

Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering

APRIL 22 - 24, 2025

Arviat, NU

INTRODUCTION

In April 2025, we convened a gathering of Inuit Elders in Arviat, Nunavut to explore the foundations of Inuit stewardship and the cultural systems that sustain it.

Through open dialogue and shared reflection, participants discussed the principles, values, teachings, and practices that supported Inuit. The gathering created space to examine how these foundations were formed and passed between generations.

This report summarizes the themes, teachings, reflections, and concerns shared during the workshop discussions on Inuit culture, place-based knowledge, and avatimi kamatsiarniq. It is intended as a synthesis of what participants said they heard, remembered, questioned, and wanted to carry forward.



Inuit Elders Gathering, Arviat, Nunavut, April 2025

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David Owingayak

What are we waiting for?
If I remain silent, who am I waiting for to speak up?
We cannot simply wait for one another.
We have to speak what we know and speak it with confidence.
We have to share what we know if we are to help our fellow Inuit.

FOUNDATIONS OF INUIT STEWARDSHIP

Knowledge systems and ways of being are designed and evolved to fit their specific environments. For Inuit, we live in a land that provides – it is beautiful and bountiful, with specific gifts from every season. However, it can also be harsh and demanding, requiring resilience in the face of challenges.

While Arctic animals possess natural defenses such as fur and blubber, humans do not have such adaptations. Instead, Inuit had to be incredibly skilled, resourceful and knowledgeable. Our survival relied on knowledge, wisdom, mindset and technology accumulated over countless generations.

THREE GUIDING QUESTIONS



What is the foundation of Inuit culture, and how was that foundation built, sustained, and transmitted?



What sustained Inuit culture over time and how do Inuit values, beliefs, laws, protocols, taboos, and ways of knowing work together in the pursuit of a good life?



How were leaders prepared, mentored, and supported?

These are not abstract questions.

They are urgent, living questions.

They matter because Inuit life has undergone profound disruption through colonization, settlement, schooling, Christianity, wage economy, institutional systems, and the silencing of Elders and knowledge holders.

The discussions made clear that this work is not about nostalgia or simple recovery of “the past.” It is about understanding the strength and logic of Inuit foundations well enough to apply them meaningfully today.



Emiliano Qirnguq of Kuugaarruk sharing reflections during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering in Arviat, NU April 2025

Many younger people have not heard these teachings and cannot be expected to know what they were never taught.

Environmental stewardship, proper conduct, cultural confidence, and collective responsibility cannot emerge automatically in a context where the foundational system has been interrupted.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that life today is different. Inuit are not returning to a previous way of life. Children are in schools, people live in settlements, technologies have changed and many people are carrying trauma.

The task is not replication – it is adaptation rooted in strong understanding.

This is especially relevant for stewardship. If avatimi kamatsiarniq is to be more than a slogan, it must be rooted in the broader Inuit cultural system – from childrearing to leadership, belief systems and lived relationships with land and community.



Guiding Principles:

Nunaliit

Recognizing the diversity of Inuit and the depth of place-based knowledge.

Holistic Thinking

Inuit systems are interconnected and cannot be separated.

Avatimi Kamatsiarniq

Extend beyond “environment” to include all relationships.

Acknowledging Trauma and Colonization

The disruption of culture and transmission.



Nunia Anoee sharing her understanding with facilitator Joe Karetak during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering in Arviat, NU April 2025

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What is the foundation of Inuit culture, and how was that foundation built, sustained, and transmitted?
- What sustained Inuit culture over time and how do Inuit values, beliefs, laws, protocols, taboos, and ways of knowing work together in the pursuit of a good life?
- How were leaders prepared, mentored, and supported?

These questions apply across all topics below:

- Maligarjuit
- Inunnguiniq
- Hivunikhaqhiutsiarniq
- Ujjiqsuiniq
- Maligait, piqujait, ukpirijangit, tiringnaqtut, aglirnaqtut

Nunaliit

Inuit knowledge is deeply **place-based.** Inuit were historically organized through different nunaliit, each with their own protocols, seasonal rhythms, practices, and knowledge shaped by their environment. Hunting methods, food practices, leadership systems, environmental knowledge, and social norms varied according to local conditions.

There is no single uniform Inuit system. Place shapes culture.

Each place understand its own place deeply, and when visiting another place, one is expected to follow protocols rather than impose their own.



Permanent settlements disrupted these systems. When different nunaliit were brought together into permanent communities, people with different place-based systems were living side by side. This created friction and required leadership to restore order and balance. Some tensions have been worked through over time, but participants made clear that the mixing of groups in settlements disrupted older localized management systems and made continuity more difficult.



Tunaalaaq and Lisa Gibbons during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering April 2025

This has important implications for today - any effort to articulate Inuit stewardship principles must consider both shared foundations and local differences. Broad concepts may be held in common, but their application has always been shaped by specific places, species, seasonal cycles, and histories.

Holistic thinking from an Inuit Worldview

The workshop consistently emphasized holistic thinking.
Participants described Inuit systems as expansive, interconnected, and resistant to fragmentation.
Human wellbeing was discussed in relation to body, spirit, mind, family, community, land, animals, ancestors, descendants, and the unseen world. One cannot isolate a single component and expect the whole system to function properly.

This holistic view extended to time as well. Planning for the future meant not only preparing for the next season but thinking about descendants and the long arc of communal life.

It also extended to healing. Personal healing was described as significant not only for an individual, but for family and for one's ability to live in right relation. Trauma was acknowledged as affecting temperament, learning, relationships, and openness.

Participants also contrasted this holistic orientation with modern materialism and individualism. Material things may provide comfort or usefulness, but they do not by themselves produce wellbeing. While material tools are useful, they do not create wellbeing on their own.



The workshop repeatedly returned to the importance of foundations. If the foundation is weak, everything above it becomes unstable. One participant used the image of an igloo: if the first layer is not set properly, the structure will not hold. Another concern was that Inuit concepts often lose depth when translated into English, or when they are forced into Western categories. Participants noted that Inuit knowledge systems are relational, layered, and holistic. They do not separate neatly into the kinds of compartments often demanded by institutions or academic writing.

Avatimi Kamatsiarniq

Tunaalaaq Gibbons, a paallirmiut elder from Arviat, stated clearly that translating Avatimi Kamatsiarniq to “environmental stewardship” is inadequate.

He shared that avati includes family, community, neighboring communities, land, water, animals, nonliving things, supernatural beings, and even the universe. In this understanding, avati is not merely one’s surroundings. It is the full relational field of existence.

Whereas kamatsiarniq was described as handling properly, acting with care, following correct protocols and being in right relation.



Together these meanings suggest that avatimi kamatsiarniq is a holistic ethic of relational responsibility rather than a narrow conservation concept. It includes how one acts with land, animals, tools, family, spirit, community, and future generations.

Acknowledging Trauma and a Need for Healing

It was clear that any discussion of Inuit culture today must include colonization and trauma. Participants spoke directly about residential schools, cultural discrediting, fear, shame, silence, and the ways institutions disrupted the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Participants described how residential schools and colonial institutions taught Inuit children a system that was not their own. They emphasized reading, writing, and mathematics while severing children from land-based teachings, family-based instruction, language, and worldview.

Elders and mentors who once carried deep knowledge were silenced, dismissed, or made to fear outside authority.

The result was not only personal pain, but a structural interruption in cultural continuity.

DISCUSS THEMES

1 The maligarjuit as core principles

- Respect for all living things
- Willingness and ability to work together for the common good
- Always planning for a sustainable future
- Maintaining harmony and balance

They operate together as an interrelated system. One cannot neglect one principle without affecting the others. The maligarjuit reinforce one another. They form a relational framework for individual conduct, social life, leadership, and environmental responsibility.

Upiguhungniq / Upigusungniq: respect

The English word “respect” does not capture the full meaning of upiguhungniq. Upiguhungniq is described as expansive, extending beyond courtesy between people. It includes reverence, humility, reciprocity, empathy, and recognition of the value of all beings. It applies not only to humans, but also to animals, living beings, weather, tools, and the wider environment. Participants suggested that respect in this sense must be understood, felt, and practiced. It is both an inner orientation and an external conduct.

Several examples illustrated this broader understanding. Inuit did not speak of “bad weather,” because such language itself was considered improper. Weather was to be described accurately, not judged. Tools such as the pana and unaaq were also spoken of with respect because they were not inert objects. They were part of one’s survival and relationship to the land. This shows that upiguhungniq is not sentimental. It is practical, moral, and ontological all at once.



Lucy Sanertanut during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering April 2025

Atausiuqatigiingniq / Piliriqatigiingniq: working together for the common good

Participants described collaborative responsibility as another foundational principle. People were not understood as isolated individuals whose gifts existed only for themselves. Skills, purpose, attitude, and determination were all to be developed in relation to the collective good.

This theme challenged individualism. The workshop returned to the concern that southern systems encourage self-focused ways of thinking that weaken responsibility to others. In contrast, Inuit social principles were described as requiring responsiveness, usefulness, cooperation, and accountability to the group. When people do not contribute, strain is placed on others. When people do contribute, leadership becomes easier and communal balance is strengthened.



David Owingayak during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering April 2025

Sivuniksaqsiutsiarniq: planning for the future

Planning for the future was not described in narrow administrative terms. Participants framed it as long-term thinking rooted in care for descendants and in the continuity of life. Inunnguiniq itself was offered as an example of future planning: one raises children intentionally now so they can assume meaningful roles later. Hope was also linked to this principle, not as passive optimism, but as something built through effort, preparation, and collective responsibility.

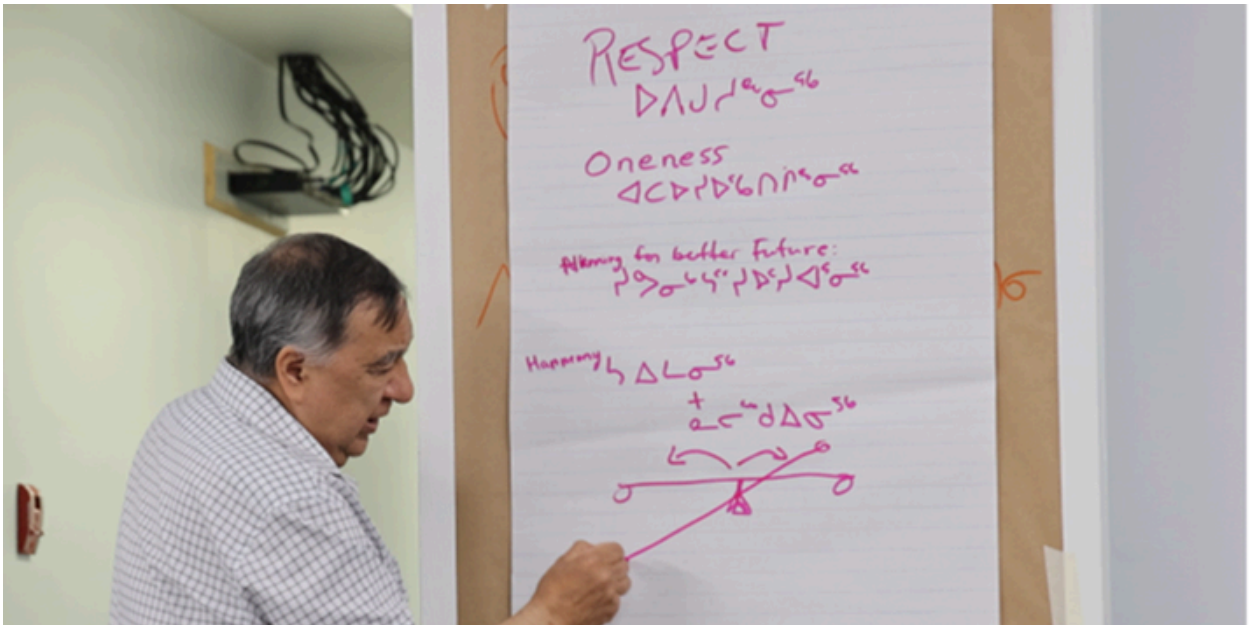
Planning ahead also meant anticipating difficulty rather than expecting ease. Participants noted that Inuit life required preparedness for hardship, changing seasons, danger, and uncertainty. This kind of future orientation was practical and moral at once. It was about survival, but also about ensuring that future generations could live well.



Haimaniq amma naliqquiniq: harmony and balance

Harmony and balance were presented as essential social goals. Participants described a way of life in which people were taught to maintain respectful relations, resolve conflict quickly, and avoid behaviors that destabilized the group. Balance was not just emotional calmness. It referred to right relations within family, community, environment, and the broader order of life.

Importantly, participants linked harmony and balance to the other maligarjuit. When respect erodes, cooperation suffers. When cooperation breaks down, strain increases. When people cease planning well, instability follows. Thus harmony is not a separate value sitting above the rest. It is a condition produced by the healthy functioning of the whole system.



Joe Karetak describing maligait and their relationship to one another

2 Inunnguiniq as the foundation of human development and cultural continuity

A central teaching of the workshop was that inunnguiniq is foundational. Participants described inunnguiniq as the intentional process of raising a human being well: preparing a child to become capable, loving, observant, resilient, respectful, socially aware, future-oriented, and able to live a good life with others. This was not presented as casual parenting. It was described as a deliberate and highly strategic approach to childrearing and human formation.

Participants stressed that inunnguiniq begins at birth, and even in the naming of a child. The Inuit naming system was described as highly significant because a name is not merely a label. It carries relationship, continuity, and the gifting of qualities. Likewise, words spoken over a child matter. Children are shaped by the intentional words, expectations, and encouragement they receive. In this way, inunnguiniq begins early and works deeply, placing a child into relationship with Inuit values and beliefs from the beginning of life.

Stories, teachings, examples, and experiential instruction were all described as part of this process. Unipkaaqtuat and hinnakhautiit were not merely entertainment. They were pedagogical and moral tools. They taught resilience, consequences, problem-solving, conduct, and social understanding.

What came through strongly is that inunnguiniq was tied not only to personal wellness, but to collective continuity. It prepared future leaders. It helped children discover their strengths, role, and purpose. It nurtured trust, love, relational intelligence, and the ability to withstand hardship.



It taught children how to survive obstacles and how to prepare for them rather than merely react. It fostered both moral formation and practical capability.

Participants also pointed out that this kind of preparation is difficult to replace with book learning alone. Some forms of knowledge must be experienced, practiced, and felt in the body.

The example was given that reading about igloo building is not the same as learning directly through sensory and tactile experience.

This point extended beyond technical skill. It underscored a broader principle: Inuit knowledge is embodied, relational, and experiential. Inunnguiniq is therefore not only about what a child is told, but what a child lives through in relationship with others and with the environment.



Luccassie & Beatrice Ikkidluak during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering in Arviat, NU April 2025

3 Hivunikhaqhiutsiarniq

Leadership emerged as another central theme. Participants described past leaders as people who understood the interconnected system of inunnguiniq, maligarjuit, maligait, piqujait, ukpirijangit, arlirnaqtut, tiringnaqtut, place-based knowledge, and seasonal awareness. Leaders were not simply authority figures. They were people formed through a long process, starting in childhood, who knew how to interpret environmental conditions, guide social conduct, reinforce protocol, and maintain communal order.

Several examples illustrated this. Leaders once directed how people should act around caribou crossings, when certain animals should or should not be hunted, how food should be shared, and how people should respond to seasonal changes. Participants stressed that these decisions were not arbitrary. They were rooted in deep knowledge and responsibility. When such leadership was present, the whole system functioned more smoothly. When it is absent, harmful patterns emerge more easily.

A strong concern raised in the workshop was that today there are fewer people ensuring that protocols are followed. This has consequences not only for environmental stewardship but also for social wellbeing. Without prepared leaders, there is more fragmentation, less guidance, and weaker continuity between generations. Participants suggested that this leadership gap is one of the major consequences of cultural disruption.

At the same time, leadership was not described as belonging only to a single heroic figure. Participants also noted the importance of those who support leaders, follow leaders, and contribute to the larger system. Leadership functions within a network of collective responsibility. Still, the workshop made clear that future work must include attention to how leaders are prepared, mentored, and supported from an early age.



Joe Karetak describing the interrelationships and roles of leaders during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering April 2025

4 Ujjiqsuiniq and environmental attentiveness

Another major theme was **ujjiqsuiniq**: the process of close monitoring and observation of one's surroundings. Participants described this as a fundamental Inuit principle tied to safety, environmental awareness, practical intelligence, and survival. It involves close attention to weather, clouds, wind, stars, water, ice, snowdrifts, animals, terrain, and seasonal change.

What we heard is that this kind of observation was not occasional. It was a disciplined way of being. Children were prepared from a young age to notice subtle indicators in the environment and to understand their implications. This included paying attention to the feel of the ground beneath one's feet, differences between land and frozen lake, the shape and direction of snowdrifts, and the signs that indicate whether conditions are safe or dangerous.

Participants emphasized that this knowledge was built gradually. Small lessons introduced in childhood became the basis for more advanced understanding later. A teaching as simple as observing how ice forms in the fall every day could later become part of a much broader system of land safety and seasonal interpretation. In this sense, knowledge stacked over time. It was cumulative and developmental.

The workshop also highlighted the relationship between pace and perception. Several people noted that earlier forms of travel, such as walking or dog teams, were slower and quieter than modern machines. This slowness allowed greater intimacy with the environment. It gave people more time to think, notice, remember, and learn from the land. By contrast, faster mechanized life can reduce attentiveness and weaken environmental connection.

Games and child-centered teaching methods were also mentioned as ways to develop wayfinding and spatial awareness. Children could be asked where a place was, and through repetition they would learn directionality and orientation. These examples reinforced a broader point: environmental knowledge was not separate from childrearing. It was woven into everyday life and into the making of a capable person.



David Owingayak and Joe Karetak during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Gathering April 2025

5 Maligait, piqujait, ukpirijagit, tiringnaqtut, aglirnaqtut, and their interrelationship

Participants stressed that Inuit systems of guidance cannot be reduced to neat Western categories. Terms such as **maligaq, piqujaq,maligarjuaq, tiringnaqtuq, aqlirnaqtut, ukpirijait,** and others overlap and work together. They do not map cleanly onto English distinctions such as “law,” “rule,” “belief,” or “custom.” The workshop surfaced the difficulty of translation itself as part of the issue.

What we heard was that these systems existed to help people live a good life, avoid danger, maintain balance, and preserve right relations. Participants spoke about taboos, restrictions, protocols, and beliefs not as irrational leftovers, but as purposeful parts of a coherent moral and practical order.

Many of these beliefs and practices were said to have been strategically developed in response to the realities of life, including environmental danger, animal relations, spiritual realities, and social wellbeing.



Participants also discussed how fear and colonial influence caused many people to stop speaking openly about these dimensions of Inuit life, especially supernatural beings, place-based presences, and offerings or protocols associated with certain places.

Stories were shared about encounters with beings on the land and about the need to respect places inhabited by forces beyond ordinary human perception.

These discussions were not treated as marginal. Rather, participants indicated that these beliefs were historically part of the foundation of Inuit culture and cannot simply be cut out without losing something essential.

A particularly important point was that these systems cannot be easily broken apart because they operate together. A piqujaq may have context-specific force; a maligaq may have wider applicability; taboos and spiritual beliefs may inform practical conduct. The attempt to divide everything into discrete English categories can distort the logic of the system itself. Participants warned against writing about Inuit knowledge in ways that sever what Inuit understanding holds together.

LOOKING AHEAD

The discussions held during this gathering reinforced that Inuit stewardship cannot be understood in isolation from the broader cultural systems that sustain it. Stewardship is connected to childrearing, leadership development, place-based knowledge, observation, relationships, language, beliefs, values, and responsibilities that have been carried across generations.



Joe Karetak, Luccassie Ikkidluak, Emiliano Qirngnuq, Paul Sanertanut, Lucy Sanertanut, Sandy Kownak, Nunia Anoee
Beatrice Ikkidluak, Tunaalaaq Gibbons, David Owingayak and Lisa Gibbons

Participants emphasized that this work is urgent. Many teachings remain with Elders and knowledge holders whose experiences and insights are invaluable. At the same time, younger generations are seeking opportunities to reconnect with Inuit ways of knowing and being. **There is a growing need to create spaces where these teachings can be shared, practiced, and applied in meaningful ways.**

This gathering was not an end point, but a beginning. It highlighted the need for continued dialogue, documentation, learning, and action. It also reaffirmed the importance of supporting Inuit-led approaches to stewardship that are grounded in Inuit knowledge, relationships, and lived experience.



Joe Karetak, Lori Tagoona Randall and Melissa Irwin during the Inuit Stewardship Elders Workshop in April 2025

To honour the contributions of participants and build on the momentum of this gathering, several priorities emerged for future work, including:

- Continuing conversations with Elders and knowledge holders;
- Documenting and sharing teachings through reports, interviews, audio, video, and other media;
- Creating opportunities for intergenerational learning and dialogue;
- Exploring Inuit approaches to leadership development and mentorship;
- Supporting the revitalization of Inunnguiniq and other foundational cultural teachings;
- Developing resources, training, and learning materials rooted in Inuit ways of knowing;
- Strengthening understanding of Inuit stewardship across communities, organizations, philanthropy, and public policy.

The wisdom shared during this gathering reminds us that strong futures are built upon strong foundations. By learning from Elders and strengthening the systems that have sustained Inuit for generations, we can help ensure that Inuit stewardship continues to guide and support future generations.