On the 2008 Northwest Greenland expedition we traveled with the Polar Inuit in their high Arctic realm referred to as "Ultima Thule," where the training and preparations for Robert Peary and Mathew Henson’s 1909 North Pole expedition took place. We had an opportunity to interview these traditional Inuit hunters about how the legacy of these American explorers impacted their culture and community. Dogsledding and camping with them along the coast of northwestern Greenland made this interview process particularly effective. We recorded the effects of Global Warming in this critical point in time on the last Greenland Inuit community that lives a traditional life style living off the land and banning snowmobiles. We flew to Iqalhuit, capital of Nunavut, and chartered a plane to Qaanaaq (Thule) in northwestern Greenland. We traveled with Paul Schurke who has led Arctic mushing expeditions with Will Steger to the North Pole in 1978, and to northwestern Greenland in 2001 and subsequently. The Polar Inuit, the world’s most northern and traditional Arctic culture, occupy a 400 mile expanse of northwestern Greenlandic coastline that is framed by the Melville Bay ice cliffs to the south and the Humboldt Glacier to the north. They travel by komatik sledges pulled by traditional Greenland dog teams. We had two objectives: First, to make observations on the effects of climate change on local ice conditions and glaciers and effects on the North. For example, how do they as the world’s northernmost indigenous culture feel about the
association now firmly established between them and the world's northernmost point by these historic polar expeditions? What cultural pride do they take in their substantial contribution to these events? Is this legacy being passed along to their children by their elders or through their village schools? Although the dogsledding tradition is alive & well in their region yet today, what is their prognosis for their continued practice of traditional elements of Polar Inuit culture? We wanted to learn about other factors impacting their traditional subsistence lifestyle including globalization and, most significantly, Arctic climate change. Dogsledding the coast of northwestern Greenland in the spring gave us the opportunity to observe and learn directly from the Inuit how the rapidly diminishing Arctic ice pack is threatening their livelihood as sea hunters.

We arrived at mid-day in Qaanaaq in the bright sunshine at –34 C and quickly learned how to brave the cold with double long underwear, neoprene boots on top of our mukluks, and down parkas atop our anoraks. We met our 8 inuit and 120 Greenlandic dogs as we embarked down Inglefield Fjord. Knut Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen had a trading post in Thule, and we visited their original museum with numerous momentos to their extraordinary contributions to understanding inuit culture and their geography. Arqiunquaq had his 6-month old puppies learning to pull the fan hitch. Icebergs filled the horizon. Our first camp was near an ancient inuit settlement with rock igloos below the cliffs to shelter the ancients. We slept in cold tents learning early that sleeping in the inuit tents was much more pleasant. They had a dark half to provide cover against the midnight sun and kerosene heaters to provide warmth. The smooth sea ice was perfect for a brisk pace as we passed glaciers squeezing between mountains in their descent
from the Greenland ice sheet massif. We circumnavigated Josephine Peary Island where the Tracy Glacier once reached to the shore on our 2003 map. Next morning we climbed alongside the Tracy Glacier observing approximately 10 kilometers of rubble and icebergs where the glacier had receded in just 5 years. The inuit told us that very recently they were unable to pass between the island and the mainland because of the towering glacier. I learned unique inuit words for iceberg calving, grande icebergs, and plain iceberg. Ahead was a dark speck sunning on the ice—a ringed seal. We stopped the sleds as the dogs turned and alertly stood at attention. Rasmus pulled out his gun, and unfolded his white sheet and attached it to a wood frame making himself invisible as he approached the unsuspecting seal. We had fresh boiled seal ribs that evening.

In Qeqertak we stopped at a halibut hole and reeled in the ganghooks with a dozen or more fresh halibut. Another feast. Eventually boiled walrus was also tasty—but chewy. We crossed to Bowdoin Fjord and passed overland to frozen MacCormick Sound. Tugto Glacier descended here and we climbed down into a sinkhole that stretched all the way to the sea; these holes are filled with rushing water in the summer as moulins accelerate melting. We crossed to Siorapaluk where Paul and I unfurled the Explorer’s Club flag at the northernmost inhabited village in Greenland. We found Ikuo Oshimo who has lived here since 1974 as a hunter. Ikuo has more than 100 walruses to his credit and is renowned for his hunting skills. He married an inuit and his sons and grandsons aspire to the hunting lifestyle. He told us about the earlier ice break-up beginning in May and June rather than July. The ice-forming had been delayed from mid-October to early December when he said he could hear waves breaking on shore.
during the complete blackness. He said that the sledging was becoming more difficult on mushy ice to obtain the walruses they depended on. He said the ice had been more dependable in the 1980s. He was also critical of the limits placed on polar bears (eight for Siorapaluk) which he thought was too few to support the hunters. He said there were lots of musk ox nearby, small reindeer and caribou to the south, and many narwhals. He said that last year the blue whale, the largest in the world, was coming this far north from waters much further south in Greenland. Ikuo is also famous for his dog whips made from the bearded seal. We visited the local school to meet the 12 students who were learning English as well as Danish and their native inuktun spoken by the 1000 or so Inughuit comprising the Thule inuit. Ikuo’s sons thought hunting was exciting. We headed west to the open sea finding open waters near Herbert Island finding aqua water but no walruses. We sledged to Qeqertarssuaq which is a summer fishing village; here I found the red house that the late Explorer Club member Sir Wally Herbert spent several seasons. We found a house that belonged to two of our inuit brothers where there was picture of their father who had sledged with Sir Wally across the Arctic from coast to coast in 1968-9. He was dressed in a sealskin parka with polar bear skin pants and skin boots identical the dress of our inuit today. We stopped at the local church to witness Martin play the organ skillfully. He showed us his sister’s grave where she was laid to rest after a self-inflicted suicide at age 19. We played our inuit hosts a game of football using an insulated water bottle as our soccer ball and kicking it into a harpoon at the two ends of our field on the sea ice. Inuit 10-Americans 2. They celebrated. Next day we mushed to Qaanaaq where I obtained an interview with
Rasmus and Hans Jensson about the ice conditions and hunting culture. The ice went out in Qaanaaq on June 27 last year that was one week too early. Hans and Rasmus also were worried about the continuation of their hunting lifestyle if the ice is not good for sledging and the quotas on animals limits their inuit hunting.