Cold Front

BY LOUISE JOHNCOX

How global warming is having a startling impact on the Inuit's ability to survive

Iqaluit is a remote frozen outpost off Baffin Island, northern Canada, with a population of fewer than 400. As I step off the plane into minus 25 degrees C, the icy cold hits me hard on the cheeks. I've travelled to this isolated community in Nunavut, Canada's newest and largest federal territory, to stay with an Inuit family.

On first impressions, the wooden houses resemble large sheds—square, flat-roofed and with small windows. Inside, it is so warm I rip off my balaclava, hat and two layers of extreme-weather gear.

According to the Nunavut Housing Corporation, only 28 per cent of people in Nunavut own their own homes. (In the rest of Canada, it's 63 per cent.) The cost of living is steep too: a typical house is £740 a month to rent and fuel is expensive. The minimum wage is £5.30 an hour and jobs are hard to find.

My hosts own their home, which has a comfy living room with two sofas and a TV. They are Ragelee and Silasie Angnako, both 75, the parents of Billy Arnaquq, a hunter and an organiser of tours of the region. Billy, 51, lives next door with his wife Daisy, 48, a school office manager, and their children.

I'm here to find out how the Inuit are being affected by

Billy Arnaquq: "We know it's getting warmer"

climate change. "One thing we know for sure is that it's getting warmer," says Billy, "which means there's an earlier melting season. For a number of years we keep seeing weather records broken. Last summer was the warmest I've experienced in Qikiqtarjuaq. Temperatures have even gone as high as 30 degrees in Pangnirtung, where children now go swimming—not something we did when I was growing up." Billy was born in a traditional Inuit camp south of Pangnirtung, moving to Qikiqtarjuaq in 1980.

Clockwise from left: Billy and Daisy; the family cabin; Auyuittuq National Park

The climate hasn't just become warmer, but more unpredictable. "The Elders used to be able to foretell the weather, but now they find it increasingly hard," he says. "I've noticed stronger winds and more storms. And for some years now it doesn't seem as cold in January and February as it used to be, but in March it becomes very cold for two weeks."

THERE'S BEEN A **DRAMATIC INCREASE IN** MOSQUITOES IN THE ARCTIC SUMMER

Flash floods last summer caused two bridges to collapse in the region: one at Windy Lake in Baffin Island's Auyuittuq National Park, where more than 20 visitors had to be evacuated by helicopter. The high June temperatures had boosted the amount of melt water in the park—ironic given that Auyuittuq means "The Land That Never Melts".

"The ice used to melt in early August when I was a boy," says Billy. "Now it's gone at the end of June or the first week in July. It used to freeze in early October and now sometimes that doesn't happen until November."

Most Inuit in Qikiqtarjuaq remain involved in seal hunting and fishing. Some hunt for caribou, which can take two days to reach. In recent years, changes in the ice have led to more accidents. Billy's brother-in-law Juilie, a full-time hunter, was out hunting with his nephew and they became stranded after he failed to judge the conditions correctly. They had to be picked up by helicopter. Juilie's wife Geela, 43, speaks for many Inuit women: "I worry about my husband a lot more now when he is out hunting. He has hunted all his life and I hear from him how the ice is melting earlier and faster."

PHOTOS BY LOUISE JOHNCOX

The Inuit have such a close connection with the land that their health cannot be separated from the environment. The availability of processed foods and the decrease in hunting have affected their diet. In my hosts' kitchen there's a leg of caribou to be eaten raw, but I'm also offered chocolate chip cookies—from the local supermarket. Dr Isaac Sobol, the chief medical officer for health in Nunavut, says, "We advise Inuit to eat country food which is very good for them. Before the introduction of Western store-bought foods they lived healthy lives." Now obesity and diabetes are on the rise.

At the AGM for the Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, the Mayor of Iqaluit, Elisapee Sheutiapik, spoke about health issues now affecting the people, including high levels of domestic abuse, suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse, as well as problems directly related to climate change, such as skin cancers.

Dr Grace Egeland, Canada Research Chair in Environment, Nutrition and Health, based at McGill University, Montreal, is leading the Inuit Health Survey project funded by the government for International Polar Year. In 2007 and 2008, 2,100 Inuit adults and 380 children were interviewed across a wide region. Although the data is still being processed, Dr Egeland is concerned about what they learned.

"The Inuit say they cannot read the environment in the same way. They say the ice sounds different. The wind, they tell us, always used to come from the same direction. Now, it comes from everywhere and changes in intensity. I met a woman who was watching her husband and son return on their skidoo from a hunt. She was eagerly awaiting them and then they disappeared. They fell through the ice and died."

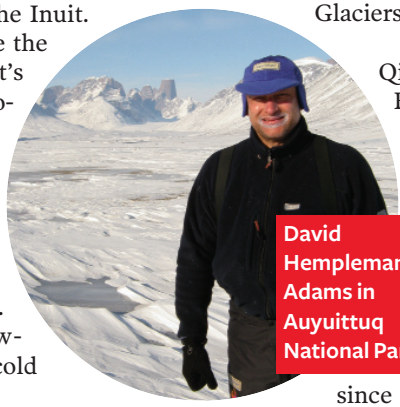
Research suggests the loss of about 770,000 square miles of "multi year" (not seasonal) sea ice since 1979. Professor David Barber of the University of Manitoba reports that Arctic sea ice is

now melting at 27,000 square miles a year. "At that rate we expect the Arctic to be seasonally ice free by around 2050," he says.

Dr Egeland is worried about the consequences for the Inuit. "It's hard to imagine the Inuit without ice. It's essential for the ecosystem in the Arctic and for the species they rely on."

Billy and Daisy take me to their family cabin about 20 miles to the north. We travel by snowmobile and it is so cold I stay in a sleeping bag for the five-hour journey. Occasionally I peep out and am startled by the bright blue skies and the way the snow shimmers with shades of white and blue. Billy points out polar bear tracks and an iceberg as high as a three storey house. He says the icebergs have been disappearing in this region, down from about 30 to three.

That night over caribou stew and Inuit bread, we are joined by Daisy's brother, Davidee—a polar bear tracker who has worked for Canada Parks for more than 30 years. They discuss how the warmer weather has contributed to the dramatic increase of mosquitoes in summer. Glaciers are also melting.



David Hempleman-Adams in Auyuittuq National Park

'THE **INUIT PEOPLE** ARE THE CANARY IN THE GLOBAL COAL MINE'

After my stay in Qikiqtarjuaq I join the British explorer David Hempleman-Adams for one of his treks across the Auyuittuq National Park. It's a journey I also made in 2007 and I'm struck by the changes to the landscape since then. In some places it's unrecognisable after the flash floods.

Hempleman-Adams, who has visited Baffin Island ten times in the past 25 years, agrees: "Last summer, the ice melted at a phenomenal rate. Huge portions of the trail have gone. The Inuit are the canary in the global coal mine. They can give the world an early warning about climate change. It's time we listened to what they say."

■ If you want to learn more at first hand about Inuit culture, David Hempleman-Adams's next Baffin Island trek is next year. For details, go to coldclimates.co.uk.

STRAIGHT TO THE POINT

Slimming-club advertisement, seen outside a village hall: "Fed up with being fat and ugly? Want to be just ugly?"

Submitted by **Sue Gammon, Bristol**