

Successful DoD – Tribal Partnership



NATIVE VILLAGE OF BARROW: ELSON LAGOON AND “VALLEY OF 10,000 DRUMS”

The Native Village of Barrow became a partner tribe in the Department of Defense-sponsored Native American Lands Environmental Mitigation Program (NALEMP) in 1999 when the Tribe signed its first Cooperative Agreement (CA). The Point Barrow Navy Arctic Research Laboratory (NARL), consisting of approximately 6,200 acres, was originally withdrawn for use by the Department of the Navy in 1923 as part of the Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4. During World War II (WWII), Elson Lagoon in Barrow, Alaska became the staging area for the Naval Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPRO) initiative, introducing large numbers of personnel, equipment, and supplies to the region. These facilities and equipment were subsequently used by the U.S. Air Force, the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the North Slope Borough. Severe storms hit the area in 1963, after jurisdiction of the site was returned to the U.S. Navy, washing tens of thousands of drums and debris into the lagoon, hampering marine traffic and the subsistence activities of NVB hunters and fishermen. In 1998, the Department of Defense (DoD) determined it was responsible for the debris remaining in the lagoon.



Debris removed from Elson Lagoon 2005. Photo: NVB

The focus of the first NALEMP CA was to identify and document hazards from military debris. A 2001 CA enabled the Tribe to map debris and implement a demonstration debris removal project in Elson Lagoon, as well as analyze boating hazards and quantify impacts to subsistence activities from submerged debris. With NALEMP funding, NVB crafted specialized grappling tools, which were attached to a small barge, to pull debris from the lagoon through the summer seasons from 2001 to 2005. NVB also used magnetometer surveys and sidescan sonar to locate submerged debris in order to remove it. By 2005, working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska District, NVB had removed and properly disposed of 256 tons of military debris from the lagoon.

With continued NALEMP funding in 2005, NVB also began cleanup of the Barrow Drum Ravine, or the “Valley of 10,000 Drums,” located 1.5 miles from NVB. The traditional name given the area by the Inupiat people is Qiqu, or a place where one extracts clay for making pottery. The drums presented a threat of physical injury to local residents during subsistence activities and hunting. The drums also posed a risk of being washed out to sea during storms. Since 2005, NVB and its contractors have collected, crushed, and disposed of over 1,385 tons of military debris from the “Valley,” including well over 10,000 drums.



Before and after cleanup at Qiqu, 2009.
Photo: USACE, Alaska.

NVB was also able to leverage support for the projects from the North Slope Borough, Inupiat Heritage Language Center, and the Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation Realty Department, through equipment loans, land access, and information. The City of Barrow and the North Slope Borough also donated staff time and materials. Support from these agencies allowed NVB to extend the impact of labor force work time supported under NALEMP.

With debris removed from Elson Lagoon, and barrels removed from Qiqu, members of the NVB can now utilize both areas for subsistence food gathering, hunting, and fishing without worry of injury or damage to boats or snow machines. Not only has the cleanup removed unsightly debris, it has made the area safer for all residents.