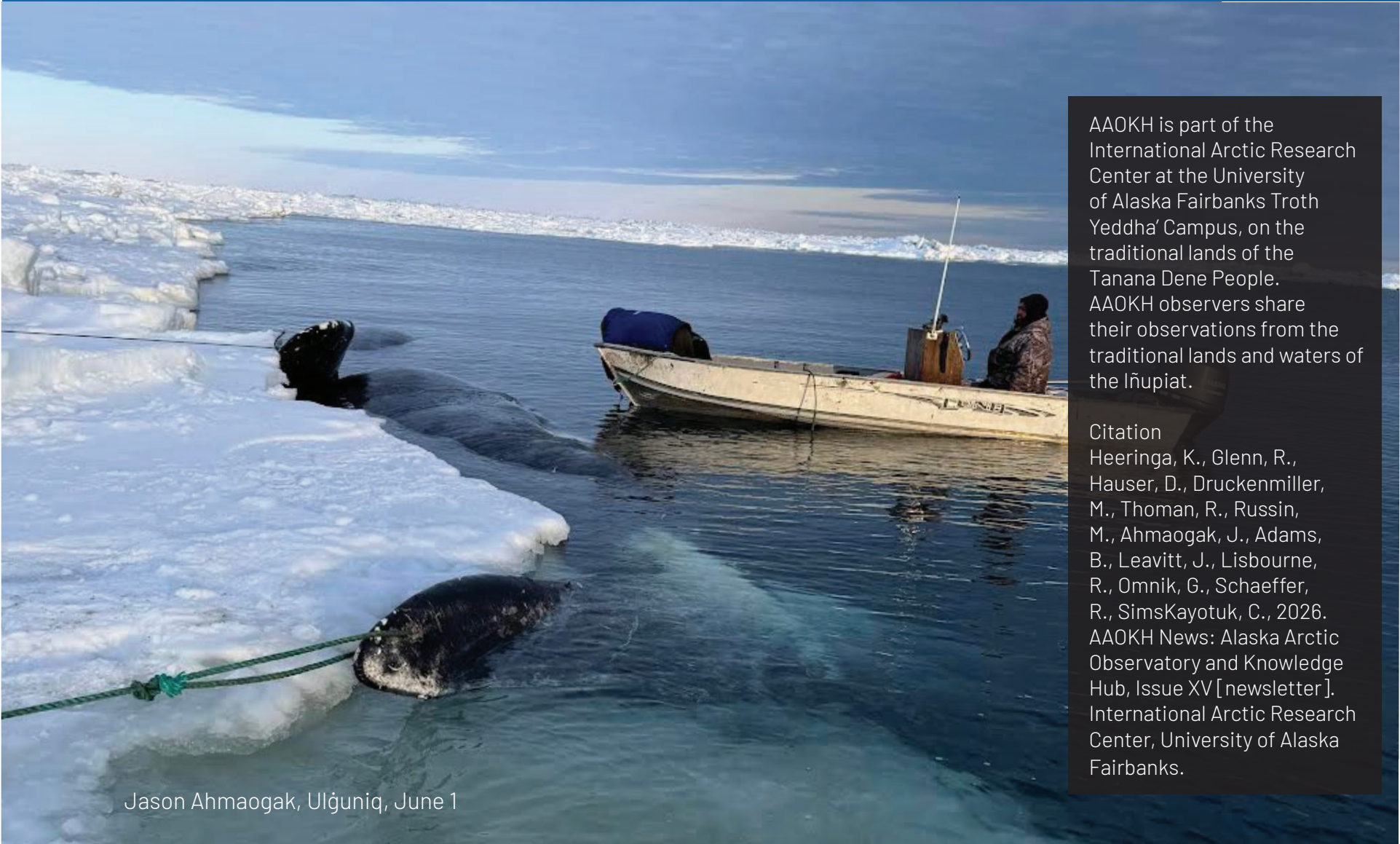


AAOKH NEWS

Issue 15, Summer 2026

Alaska Arctic Observatory and Knowledge Hub



Jason Ahmaogak, Ulġuniq, June 1

AAOKH is part of the International Arctic Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Troth Yedha' Campus, on the traditional lands of the Tanana Dene People. AAOKH observers share their observations from the traditional lands and waters of the Iñupiat.

Citation
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Inupiaq: Paġlagivsi! AAOKH-kuayaat itchaksraniñ nunaaqiniñ, talimat malġuk qiniqtit. Qiniqtuġuurut ukiupaiqtuġu. Nunaaqqiruallu, naipiqtuqtillu iġsaqtuallu taputaurut tavruuna qimilguurit ilaumiut uvuuna maqpigaakun. Tikisaksragivut uvva: Tunulliqsuglugit naipiqtuqtuat aglaanigunlu. Savalgusiglugich ikayuġniagivut iñuuniagvinisat irrusiat. Aulaqisaagmilugich iġsaasranjich nunaaqich iġsaqtinijtsalu aularinjalu.

English: Greetings! AAOKH has seven active community-based observers in six coastal Arctic Alaska communities. These individuals make observations throughout the year, playing an important role in understanding Arctic Alaska's changing environment. AAOKH's team includes observers, students, and scientists.

In this Issue:

- Key observing themes from this past spring and summer included high winds and cold temperatures (January-March) and warm June temperatures. Several observers noted healthy catches of caribou and ugruk (bearded seals), while the abundance and health of different species of fish was a mixed experience.
- In this issue we profile spring whaling conditions in Utqiagvik, recap ocean monitoring data in Kotzebue, provide updates on AAOKH inspired curriculum development, and highlight some of the contributors of AAOKH including Billy Adams and Rick Thoman.
- We are thrilled to announce the launch of the AAOKH Endowment!



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Recent Observations



Carla SimsKayotuk, Qaaktuḡvik, March 10



Carla SimsKayotuk, Qaaktuḡvik, February 10



Robert Lisbourne, Kali, January 6

Cold winter temperatures with persistent high winds

Carla SimsKayotuk (Qaaktuḡvik) January 7 - Cold wind with ground blowing snow that was making drifts wherever it could find to make some. Some apps said wind chills of -55°F and/or -75°F. Mine reported -55°F, either way super cold, everyone still having issues with frozen equipment.

Guy Omnik (Tikiḡaq) February 4 - Day 3 of the north wind storm. -2°F Looks like clear skies, north winds 40-45mph with gusts over 50mph. I believe half the town has no power due to high winds. 3 days of constant high winds and blowing snow.

Robert Lisbourne (Kali) February 25 - We've been having blizzard after blizzard.

Jason Ahmaogak (Ulḡuniq) March 6 - Good to see the caribou nearby again, majority of them look healthy after surviving the coldest winter we've had in years.

Bobby Schaeffer (Qikiqtaḡruk) March 18 - It's blowing from the West again. 25 with gusts to 36. Although it is clear, the blowing snow and wind chills make for a "stay home" kind of day. Wind chills to minus 50°F.

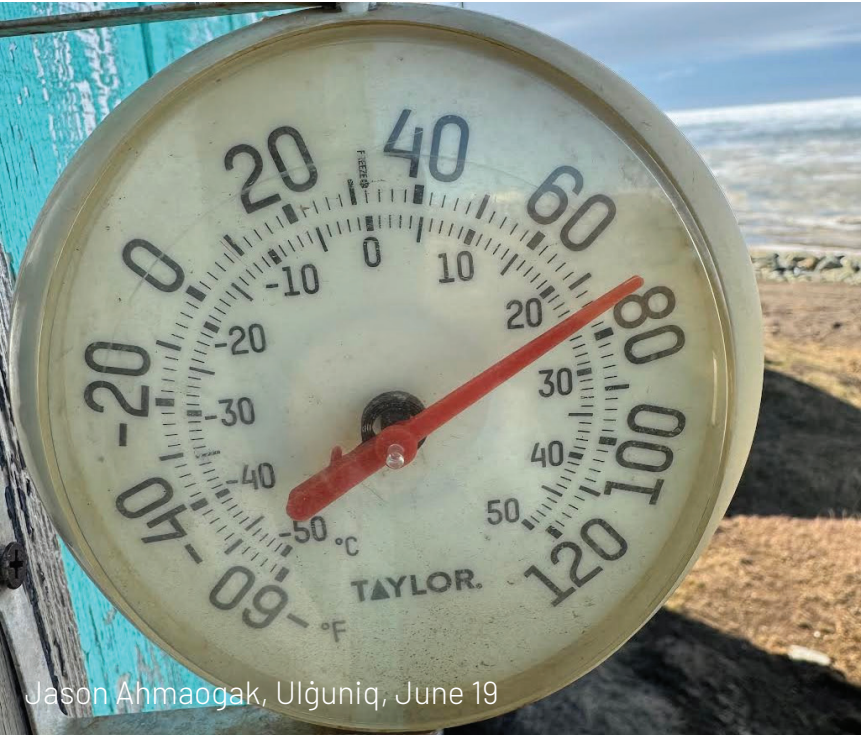
Carla SimsKayotuk (Qaaktuḡvik) March 1 - Well, that storm was something else, gusts as high as 85 mph out of the west, loose wet snow blowing so hard it was very hard to see. Had to watch for pole lights or buildings when gusts would slow down for a second. Many homes' doors were drifted over and had to either climb out their windows or wait for someone to come dig them out.

Billy Adams (Utqiaḡvik) March 16 - The temperatures have been cooler than recent years ranging from -30°F to -25°F and wind chills to -60°F to -70°F have been here. We are hopeful for winds to shift to the east so that open leads will direct whalers where to make trails.

Hot June temperatures

Bobby Schaeffer (Qikiqtaḡruk) June 25 - We haven't had rain for nearly a month. Not good for the berries and greens. In fact, NWS has an advisory out for extreme fire danger for all of NW Alaska. BLM is presently fighting a fire near Ambler. Smoke jumpers were flown in yesterday along with planes that dump water on fires to slow its advancement. Upper Kobuk is experiencing 80°F degree temperatures.

Jason Ahmaogak (Ulḡuniq) June 19 - Been a hot few days light winds and sunshine winds E NE 5mph been in the upper 60's the past few days today is the hottest though good time to harvest eggs our inlet is really flowing now.



Jason Ahmaogak, Ulḡuniq, June 19

Variable fish health

Guy Omnik (Tikiġaq) February 17 - Fishing daily for the last 5 days has been great, some days were slow fishing in fact I even skunked one day (0 fish). But to finally catch tom cod (blue cod I think) has been fun. Last few years I didn't catch any tomcod at all.

Bobby Schaeffer (Qikiqtaġruk) June 1 - I caught a 40 inch Shee and it was starving to death. It had nothing in its stomach and it was, by far, the skinniest large Shee I have seen. The herring usually bless the lake with their presence by this time but, for the first time that I can remember, no Spring herring showed up in the lake.

Jason Ahmaogak (Ulġuniq) July 31 - I set my salmon net out n harvested 3 pink salmon from the oceanside all were healthy finally some fresh ocean salmon.



Jason Ahmaogak, Ulġuniq, July 23



Guy Omnik, Tikiġaq, February 28

Challenging whaling conditions

Joe Leavitt (Utqiagvik) May 20 - Most whalers have put away their gear for whaling. Bad ice condition on the lead edge, too rough and not enough flat areas to pull up big whales. Still have few crews on the lead edge. Lots of people have gone geese hunting. Still no whales for Barrow. The ice needs to break off close to the shore to get better ice (thicker) to pull up big whales.

Robert Lisbourne (Kali) May 22 - This has been the windiest spring whaling for Point Lay. Crews have put their whaling gear away due to river water flowing into our lagoon. Hunters are out there inland hunting geese.



Billy Adams, Utqiagvik, March 16



Jason Ahmaogak, Ulġuniq, June 26



Guy Omnik, Tikiġak, June 2

Healthy ugruk and caribou

Billy Adams (Utqiagvik) January 19 - Healthy [caribou] bulls linger together, a few are taken for fresh meat.

Jason Amaogak (Ulġuniq) March 6 - Good to see the caribou nearby again, majority of them look healthy after surviving the coldest winter we've had in years.

Guy Omnik (Tikiġaq) June 2 - Good day out in the ocean. Nice and healthy *ugruk* [bearded seal]. South beach was still blocked in with ice. All boats docking on the north side beach, less then quarter mile to the lead on the ice.

Bobby Schaeffer (Qikiqtaġruk) June 18 - I talked to a few hunters and they said the *ugruk* [bearded seal] are in better health this year. Last year, it was hard to find fat, healthy ones. A lot harvested had low blubber content. This Spring, most say that the *ugruk* are a lot fatter. Obviously, they had good feeding in the Bering Sea during the winter.

Jason Ahmaogak (Ulġuniq) June 25 - Beautiful weather the last few days. We had success with *ugruk* [bearded seal] both nice and healthy, with full stomachs of clams/ shrimp/octopus and many other small creatures. Beach is now ice free in front of Wainwright.

Trails to the Whales

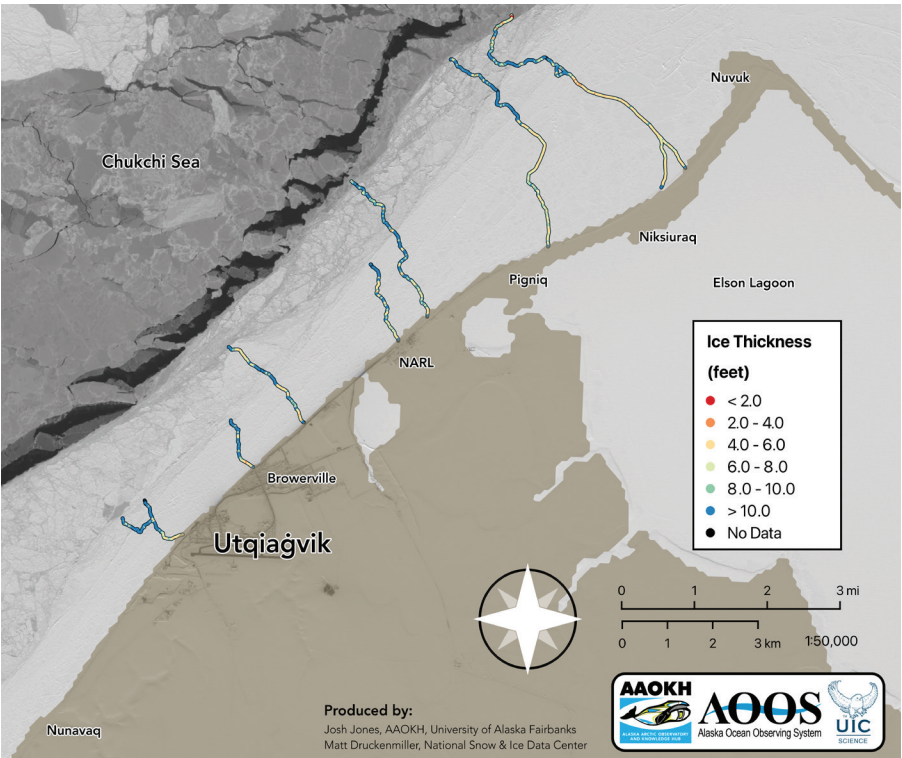


“Hard working whalers making a trail to the lead edge”.
Billy Adams, 4.16.2026

Challenging conditions plagued this past season’s ice trails for spring whaling in Utqiagvik. Strong west winds from January to March created rough trail conditions. A large shear wall (*agiuppak*) developed in front of Utqiagvik mid March. Several trails to the south were paused or abandoned due to very rough ridged ice that attached in late winter. Hunters noted some dangerous spots marked by big cracks and refrozen water on the ice and few suitable locations at the edge for hauling up a harvested whale. North and NE winds in April and May created rough water in the big open lead, keeping whalers off the ice and out of the water. Only one whale was harvested in June in Utqiagvik.

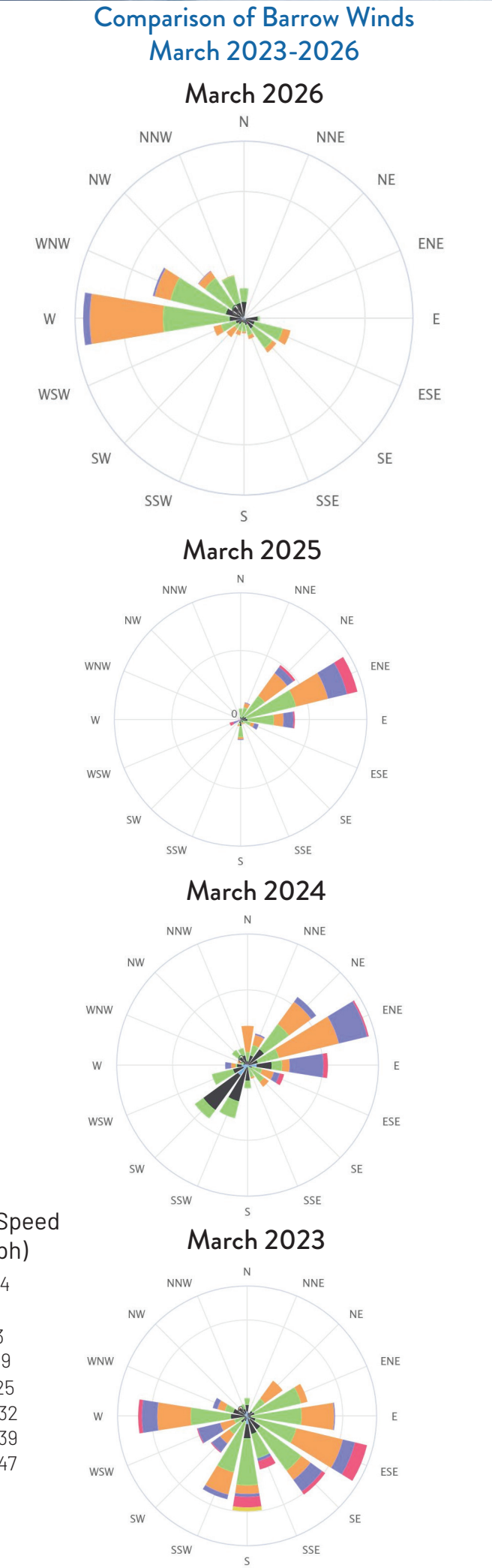
Utqiagvik Ice Trails as of April 7, 2026

These trail maps are produced with support from the Alaska Ocean Observing Systems and in-kind support from UIC Sience



“We had severe westerly winds that created a lot of ice ridging throughout the winter, and we were at least 3 weeks late to get to the open lead. The migration of the bowhead whales was early this year. The migration trend has been that way in the last few years. And we felt that had a very big impact on trail building. Only two or three trails may have been successful reaching the open lead, but at a very late time. The timing was felt.”

-Billy Adams reflects on spring whaling conditions



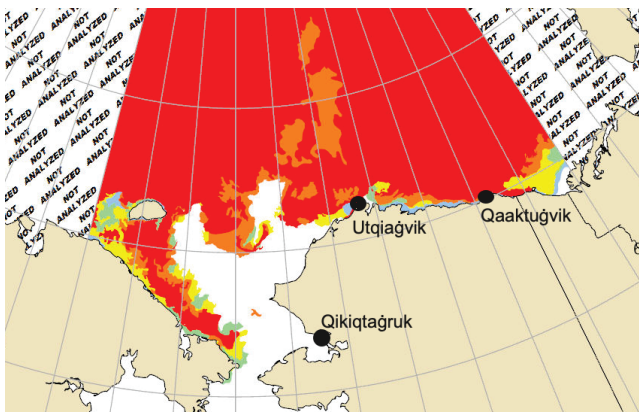
Weather & Climate

Summer sea ice extent

Spring and early summer sea ice meltout was close to normal in northern Bering Sea, but farther north it was a different story. Ice largely cleared the Tikigaq area by the end of June but remnant ice persisted in Kotzebue Sound into the second week of July. Ice conditions were variable at Utqiagvik starting in mid-July. Barges were delayed by high concentration ice into early August. Sea ice melt along the Beaufort Sea coast was later than many recent years and near Qaaktugvik moderate to high ice concentrations persisted through late August. Overall, sea ice extent in the Chukchi Sea was the highest since 1994, while in the Beaufort Sea ice extent was the highest since 2006. Ice loss was rapid in early and mid-August and by the end of the month ice extent was similar to some recent years.

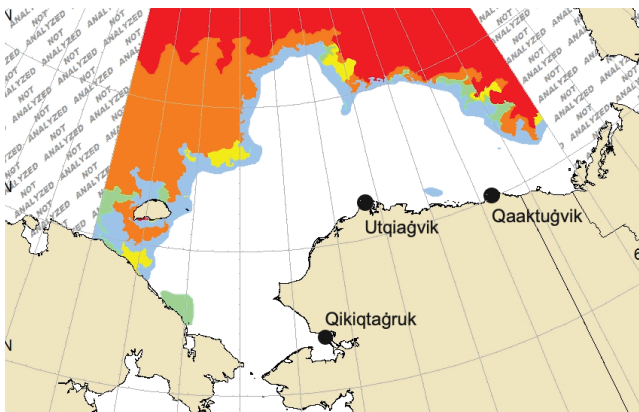
Daily Sea Ice Concentration Analysis
NWS Alaska Sea Ice Program

August 1, 2026



August 1, 2019

- Confidence
High to Moderate
- Less than 1 Tenth
 - 1-3 Tenths
 - 4-6 Tenths
 - 7-8 Tenths
 - 9-10 Tenths
 - Fast Ice
 - Ice Free



A note from our weather & climate contributor Rick Thoman

Utqiagvik is one of the longest operating weather and climate stations in Alaska, with the Weather Bureau station opening in the fall of 1920. The station at Qikiqtaġruk opened in the early 1940s. The recent removal of staff from the NWS offices and now mothballing of the rural Alaska Flight Service stations means that the continuation of weather observations are now entirely reliant on equipment and communication systems that sometimes fail, often during storms and occasionally for long periods of time. The situation at stations in other communities is equally shaky. Periodically missing observations creates gaps that make a full understanding of the environmental situation difficult, underscoring the importance of community observations. As Elders everywhere have said, “the government won’t always be here to help us, we must do it ourselves”. And we see how this includes keeping track of what’s happening in our environment.

In a similar vein, the Arctic Report Card has been published each autumn since 2006, reporting on environmental conditions in the previous year. However, on August 10, NOAA terminated funding for this widely used report. As the country’s only Arctic state, the Report Card is especially valuable to Alaska, not because the report card was solely focused on Alaska, but because it was an up-to-date source of information on what was happening in Alaska and elsewhere in the Arctic. Despite the loss of NOAA support, the independent editor and more than 100 volunteer authors are committed to seeing the 2026 Arctic Report Card to completion and are already working to develop support for 2027 and beyond.

Observer Corner

Our foundation of almost 20 years of AAOKH research in Utqiagvik could not have been possible without Billy Aġnaq Adams who has been working with AAOKH since 2014. Billy has been able to share valuable guidance and insight to AAOKH research and our vision for future work through his leadership in North Slope communities and deep knowledge of coastal Arctic ecosystems and marine wildlife ecology. In addition to his extensive knowledge and experience he brings a sense of humor and light heartedness that keeps our collective work grounded and fun! He has also been able to sustain our relationship with North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management (NSB-DWM), currently as Deputy Director. Our foundation of almost 20 years of AAOKH research could not have been possible without building partnerships with key collaborators at the NSB-DWM, including Billy.

“We continue to see the animals to be healthy. We see that and their population numbers have been very good. And it tells us that the animals and the birds continue to adapt to these changes more than we can understand. But the rate of the change has made us think of what is going to happen next. As humans, we need to work together with our neighbors, to preserve cultural lives and to preserve the animals that we depend on.”



Sharing observations with the next generation

Our AAOKH team has been working with school district teachers and administrators to explore ways we can support place-based and culturally relevant lessons and activities through our work. In 2025, we started working with the North Slope Science teachers at Barrow High School, to develop activities for students to learn about local observations, Indigenous Knowledge, weather and ocean conditions, and Iñupiaq terms for key features and conditions in coastal Arctic environments. We visited the North Slope Science and Iñupiat Language classes in Utqiagvik in April of 2026 to pilot the developed lesson plans. These trips allowed us to refine and improve the materials and activities that will eventually be available on the AAOKH website for students and teachers to access.

In May this year we also recorded video interviews with key knowledge holders in Kotzebue to hear from them about topics related to Arctic survival, fishing in Kotzebue Sound and how to read ocean and river ice. These interviews will be included in lesson plans we have started to develop for the Northwest Arctic Borough School District.



Noor Johnson, ELOKA, March 2026

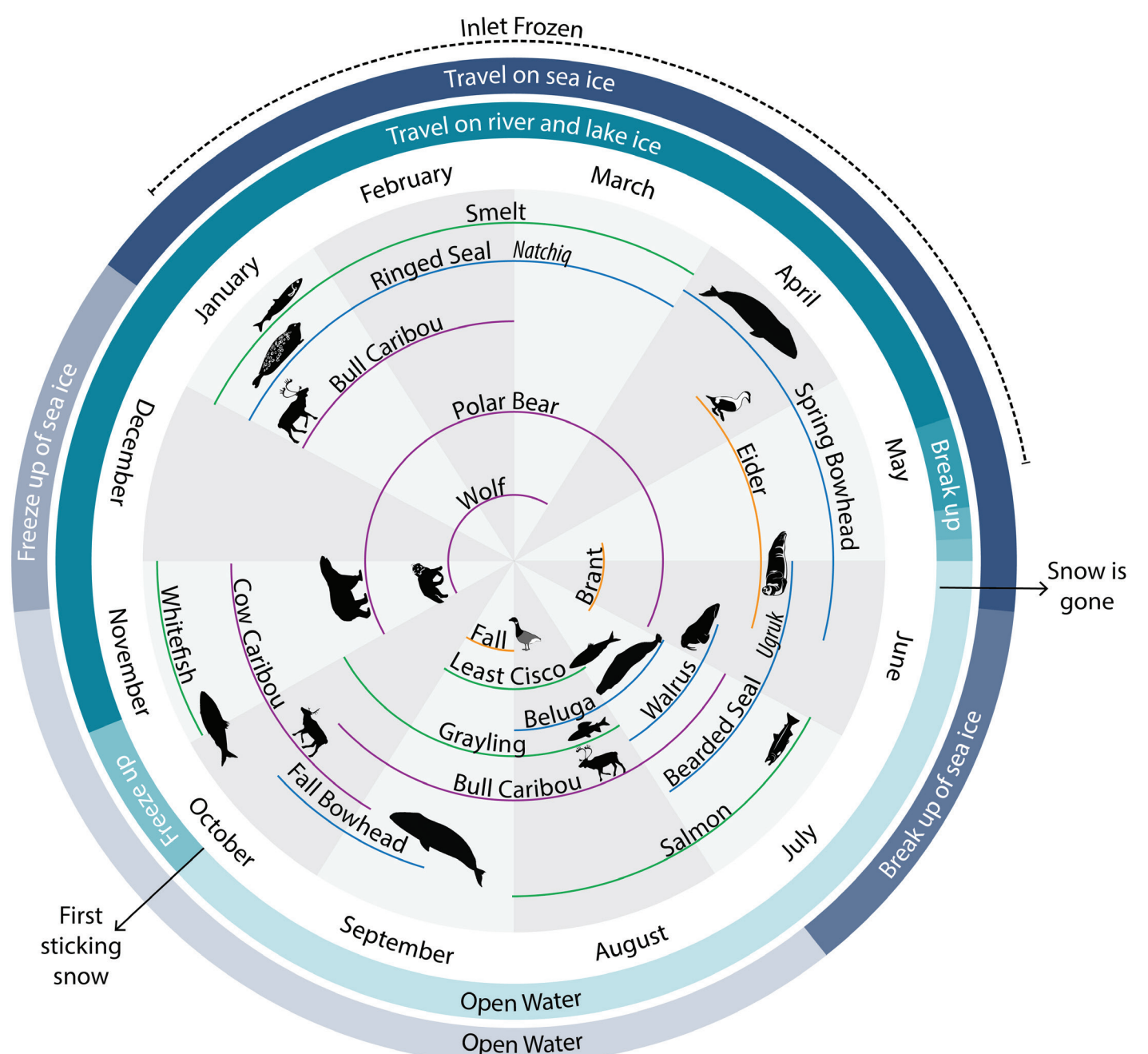
Explore AAOKH Community & Observer Profiles Online!

An important aspect of developing these lesson plans is providing context to observations in the database and help to communicate key differences in harvest calendars, community activities and seasonal cycles across varying geographies. Community profiles that introduce each of the current AAOKH observers and their communities are now available on our website that include video introductions of observers and seasonal calendars of important harvest activities identified by each observer.



Check out Jason Ahmaogak's profile and the other AAOKH observers on our website!

arctic-aok.org/communities-observers



Example of a seasonal calendar developed by Jason Ahmaogak depicting the "normal" timing of important harvest activities and seasonal events that occur in Ulguniq (Wainwright).

Qikiqtagruk Winter Ocean Monitoring

For the first time this winter, the underwater instrument placed in front of Kotzebue included a sensor that measured oxygen under the sea ice. Until now, we have been measuring water temperature and salinity beneath the ice. Measuring oxygen gives us another way to understand what is happening in the water during the ice-covered months. The water beneath the ice started winter 2026 much fresher than past winters we measured during 2019-2025. As the season continued, saltier ocean water moved in and out of the area.

Oxygen also changed throughout the winter. At times, oxygen levels changed along with salinity, but often followed a different pattern. We are only beginning to understand what is driving these changes and what they might mean for fish and other marine life beneath the ice.

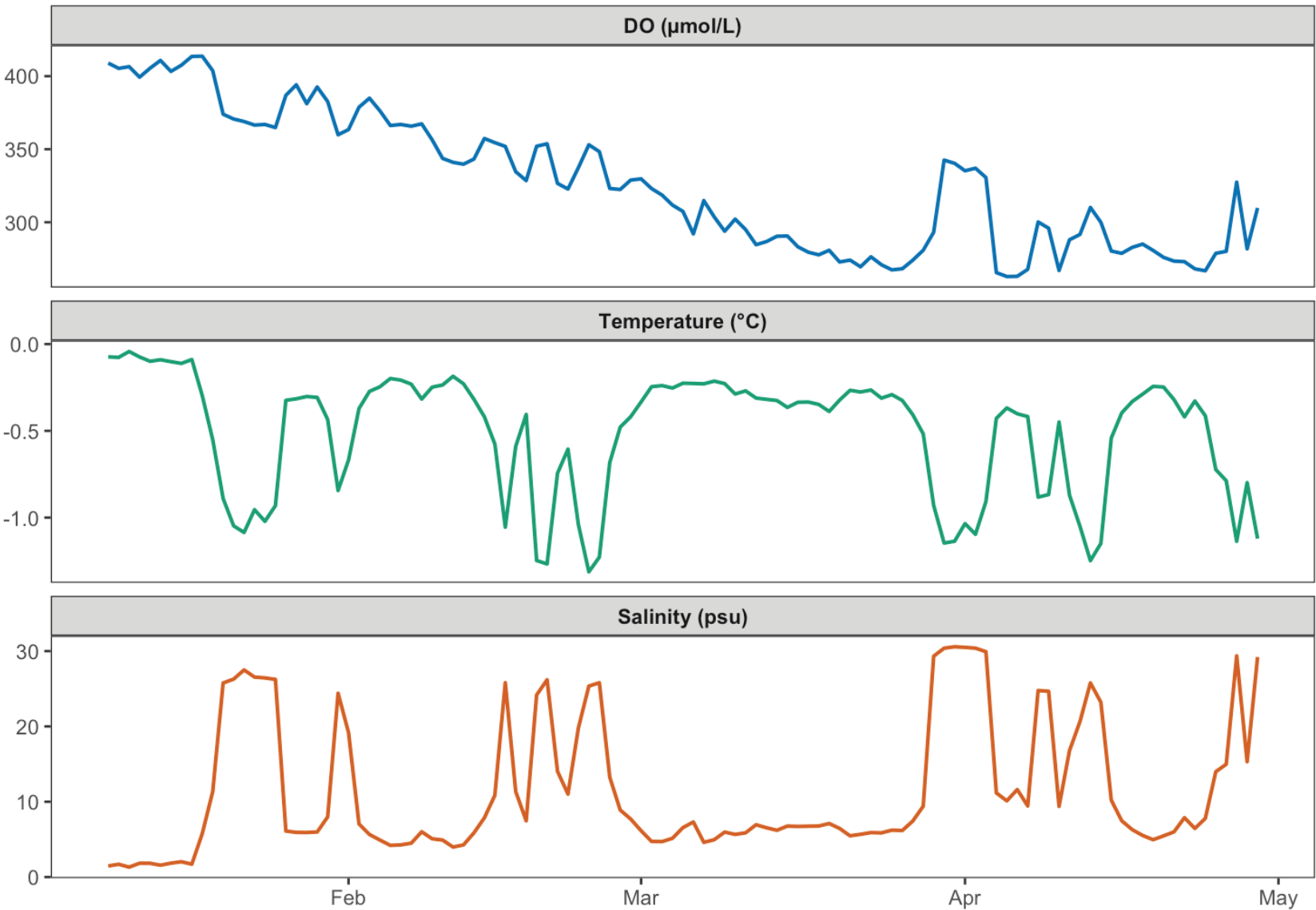
Bobby Schaeffer also documented an unusual winter at the surface. On January 27 he wrote: *"There hasn't been a smelt run in Kotzebue this year. Poor Tomcod fishing as well. I've been checking the fishing hot spots to see if the Tomcod and smelt came in during the last weeks storm surge. Nothing. Nobody got Tomcod and smelt this winter."*

We don't yet know whether water conditions and fishing observations are connected. Measuring oxygen alongside temperature and salinity gives us another way to investigate what was happening beneath the ice and to compare those measurements with AAOKH observations.



A catch of tomcod and smelt in December 2019 is a strong contrast to this past winter. Photo by Bobby Schaeffer

Winter 2026



Daily median dissolved oxygen, water temperature, and salinity measured at 11.5 ft depth beneath the sea ice in the channel near Kotzebue during January–April, 2026. This research is being supported by the North Pacific Research Board (Project No. 2406) in collaboration with the Native Village of Kotzebue.

Announcing the AAOKH Endowment

We have big news!

AAOKH recently launched the Alaska Arctic Observatory & Knowledge Hub Endowment Fund aimed at sustaining and strengthening Indigenous self-determination in Arctic research and Indigenous-led stewardship of the Alaska Arctic environment. We are so humbled and grateful to Cyd Hanns and the George family for their generous donation to help us establish this endowment in honor of the legacy of Dr. Craig George. In the words of Billy Adams, *“Doctor John Craighead George advocated for great research to be done by using elders, Indigenous people, and local experts that are out there. He’s made a big difference in many of our lives and influenced me a lot to be part of this [AAOKH]. He was a great bowhead whale biologist, and I know he’s amongst the best in the world. I learned a lot from him, how to be a man and how to live. This was a very special man in my life.”*

We aim to continue building on this foundation to support true and equitable collaboration with Alaska Arctic people and communities.

You can help us build on this collaborative network of Inupiaq observers across coastal Arctic Alaska, by giving now to the AAOKH Endowment Fund. Contact us directly if you have specific ideas about your interests in supporting AAOKH’s mission and vision.

To donate go to arctic-aok.org/support-us/ and click on ‘Give Now’



- Observers
- ✓ Staff & Steering Group

Who we are

Observer and science activities are guided by a volunteer steering group composed of Indigenous and allied advisors aligned with the AAOKH mission and vision. Members include Kimberly Kivvaq Pikok (Utqiagvik), Alex Whiting (Kotzebue), Lee Kayotuk (Kaktovik), Qaiyaan Harcharek (Utqiagvik), Claudine Hauri (UAF), Margaret Anamaq Rudolph (UAF), Vera Metcalf (Sitḡasuaq), Henry Huntington (Anchorage), and Jessica Black (UAF). Program activities are led by UAF researchers and staff Donna Hauser, Roberta Tuurraq Glenn, Krista Heeringa, Julia McMahon, and Josh Jones.

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