

# TUJAAKĀQ



## THIS IS MY OFFICE

MONITORING DOLLY VARDEN ON THE NORTH SLOPE P.45

## ANGUNIAQTUQ

THE DEADLY ART OF HARVESTING P.4

# Tusaayaksat means stories and voices that need to be heard. We celebrate Inuvialuit culture, heritage, and language.

**OUR MISSION:** To empower, celebrate, communicate, heal, and bond; to bring you the best coverage of our news, vibrant culture, and perspectives.

COVER STORY

## THIS IS MY OFFICE

45

with Ellen V. Lea, Michelle Gruben, Colin P. Gallagher, Jennifer Costa, Frank Dillon, Richard Gordon, Allen Kogiak, Paden Lennie, Billy Storr & J.D. Storr

PHOTO BY ELLEN LEA

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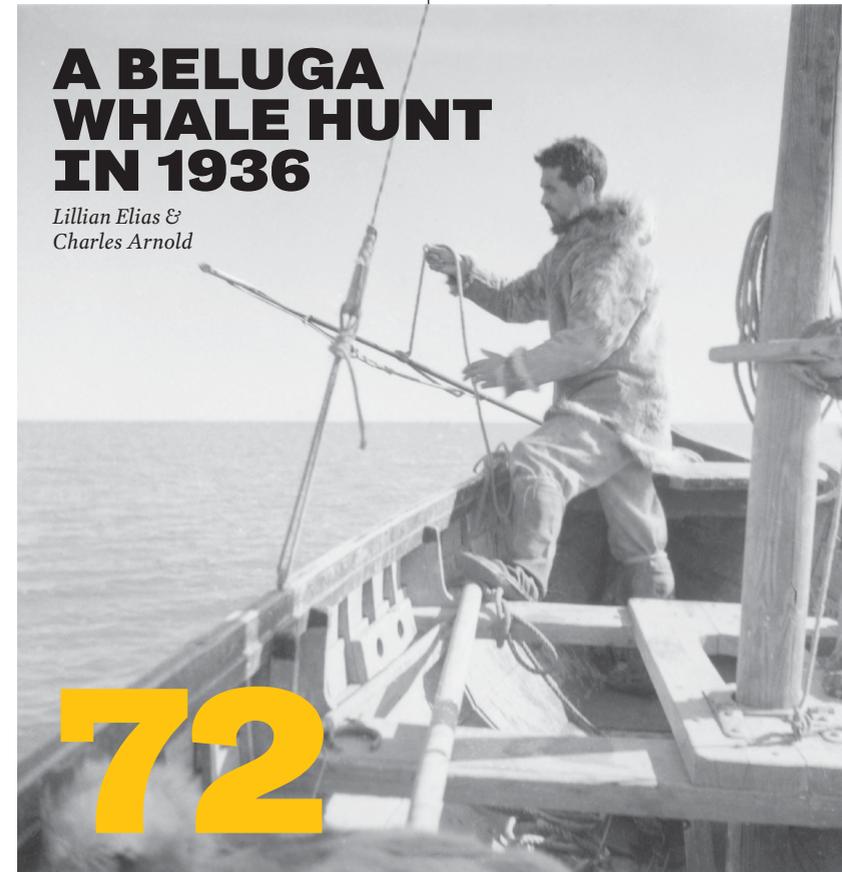


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**"This is my office," exclaims Frank Dillon, as he looks around the Firth River 'fish hole', while taking a quick lunch break in between catching hundreds of fish with a seine net. He does this every fall as part of a multi-year program set out to monitor Dolly Varden populations in rivers situated in the North Slope mountains. This program is one of many where Akłarvik harvesters monitor Dolly Varden through the Akłarvik Hunters and Trappers Committee (AHTC) and in partnership with Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), the Fisheries Joint Management Committee (FJMC), Parks Canada, Yukon Territorial Parks, and numerous community members. ▶▶**

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**FEATURING**  
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J.D. STORR

# THIS IS MY OFFICE

Frank Dillon at the  
Firth River. Photo by  
Ellen Lea.

## WHAT IS A DOLLY VARDEN?

Dolly Varden, known locally as *iqaluqpiq* (Inuvialuktun) and *dhik'ii* (Gwich'in), belong to a group of fishes called char, which includes Arctic char and lake trout. Although they are different species, Dolly Varden were called Arctic char in the past because they appeared similar to one another.

On the North Slope, different types of Dolly Varden can be found within a river system. Sea run, or anadromous char, grow to larger sizes (almost 3 feet) and migrate seasonally between the river and ocean. Resident Dolly Varden, typically males that are small in size, spend their lives in the river and sneak spawn with sea run char. Lastly, landlocked char are separate populations of small-sized males and females located above waterfalls.

The general distribution of sea run Dolly Varden in the Arctic extends from west of the Mackenzie Delta into the Yukon North Slope and Alaska. Dolly Varden are important to the Inuvialuit and Gwich'in cultures and diets, especially for the communities of Aktauvik and Ft. McPherson.

*"Who knew char tastes so deadly. It's beautiful! I love it... You can have quaq, dry fish, you could cook it [in] the fire, boil it, like there's all different ways you can eat that char but, mmm, it's ever good."* —Michelle Gruben

*"It's been a big food source for many years. It's really big with our family. Every Christmas, when our family comes together, we have what we call a cardboard party. We cut up fish eggs, frozen char, and stuff like that, and most times you can't get my kids to the table to eat—but if there's char cooked, they'll sit down and eat almost a whole fish."* —J.D. Storr

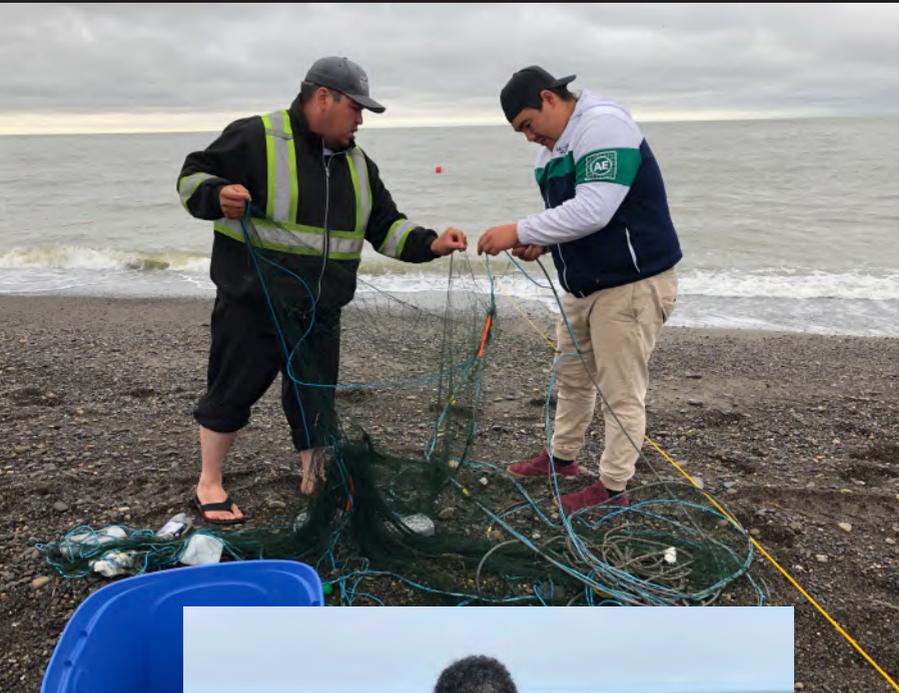
Sea run char are harvested as they undertake their seasonal migration from the spawning and overwintering area in the upper reaches of certain river systems, known locally as the 'fish holes,' to coastal waters during summer to feed. The fish holes are distinct areas where groundwater is continuously flowing, which prevents these areas from freezing, supporting the char eggs' development through the winter months.

Populations of sea run Dolly Varden are found in both the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR) and Gwich'in Settlement Area (GSA), in the upper reaches of Firth River, Joe Creek, Fish Creek (Komakuk), Babbage River, Big Fish River, Rat River, and Vittrewka River drainages. Traditional harvesting areas include fishing camps along the Yukon coast, channels of the western Mackenzie Delta, and the fish hole areas.



◀ Male Spawner Dolly Varden underwater.  
▶ Silver (non-spawning sea run) Dolly Varden.  
Photos by Ellen Lea.





**“When you involve the community when you’re developing these plans...if we have buy-in, they want to be a part of this thing and they want to make it work.” —Billy Storr**

(TOP-BOTTOM): Jordan McLeod and Keegan Arey at Shingle Point; Nellie Arey cutting fish at Shingle Point; Frank Dillon holding tagged Dolly Varden. Photos by Colin Gallagher.

**CO-MANAGEMENT & MONITORING OF DOLLY VARDEN**

Following community concerns that certain Dolly Varden populations had declined, working groups were established to support local decision-making through an adaptive co-management approach. Fishing plans were created that reflected the land claim agreements and community priorities and knowledge through representation from harvesters, co-management organizations, and territorial and federal governments. The working groups and associated fishing plans were expanded with the co-development of a comprehensive management plan (established in 2010).

The focus of the West Side Working Group (WSWG) has been Dolly Varden stocks originating in the ISR, with a focus on the Big Fish, Babbage, and Firth rivers, for their management through fishing plans, monitoring programs, and research projects, and for consulting on and communicating these decisions. Furthermore, Inuvialuit have worked closely with Gwich’in leadership on populations originating in the Gwich’in Settlement Area through the Rat River Working Group.

Monitoring can take different forms, yet is best accomplished through partnerships and leadership from the community. Monitoring can answer questions such as: *How many are there? How big are they? How old do they get? What are they eating? How do they interact with other animals in their environments? How many are harvested from each population? Where are they going? Are they healthy? What habitats are important, and how can we protect those areas? How are things changing over time? How can we adapt to climate change and other challenges?*

This kind of ‘for the community, by the community’ monitoring approach has been used for fish and marine mammals across the ISR for decades including, but not limited to, beluga whales, ringed seals, Arctic char, and lake trout. These programs have relied on the comprehensive knowledge and experience of Inuvialuit harvesters at every stage, from priority setting, project design, the documentation of information through scientific and/or traditional knowledge approaches, all the way to the interpretation and application of results to community-based decision making.

*“Right in the IFA it gives you those three principles to protect our Inuvialuit culture and heritage. And that is what HTC does! But it comes from these harvesters and monitors. Monitors are the ones that are like: ‘Hey, there’s something!’” —Michelle Gruben*

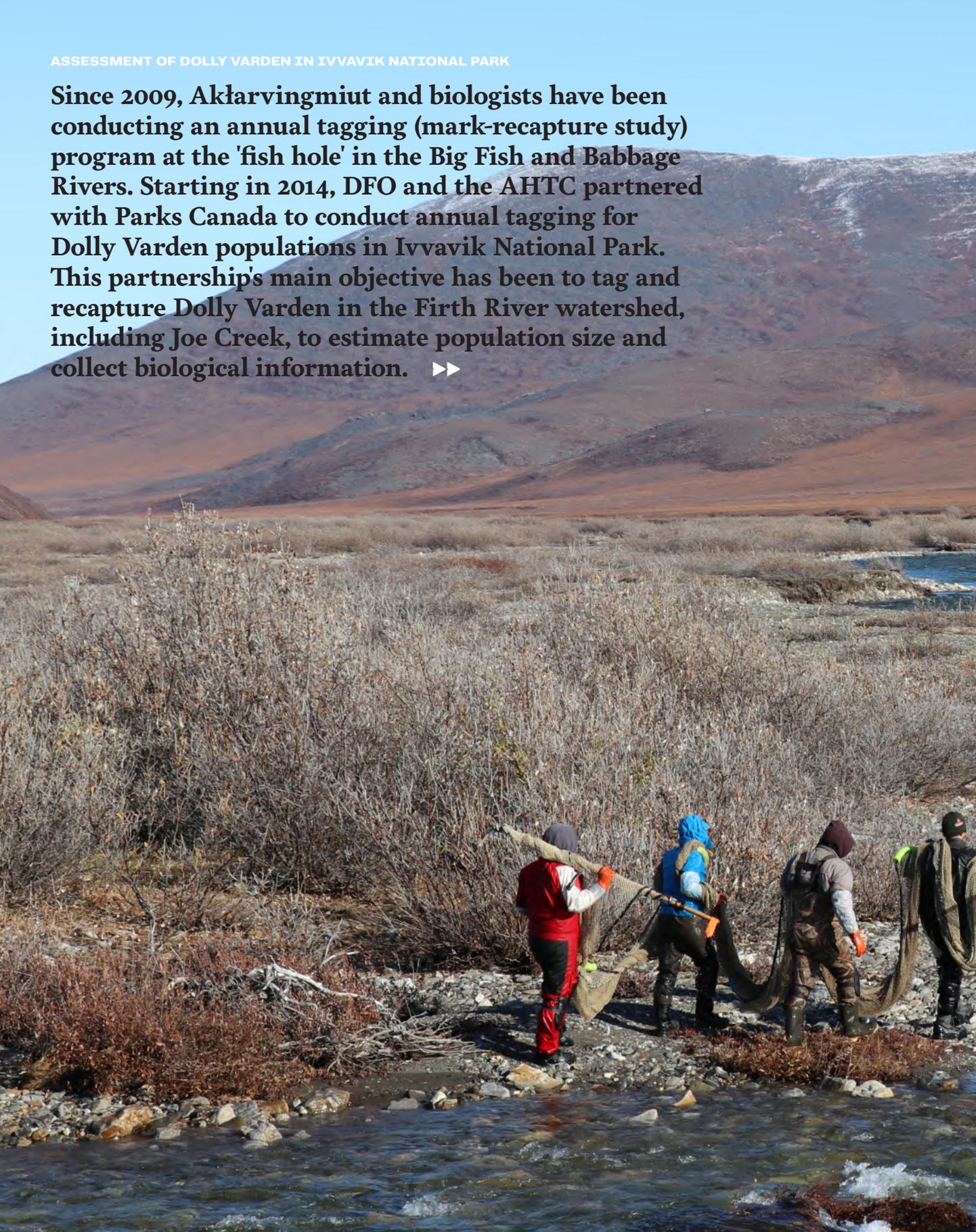
Inuvialuit harvesters are hired by their respective Hunters and Trappers Committee to work on monitoring programs. These programs are designed to build community capacity, and in many cases provide the opportunity for monitors to lead these programs for several years (and in some cases for decades). These monitors are considered the “eyes and ears” for the membership. They are highly respected as knowledge holders and leaders by their communities and their government or academic colleagues, who in some cases they have formed long-standing partnerships with.

Every March in Aklavik, local community experts, researchers, and co-management partners sit around the table, exchanging scientific and traditional knowledge and their observations on Dolly Varden populations in the ISR. Not only do the community monitors have an active role in the collection of important information reviewed at these meetings, co-management partners also depend on these community experts as lead advisors and knowledge holders to support decision-making at the local level.

Harvests have remained relatively low and carefully managed through community leadership and strong co-management. However, the threats related to climate change and limited habitat availability continue to underscore the importance of monitoring Dolly Varden and their habitats.

*“We have to adapt today. Things are going to change. We are a resilient people. We’ve been adapting and changing forever, you know? And that’s what we’re good at, adapting and changing.” —Allen Kogiak*

Since 2009, Aklarvingmiut and biologists have been conducting an annual tagging (mark-recapture study) program at the 'fish hole' in the Big Fish and Babbage Rivers. Starting in 2014, DFO and the AHTC partnered with Parks Canada to conduct annual tagging for Dolly Varden populations in Ivvavik National Park. This partnership's main objective has been to tag and recapture Dolly Varden in the Firth River watershed, including Joe Creek, to estimate population size and collect biological information. ▶▶



Each September since 2014, the project team has travelled from site to site by helicopter with a long (16 m) seine net rolled up in the basket, ready to capture fish similarly to the traditional method of 'sweeping' the pools at the fish holes. Using this seine net in deep, fast, boulder-filled waters can be tough work, and the crew has to be quick on their feet, but the reward for a good net deployment can be huge, sometimes catching hundreds of fish at once. Collecting biological and tagging data and documenting observations over many years allows for monitoring changes in the population.

*"It's like a big puzzle piece, but it's all coming together because we're catching, tagging fish, [and] feeding the community. But that all starts at your HTC level."*  
—Michelle Gruben

The team captures and tags hundreds of char each fall. The time spent in this important area has allowed the team to explore other sites based on traditional knowledge. For example, while the team was initially focused on the Joe Creek and Firth River fish holes, Danny C. Gordon provided direction on where to find the 'fish hole' at Fish Creek near Komakuk Beach. This well-respected Inuvialuit harvester and Elder from Akṭarvik has observed char during his many travels in the area over the years. In 2016, the project team was excited to get to the location that Danny C. had shared and have continued to visit the site annually since. Not only was there a population of Dolly Varden at this site, but also a biologically unique one compared to other rivers in that it has a much higher density of "resident" char (ones that stay in fresh water their whole lives despite connectivity to the sea).

*"It's nice to be able to be involved in the field work because you get to see that traditional knowledge applied directly. When we went to Danny C's site that he suggested and found not only lots of char, but something that you didn't see in other sites, that was so special to be a part of first-hand."* —Paden Lennie (Parks Canada)

Frank Dillon first started working on Dolly Varden assessment programs since 2009 and has participated annually as a community lead on the program in Ivvavik National Park. Frank always treats the land with utmost respect based on values taught by Elders and other harvesters in the community. Through all of his work in this program and others, Frank has earned the respect of the AHTC Board as one of the community's key knowledge holders and advisors to inform harvest and monitoring decisions.

*"Always when you get more than enough for yourself, you always distribute it out to those Elders who can't go out and do what they love to do... Every time my son goes out, I always tell him: 'Give out your catch, you'll have better luck next time.'" —Frank Dillon*

*"Frank is such a good, dedicated worker. He's not only working to gain his knowledge and share his knowledge, but he makes HTC deadly. So, when he's deadly, we're deadly!" —Michelle Gruben*

Several other community members have also participated in this program over the years, receiving training and sharing their knowledge and observations with the community. The benefits of this long history of training participants from Akṭarvik were evident in 2016 when community members from Akṭarvik led every aspect of the fieldwork at the Big Fish River 'Fish Hole'. They also showed a new participant how to catch, tag, and record the information.

*"Community members all say, 'Why do we always have to get someone from DFO? How come they just can't do it, our own community members?' So, finally that year there was Frank Dillon, Deon Arey, Danny Gordon Jr, and Lee John Meyook. They went out and did this project all on their own. That goes to show: over 30 years of the claim and it's about time! Our Inuvialuit members did this on their own. And then every year it's getting better. Every year, it's getting better and better."* —Michelle Gruben



**Ivvavik was established under the Inuvialuit Final Agreement to ensure that this biologically and culturally important area was protected. It was the first national park to be created through a land claim settlement in Canada. The Inuvialuit and the Federal Government work together to manage the land, animals, habitats, and operations of all the National Parks in the Western Arctic.**



► **TOP:** Frank Dillon, Colin Gallagher, Ellen Lea and Paden Lennie at the Firth River. **BOTTOM:** Upper Firth River including aufeis. Photos by Ellen Lea.



(TOP-BOTTOM): Desiree Arey at Shingle Point (by Colin Gallagher); Jordan McLeod sampling char at Shingle Point (by Colin Gallagher); Sam McLeod and Edward McLeod fishing at Qikiqtaruk (by Ellen Lea).



### MONITORING DOLLY VARDEN FISHERIES ALONG THE YUKON COAST

Following break-up each spring, many Akłarvik harvesters travel westward along the Yukon coast to their summer camps for harvesting, vacation, and time away on the land. While harvesters are setting nets from the shore mostly for herring (Arctic cisco), Dolly Varden are also caught along the coast during their summer feeding migration. The Dolly Varden captured along the coast can come from various river systems, even ones from Alaska, as the populations mix together over the summer.

Since 2011, Jordan McLeod has been consistently hired by the AHTC to collect biological and catch information from community harvesters at Shingle Point, along with a team of community monitors and DFO biologists. The training over the years has resulted in a transition towards greater independence and leadership. The field program is currently led entirely by the community, through Jordan, junior monitors, and another community team collecting ecosystem information under the Arctic Coastal Ecosystem Survey. Jordan has also participated in the WSWG for years, becoming the Chair in 2012.

*“I’m most proud to see our own Inuvialuit taking on these larger roles. To see our own people do it—that makes me proud, makes HTC proud, makes this community proud. And it makes that person proud, because they know they can do it. And to see that pride on their face makes me say, ‘Oh you know, right on!’” —Michelle Gruben*

Inuvialuit Park Rangers at Qikiqtaruk (Herschel Island) Territorial Park, in addition to their other duties, have also been working with DFO since 2011 to collect biological samples and catch information from Dolly Varden harvested during summer. Yukon Territorial Parks and AHTC have worked together over the years to run 'on-the-land' programs at Qikiqtaruk, with youth, Elders, and other community participants. These programs continue to be a valuable opportunity to share knowledge on this area's importance to Inuvialuit culture and history.



► **“Qikiqtaruk is a place of harvest for Inuvialuit, and as a territorial park we continue to co-manage through harvest and sampling data for AHTC and DFO through the IFA and Park Management Plan.” —Richard Gordon (Yukon Territorial Parks)**

**REESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY HARVEST AT THE BIG FISH RIVER**

Accessible by dog team or snowmobile, the Big Fish River fish hole area in the Richardson Mountains is an important traditional harvesting area for the community of Aklavik. Due to conservation concerns with observations of population declines by the community and co-management partners, the Big Fish River and all of its tributaries, including the fish holes, have been closed to fishing in the *Northwest Territories Fishery Regulations* since 1987.

**“[The Big Fish River has] traditionally been where everybody fished for char. People are trying to maintain their ties to the land, to where we’ve been before, and we like to continue to see tradition stay because our membership in Aklavik is pretty traditional. We like to keep things going if we can. So, I think that’s good because it lets our young people know: this is where my dad fished, my grandpa fished, and that’s important to us.”**

*—Billy Storr*



A number of research and monitoring initiatives have been undertaken through the WSWG to better understand the habitat and size, characteristics, and dynamics of the Big Fish River population. Although the population has been lower than historical levels as observed through traditional knowledge, it showed stability through the early 2010s. All available scientific and traditional knowledge was brought forward through the WSWG to establish a safe harvest level and design a monitoring program for summer harvesting at the mouth of the Big Fish River, beginning in 2012.

The AHTC, representing the interests of their community membership-at-large, continued to advocate for harvesting at the Big Fish River fish holes. Through the community's commitment to the sustainable management and monitoring of the population through the WSWG, the AHTC has led a community harvest at the fish holes each fall since 2014.

A team of harvesters, including youth and Elders, was selected by the AHTC each fall to lead this community harvest at the fish holes. Following the harvest, the team have brought the fish back to Aktauvik for distribution to Elders and other community members to enjoy. One of the highlights of these harvests is the opportunity to listen to Elders share their traditional knowledge of the area, describing the area's importance and how things have changed over time. In some cases, this was done formally through interviews, but more often it was done informally through conversation over a warm meal shared inside a canvas tent. The AHTC team also worked closely with DFO and FJMC staff to record biological information from the harvest, often late into the night by the light of headlamps and lanterns.

*"They usually get the same people, so they know the same procedures and practices and how to do the job right and safely. It's a big thing, safety. So, they're doing awesome. They're really good when they come back, and they report their findings—you know, they'll do a comparison of how it was this year compared to last year or...five years ago. It's always good to have the same person doing it. Even if you bring other people on... that way we have consistency and they can see how it was back then compared to today."*  
—Allen Kogiak

While this community harvest approach has been a success over the years, the membership wanted this to transition further towards a traditional harvest where harvesters travelled out to the area independently. In 2020, the AHTC developed a management and monitoring plan under the WSWG, including how they would allocate the safe harvest level to anyone under their membership who expressed an

interest in fishing at the fish holes. This harvest plan was supported through the co-management process, providing the opportunity for harvesters to fish out there on their own and report back on their total catch.

*"As Inuvialuit, we're taught not to over-harvest. I think that's why Aktauvik HTC kept pushing to get it open at the Big Fish River fish hole. And today, I'm proud to say that our community members could look forward to fishing there on their own."* —Michelle Gruben ▼

Quyanaqpak to the many community members who have led and participated in these programs over the years; the Aktauvik Hunters and Trappers Committee for their ongoing leadership; and the Fisheries Joint Management Committee, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Parks Canada for their continued support for these important programs.

We encourage you to get in touch with your local Hunters and Trappers Committee for more information on ways to get involved if you are interested in participating in similar programs in your community.



(TOP-BOTTOM): Danny C. Gordon at Big Fish River harvest; Peter Archie, Stephanie Charlie, Desiree Arey and Danny C. Gordon at Big Fish River; Big Fish River fish hole 2019 team. Photos by Ellen Lea.

**"Don't be scared to learn. If there's ever a time you get to try something new, don't hesitate. Working with fish, I didn't know how but if it wasn't for trying, I'd never know. You never know unless you try."** —J.D. Storr