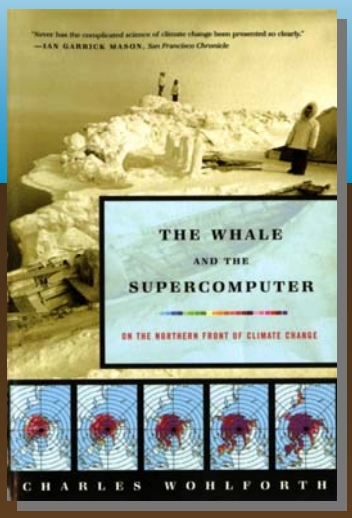
UAA Office of Community Partnerships
UAA/APU Books of the Year

READERS' GUIDE



The Whale and the Supercomputer

On the Northern Front of Climate Change

Charles Wohlforth

What knowledge do the Inupiaq need to be successful whale hunters? How does this compare to the knowledge of a scientist? Is the knowledge arrived at in the same way?

How do Western ways of approaching conflict and disagreement differ from traditional Inupiaq ways? Are some of these individual behaviors? Are some of them group behaviors? What do they tell us about the two ways of looking at the world?

Charles Wohlforth states "Alaska had both Natives and natives. The upper-case Natives were the indigenous people whose culture had far less in common with that of Anchorage and Fairbanks than those cities had in common with Seattle or L.A. But the lower-case native Alaskans also had a culture" (page 220). What are the differences between the cultures of Alaska Natives and native Alaskans?

The snow survey forms a major story in the book. What do the scientists hope to learn from the snow survey? What knowledge do the elders possess about the snow that the scientists lack? What information is lost when the scientists do not learn from the elders?

How is the whale meat divided up amongst the Barrow community members? How is this sharing of food different from non-Native communities? Are there other indigenous communities in the world that share food in a similar manner to Alaska Natives? If so, why does this similarity exist?

Why did the whale hunts survive when much of traditional Inupiat society "broke down?" What changes have been made to the whale hunts as the Arctic has warmed? How does this reflect the adaptability of a "traditional" culture? Are the whale hunts still "traditional?"

Review Wohlforth's description of his "outsider status" on page 16. Are these behaviors based on race, or on something else? Wohlforth also refers to the Alaska Native "outsider" status on page 98. In what ways does experience of discrimination and prejudice contribute to loss of important information about the environment?

A theme in the book is the transfer of knowledge within cultures – both traditional wisdom and Western science. Is knowledge transfer in one of these cultures more effective than in the other?

How have the Inupiat traditionally fared during periods of climate change? What is the impact now? Is there a difference between their current cultural response and their past responses?