

STORIES FROM THE LAND

The land has a heartbeat; what does it sound like?

📍 Story from the Mangilaluk School, Tuktoyaktuk NT

In some places, it is the ocean meeting the shoreline. In others, the wind moving through tall pines. But in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, that heartbeat runs on four legs. It beats in the chest of a dog—steady and powerful. You can hear it in their screams of excitement or in the quiet of their breath as they run. The land, the dogs, and the people are deeply interconnected, and have been for generations. Even now, that heartbeat remains.

Tuktoyaktuk—or Tuk—is a community of about 900 people, resting along the Arctic Ocean on the traditional lands of the Inuvialuit. Its name, meaning “to resemble a caribou,” comes from an oral story of a herd that entered the water and turned to stone. The caribou still remain, strong and healthy – and so do the stories. For much of Tuk’s history—long before a road connected it to the rest of Canada in 2017—movement across this vast land depended on sled dogs. They were not optional. They were essential. They carried families, harvests, and knowledge across generations.



For the Inuvialuit, sled dogs were partners in survival and life. That relationship, built over hundreds of years, was one of trust, care, and deep understanding. Colonization took many things and attempted to sever connection to the lands, waters, and to all our relations. The Inuit and their relationship with their dogs was no exception. During the 1950’s and 60’s many sled dogs were killed in what is known as the RCMP dog killings—an act that severed mobility, independence, and cultural continuity for many Inuit families. The silence that followed was profound – with a public apology issued in 2024.

But both the people and the dogs are resilient.





At Mangilaluk School, that heartbeat is being heard. The schools embarked on a whole-school inquiry into dog sledding. Guided by Theresa Cockney, and supported by Elders, mushers, and community members, students followed the sound of the dogs into history, culture, and lived experience. They learned about mushing, racing, teamwork, and the care required to raise and run a strong dog team.

They listened.

To Marjorie Ovoyuak, who shared what it meant to have her own dog team as a young girl.
To Bruce Noksana and Joe David Nasogaluak, who carried forward the skills and teachings of the land.
To Jackie Jacobson, who grounded learning in place through stories and artifacts.
And in the warmth of a tent, Betty Elias shared language, games, and teachings that reminded students that knowledge is held in our hands, hearts, and on the land.

Inside the school, students asked questions, measured food for dogs, explored changing weather, and connected science, math, literacy, and technology to what they were experiencing. They coded sled dog races, built structures, and created art that reflected their learning.

And then—they went.

Out onto the land. The dogs leaping forward, sleds cutting across the snow. Some students stood behind the runners, feeling the pull, the rhythm, the heartbeat beneath their feet. Others watched, listened, and understood in a new way. People learn best when they feel; and there is nothing like the feeling of the wind pressing into your cheek bones as you fly across the ice – trusting in yourself, but trusting in the dogs even more. The ultimate test of teamwork and trust in this new partnership.

VOCABULARY

Qimmiq: Dog

Qamutik: Sled

Angutaaqutaq: Male Dog

Arnasalluq: Female Animal

Tasikuarun: Leash

Dji: Right

Dja: Left

Learning from the land isn't just about learning; it's about connection to the past, present and future.

This was about remembering what was nearly lost. Rebuilding what was disrupted. Reconnecting to what has always been there.

The heartbeat of the land is strong in Tuk. It runs through the dogs, through the people, through the youth who are now carrying this knowledge forward.

And like all strong heartbeats—it continues.

