta dotted with a myriad of ponds, sloughs and lakes, and networked with rivers and streams.



Aerial view of the village of Newtok, August 2006. The Ninglick River is in the foreground and the Kealavik (Newtok) River meanders to the east (right of village in photo).

Photo: Jon Menough, ADEC, Village Safe Water Program

The Qaluyaarmiut: People of the Dip Net

The people of Newtok and the Nelson Island area are known as the **Qaluyaarmiut**, or "dip net people". The Qaluyaarmiut reside primarily in five villages: Newtok to the north of Nelson Island, the Nelson Island villages of Tununak, Nightmute, and Toksook Bay, and Chefornek to the south. The ancestors of the Qaluyaarmiut people have lived on the Bering Sea Coast for the last 2000 years. The residents of the five villages are closely connected and share many traditions that have been retained over generations, in part due to the isolation of the region and infrequent contact with people outside the area.

In 1841-1842, a Russian naval officer, Lieutenant Lavrenty Zagoskin, explored the lower Yukon for the Russian American Company and came into brief contact with the Qaluyaarmiut people. Russian Orthodox priests made rare visits to the area and although they baptized several people, they had lasting impact. Nelson Island was named after Edward W. Nelson, who conducted the first detailed exploration of the area in the winter of 1878-1879 and found six people, including one trader, living in Tununak. Traders and prospectors were not attracted to the area because there were few resources of commercial value.

Missionaries were the only individuals significantly interested in the region, and it proved difficult for them to reach the scattered bands of people who migrated seasonally from place to place. A Jesuit visited Tununak in 1888 and found a white man operating a trading post there. The Jesuits sent a missionary to Tununak in 1889. A small chapel was soon built, and a school with eleven students followed the next year, but operating the school and converting the people was difficult because the small bands moved

frequently and the shamans were still quite powerful. The mission closed in 1892. The people of Nelson Island had only intermittent contact with the Catholic missionaries for the next 42 years, but no permanent mission was established until 1934.

As late as 1936, the homes of the Qaluyaarmiut were small semi-subterranean sod houses, most of which still used seal oil for cooking and heating. Although the first airplane landed on Nelson Island in 1930, there were no regular flights, no radios, and mail service came only twice a year by dogteam from Bethel. Young men still grew up in the *qasgiq*, or men's community house, and few goods other than tea, flour and rifles were available.

In 1934, a missionary named Father Deschout reestablished the Tununak mission and built a church. He was to remain on Nelson Island until 1962 and his longstanding work in the area was to have a profound influence. He spoke fluent Yup'ik and encouraged the people to retain certain traditions, such as winter dance festivals, which most other missionaries had strongly opposed. Father Deschout's respect for the Yup'ik language and lifestyle influenced the retention of Qaluyaarmiut traditions in the Nelson Island region.

Settlement at Newtok

Newtok was first reported in 1949 by the U.S. Geologic Survey. Village residents had just moved to the Newtok site from Old Kealavik, located across the Newtok River from the current village site. The community relocated to the Newtok site to escape seasonal flooding and because there was not a suitable site for a school at the old village. The Newtok site was the farthest point upriver that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) barge could navigate to offload school building materials. The BIA school was built in 1958.



The red arrow shows the location of the old village site of Kealavik, across the Kealavik (Newtok) River from the current village of Newtok. *Source: ADCCED*

Ties to Nelson Island and a Subsistence Lifestyle

The Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, a 26-million acre expanse encompassing the Bering Sea Coast and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, contains an abundance of water and wetland types that provides some of the richest waterfowl habitat in North America. Half of the waterfowl of Alaska are produced in the Refuge. The Refuge's biological wealth is thought to be the reason why the ancestors of the Qaluyaarmiut originally settled in the area. The area's modern day villagers continue to rely directly on the abundance of fish, mammals and fowl of the region for most of their food supply.

The availability of subsistence resources has historically determined where the Qaluyaarmiut lived at different times of the year. As recently as the 1960s, the Newtok village site served primarily as a winter camp for the residents. The village population

would move by dogteam in April, before ice break-up, to the summer fish camp at Nilikluguk on Nelson Island (about six miles from Tununak). At Nilikluguk, the community lived in tents all summer long. In early June, most of the men would travel to Bristol Bay to work in the canneries. The winter months were spent at the Newtok village site.



Newtok villagers with a dogteam in 1967. *Photo: Jeff Nichols*

Around 1968, the Nilikluguk fish camp was abandoned after massive landslides buried the camp area and altered the shoreline enough to affect the seasonal movement of herring along this portion of the Nelson Island coast. Villagers still use the area for spring sea bird and seal hunting.



Newtok, Winter 1967. *Photo: Jeff Nichols.*

Outside Contact and Permanent Buildings Bring Change

Contact with people and customs outside the Nelson Island area came during the 1950s, when the Territorial Guard organized and sent volunteers to Bethel for two weeks of training each year. Unfortunately, exposure to disease was also a result of this new contact, and tuberculosis became a major health problem in the region. Many people were sent to sanitariums at Sitka's Mt. Edgecumbe facility and to Seattle for as long as seven years.

After 1959, high school-aged students were sent to school in Bethel, St. Mary's, Sitka, Anchorage, and even the Lower 48, staying away all year. It was not until 1976, when a high school was built in Toksook Bay that students were able to remain close to home. Today, all of the villages in the region have high schools.

During the 1970s, the development of a modern village community with a school, clinic, airstrip and modern housing influenced a more stationary, year-round population at Newtok. Snowmobiles eventually replaced dogteams, and it was during the 1970's that the last qasgiq was abandoned and the first HUD housing projects were built.

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Early Efforts to Address Erosion

Progressive Erosion Brings New Problems

The Newtok Planning Group

Mertarvik: Getting Water from the Spring

References

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