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Arctic Village Is Torn by Plan for Oil Drilling



A Village Divided: A plan to begin offshore drilling next year could change the way of life for the Inupiat Eskimos of Point Hope, Alaska.

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#) and [ERIK OLSEN](#)
Published: October 25, 2011

POINT HOPE, Alaska — He once hurled harpoons at whales, but on this platinum afternoon beside the Arctic Ocean he swung a 5-iron at a frustrating little ball.

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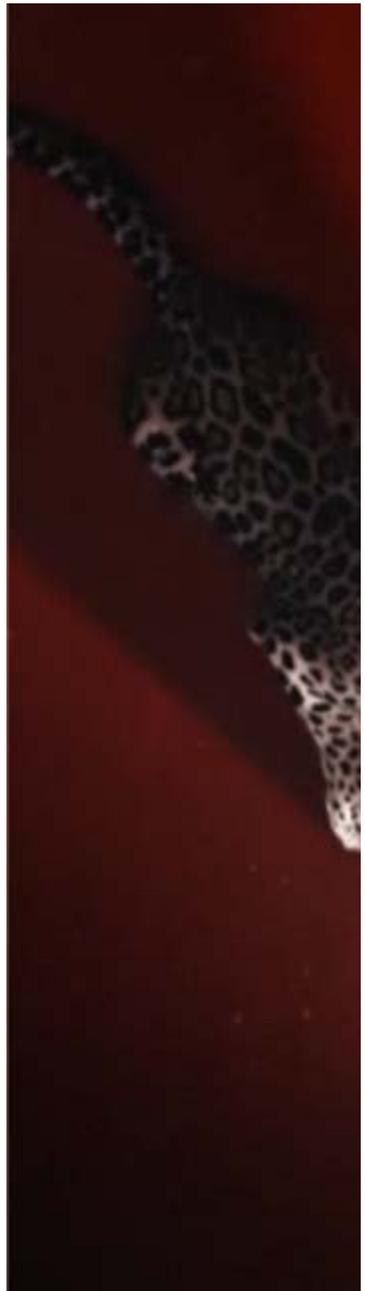
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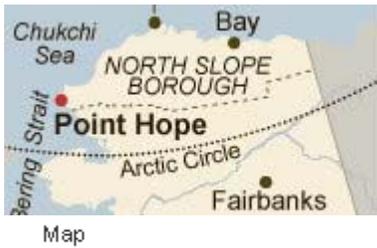
“I think that one would have hit the green,” said Sayers Tuzrolyuk, 65, finally striking a clean, straight drive, “if there was a green.”

No, there is not yet a golf course here, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle, just a daunting expanse of rough and



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the world's most challenging water hazard — an ocean that holds one of the largest remaining [oil](#) reserves in the United States but buries it in ice and darkness for much of the year.

“One of these days we’re going to get a course here,” Mr. Tuzrolyuk said. “We’ve just got to get enough guys interested. What do they say, ‘If you make it, they will come’?”

Sure enough, many things that once seemed improbable in this place so far away and unforgiving have now become central to its existence, including the smooth commercial landing strip built beside the collapsing sod houses some elders here were born in, and the satellite dishes looming over polar bear skins drying on front porches. Now, however, the striking blend of old and new, and the relative ease with which people here navigate it, are being tested by the strongest push yet to drill for oil offshore.

Perhaps more than any other village in the Arctic, Point Hope has a history of uniting against outside forces and, if not prevailing over them, at least outlasting them. Now it is divided. Mr. Tuzrolyuk is chairman of the \$30 million [Tikigaq Corporation](#) here, one of more than 200 native corporations in Alaska authorized by Congress. The corporation, whose shareholders are mostly village residents, supports

drilling. Yet the Native Village of Point Hope, whose council is elected by village residents, officially opposed drilling.

“Our town,” Mr. Tuzrolyuk said, “we’re kind of torn apart between development and sustaining our lifestyle.”

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With the Obama administration having lifted a moratorium on [offshore drilling](#) in the Arctic and elsewhere, Shell Oil has received preliminary permits to drill exploratory wells off the coast of Alaska as soon as next summer. The government says that as many as 27 billion barrels of oil could be produced, more than has been produced by Alaska's Prudhoe Bay oil fields since they were discovered in 1968. The State of Alaska projects that as many as 50,000 jobs could be created in the region in the coming decades. Fewer than 10,000 people live in the coastal regions of Arctic Alaska.

Yet Shell's rigs would work in the same sea where people here have hunted migrating endangered bowhead whales for thousands of years and still do, trekking from this thin spit in the Chukchi Sea across the frozen ocean each spring and slipping into the water in sealskin boats, deliberately doing things traditionally even as they have embraced change in other ways. The whale was why people were able to survive here, and it is still the emotional anchor of the culture. People worry intensely that offshore drilling would hurt the bowhead population — and that a spill could destroy it.

"That's our garden out there," Susie Frankson, 65, said. "Don't mess with our garden."

The most vocal people here are those who oppose drilling. They worry over how much more pressure their ancient, already compromised culture can take. But plenty also think their continued survival will depend on trying to profit from oil.

Few people publicly say they support it, but many say it is inevitable. The region has yet to find a viable economic alternative to oil.

North Slope Borough, the local government based in Barrow that presides over Point Hope and other Arctic villages, depends on onshore production from the aging Prudhoe Bay fields for more than 95 percent of its revenues. But onshore production is declining, and the [Trans-Alaska Pipeline](#) is operating at a third of its capacity.

"Our Inupiat people acknowledge and recognize that, and it's a very tough, tough call to make," said Mayor Edward S. Itta of North Slope Borough, whose term ends next month.

Mr. Itta said that the borough had pressed Shell to improve its spill-response capabilities, to shut down its operations during the fall whale

hunt, not to discharge drilling waste into the ocean and to hire local residents.

“All I’ve ever tried to do is strike a balance so that mitigation measures are put in to protect our way of life,” the mayor said.

In the 1840s, commercial whalers from New England and elsewhere came here and started a brutal industry from the bowheads. But when the outsiders sought to establish a station to process whale oil for use as fuel, Point Hope forced them to do so five miles away, at a place that came to be called Jabbertown for all the languages spoken by the immigrant workers there.

“The hunger for oil,” said Steven Oomittuk, the mayor of Point Hope, “our ancestors went through it before.”

A century after commercial whaling began, the physicist [Edward Teller](#), a proponent of nuclear weapons, aggressively pursued in the late 1950s what now seems like a farfetched scheme: Mr. Teller wanted to detonate a series of nuclear bombs in the coastline at Cape Thompson, about 20 miles south of Point Hope, with the goal of carving out a grand Arctic port.

Supported by college professors and others who determined that Point Hope could be devastated by nuclear fallout, the village became a cause for a national environmental movement. The eventual rejection of Mr. Teller’s plan, known as Project Chariot, is described in the book “The Firecracker Boys,” by the historian Dan O’Neill.

Residents here are acutely aware of their history of resistance, and it is common to hear people say they will also fight off Shell. Once again, national environmental groups have highlighted their cause, and lawsuits are pending. But a vocal village opponent of drilling, Carolyn Cannon, lost her seat on the Village Council in elections this month, and she was also defeated in a bid for a seat on the broader North Slope Borough Assembly.

Several people said Ms. Cannon’s management style, not her message of opposition, had been responsible for her loss. She did not respond to several requests for an interview.

Lily Tuzroyluk, who is executive director of the Native Village (and a distant relative of Mr. Tuzroyluk of the village corporation), said the council was encouraging the village corporation to support alternative

energy, not fossil fuels. The Tikigaq Corporation, which uses Point Hope's original Inupiat name, already has a small contract with Shell to monitor vessel traffic and subsistence hunting in the Arctic and hopes for more work.

Corporation leaders say oil and other resource development are the best ways, at least for now, to continue providing dividends to residents, which sometimes amount to several thousand dollars per person per year.

"We do love our whale, but it's such a small percentage of what we live on now," Sayers Tuzroyluk said. "If I had a choice to go back to the way things used to be, I probably would go back. But we can never go back."

A version of this article appeared in print on October 26, 2011, on page A15 of the New York edition with the headline: Arctic Village Is Torn by Plan For Oil Drilling.

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