

The

ATLATL

“Too long have I hunted mammoth alone!”

Rich McWhorter

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Naqaq Hunters on the Yukon Delta

Joseph Reeves

Imagine standing on a skiff in the Bering Sea. Its late spring, the ice is out and there is an off shore wind creating waves that rock the boat left to right. A ringed seal is below the surface about 50 yards off the bow and you have a naqaq and nanerpak – the Yup'ik words for atlatl and dart – in your hand.

I have been working with members of the Lower Yukon School Board for a number of years. The board is the governance arm of an eleven-site school district that covers the lower end of the Yukon River, its delta and coastal areas. It is here that the naqaq is still used as a primary weapon for seal hunting.

Recently, after finishing a day-long (and it was May so the days are very long) work-session and school board-assessment the School Board found time for me to ask some questions about the naqaq.

What follows are the compiled responses from seven of the nine members of the Board: George Smith, Michael Hunt, Robert Okitkun, Ray Alstrom, Andrew Brown, Liz Chikigak and Suzie Makaily.

You hunt with a naqaq or what I call an atlatl.

Who taught you to use the naqaq?

We learned from observation as young people, watching our dads and uncles hunt with the naqaq. As children we would watch great hunters catch seals while balancing on kayaks. Now days we use skiffs and sometimes hunt from shore.

It takes a lot of skill and practice to learn how to throw the harpoon on the water.

How old were you when you first hunted with a naqaq?

Generally, when we were kids we played with the naqaq to learn how to throw. George Smith remembers catching his first seal at the age of 12. Liz Chikigak was about the same age when she first hunted. The others agreed.

As kids we practiced on land with long stems of grass until we could make the harpoons.

How are the naqaq made and who makes them?

In the past they were made using a good knife and a lot of patience. Now, while it still requires patience, most people use a dremmel tool.

The naqaq is an extension of your arm. To build one you must use the measurement from the tip of the elbow to tip of thrower's finger.

Most are made by fathers or uncles.

How far do you have to throw the naqaq?

There is no set distance, it depends on where the seal is located. Sometimes the seals come up close to the boat and you just throw a very short distance. Other times they are far off and you need to throw the harpoon in an arc so it goes in the water and still catches the seal.

What skills are involved in using a naqaq?

It takes a lot of practice to hit the seal. The hardest part is judging where to throw so the harpoon hits the seal in the head. You may have to throw hard, soft or medium depending on the seal's location. You don't throw the harpoon in a straight line. Instead you have to judge the arc so that the harpoon comes down at an angle that lets it enter the water. Skilled hunters can judge where the seal will come out of the water.

Another skill is coordination so you don't fall off the skiff.

How accurate are they?

Once you practice you can hit the target with an arc from a moving boat. The accuracy really depends on who is hunting.

What do you hunt?

Bearded Seal, harbor seals, spotted seals, whales and cranes.

Why do you think people here have not given up using the nuqaq?

The fresh water from the Yukon prevents the seal from floating so we need to have the harpoon. Catching a seal with a gun would make it sink. People farther along the Bering Coast use guns since there is less fresh water in the sea. When the seal is caught with the harpoon the point slips off and is kept attached to the shaft. The shaft may also have a float attached to it by a string. The harpoon keeps the seal from moving away.

Do you think you could compete in an atlatl competition?

If we could put a seal on land as a target.

