



The view from the most remote community in the nation

By **SARA WHITNEY**

Most Alaskans will never get the chance to visit the place where Russia is not only visible but fills the horizon. No governor has been there, and Sen. Ted Stevens' brief touchdown via Black Hawk helicopter in 2002 was the only time a major Alaska official has made the trip.

About 10 years ago, a CNN reporter visited that tiny island in the Bering Strait, Little Diomedede, to verify former Gov. Sarah Palin's assertion that Russia was visible from Alaska. She was correct: The Russian island Big Diomedede was just 2.4 miles in the distance. Many residents had never heard of Sarah Palin, though, as the island had no cable television or internet at the time.

Today, what is easily the most remote community in the United States has some internet and cell service. It's also connected to the rest of the world through continued outside interest, most recently because its location has made it particularly vulnerable to climate change. Last winter, for the first time in modern history, the Bering Strait didn't freeze over. This left the island with no ice runway and no buffer from massive winter storms. It also signaled an uncertain future for Diomedede, the island's only settlement.

The history of the invisible line

Little Diomedede is just 2.8 square miles, 135 miles north-west of Nome and about 25 miles from Russia's main-

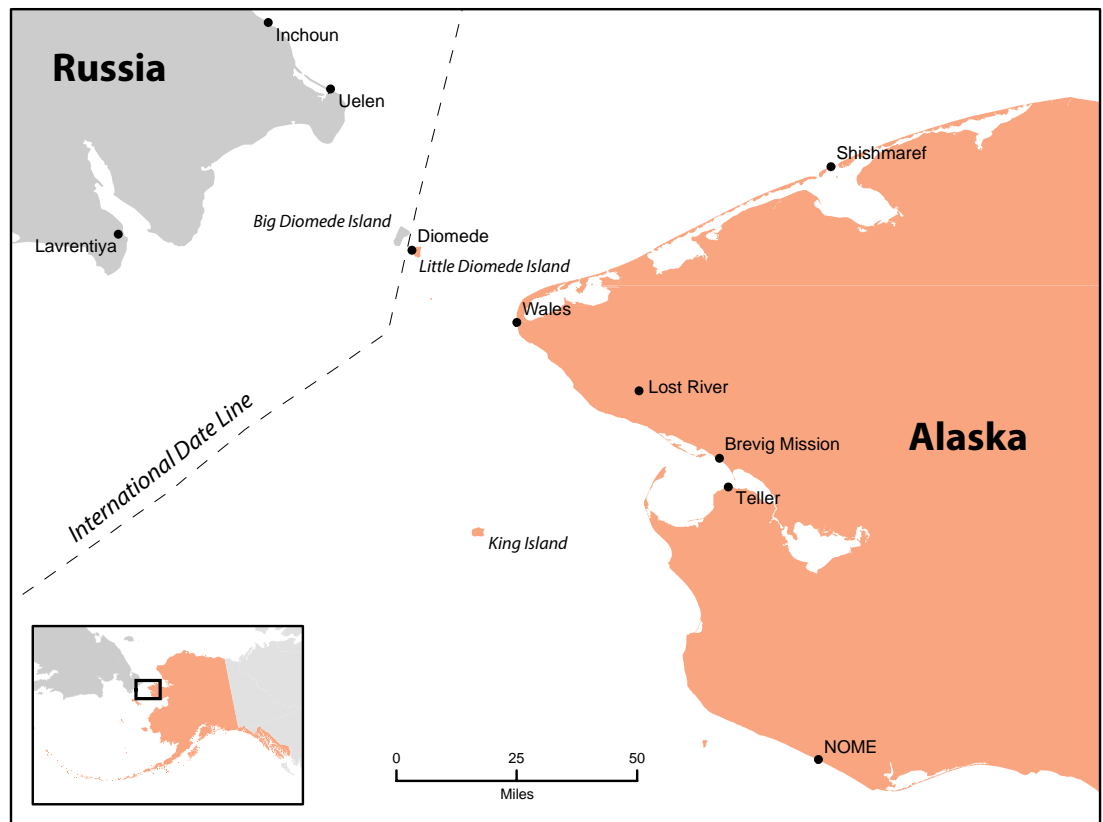


Diomedede, the only community on Little Diomedede island, is built on a slope on the island's west side. Photo courtesy of Petty Officer Richard Brahm, U.S. Coast Guard

land. The rocky island is mainly granite and features near-vertical cliffs to the water everywhere except in the town itself, which sits on a slope on the west side of the island.

Visiting the Russian-owned Big Diomedede, if that were allowed, would be a 10-minute boat ride. Between the two islands lies the International Dateline, separating them by almost a day. To Diomedede's Inupiat residents, however, the invisible line represents the continued involuntary division of family members.

Outsiders discovered the islands, which historians estimate have been occupied for more than 3,000 years, in 1648. First came the Russian explorer Semyon Dezhnyov. Then, Russian explorer Vitus Bering arrived on St. Diomedede's Day, Aug. 16, in 1728.



During World War II, Big Diomed became a Russian military base, which it remains today. Russia forcibly relocated indigenous inhabitants to the mainland in 1948 and captured any Little Diomed residents whose walrus skin boats came too close. Even today, villagers say if their boats approach, the Russians either fire a warning shot or yell at them to turn back.

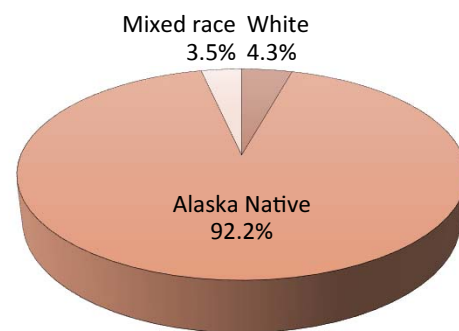
Relatively speaking, though, Russia's border with Alaska is peaceful. It's neither as tight nor as hostile as Russia's border with Europe, and aircraft incidents are rare. But that hasn't made reunification much easier.

Residents hope to reunite family

All of Little Diomed's Inupiat residents have relatives on the other side, and despite the proximity, little contact has been possible over the years. During the Cold War, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev dubbed the invisible line the "Ice Curtain."

In 1987, American Lynne Cox swam between the two islands, garnering congratulations from Gorbachev as well as U.S. President Ronald Reagan. This raised villagers' hopes, but reuniting with Russian relatives remains complicated by visas, an often tense U.S.-Russia relationship, and an often treacherous crossing.

1 Majority Inupiat Population DIOMEDE, 2010 CENSUS



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

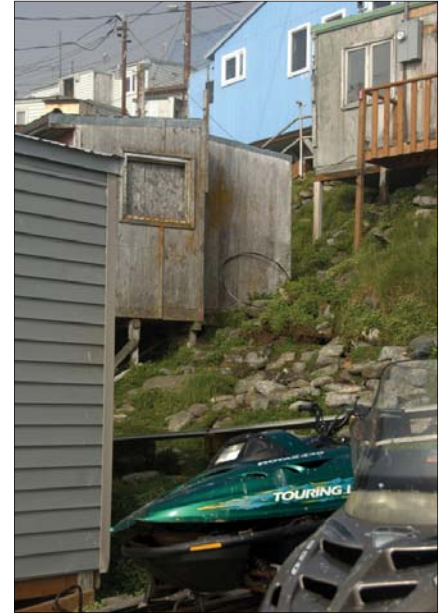
Communication has become a barrier as well. In addition to Little Diomed residents speaking English rather than Russian, just a handful of local elders speak their undocumented Inupiaq dialect. As of 2013, only two could read or write it.

Residents were able to arrange a visit in the summer of 2017, however — the first in decades — and have told



At left, walrus meat dries in the summer in Diomed. Above, a polar bear skin hangs from a home. Diomed's houses are built on stilts on a steep slope, shown at right, on the west side of the island.

Photos courtesy of Flickr user Weston Renoud



Alaska media they hope many more will follow.

The island's residents

Diomed, incorporated in 1970, is called *Inaliq* in Inupiaq, which means "the other one." The city had an estimated 102 residents in 2017, up from 88 the year before but down from its official 2010 Census count of 115. The population peaked at 178 in 1990.

Almost all residents are Inupiat. At the last census, nearly 96 percent reported they were Alaska Native or mixed race, and 4.3 percent were white. (See Exhibit 1.)

Like other majority-Native places in Alaska, Diomed's population is notably young, with a median age of 25.3 at the last census compared to 33.8 statewide.

The ratio of males to females wasn't far from the Alaska norm — Diomed was 53 percent male compared to 52 percent statewide. However, the age disparity by gender was notable. (See Exhibit 2.) The median age for males in Diomed was 37.3, and for females it was 16. It's important to note, though, that just a few people can significantly swing the proportions in a place this small, and it's been eight years since the last census.

Strong regional connections

In 2011, the village's federally recognized tribe had 489 members, with just 108 living on the island. The city has a village corporation, Inalik (part of the regional Bering Straits Native Corporation), as well as a seven-member Native council.

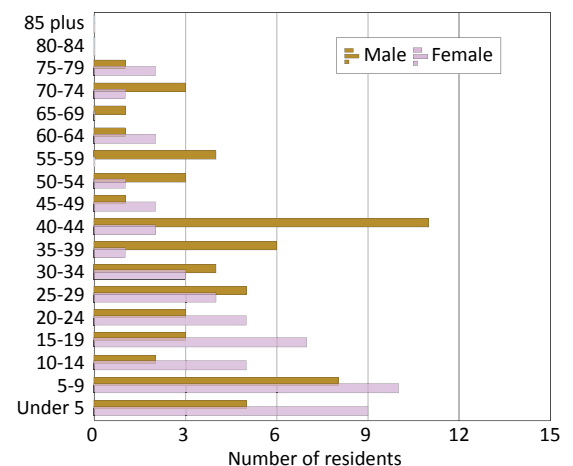
Diomed is also one of 15 member villages in the Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation, and it's one of 65 Alaska communities that participate in the Community Development Quota program, or CDQ, which Congress created to give western Alaska villages the opportunity to participate and invest in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands fisheries.

An economy based on subsistence

Diomed's economy is largely subsistence-based. While the small amount of tundra produces scant vegetation, the area is rich with fish, crab, beluga whales,

2 Residents by Age and Sex

DIOMEDE, 2010 CENSUS



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

walrus, seals, polar bears, and seabirds. Summer brings abundant eggs when nearly 2 million birds nest on the craggy cliffs. Some usable plants do grow on the tundra, though, and residents gather them in the fall to preserve in seal oil for winter.

Income is low, at just above \$10,000 per capita and a median of about \$18,300 per household from 2012 through 2016. Many villagers supplement their income through skin sewing and ivory carving. Diomedes is a wholesale agent for raw ivory.

Most jobs are in city services

Diomedes had just five business licenses as of November 2018, so retail and tourism opportunities are limited. The local school provides accommodation for visitors, and the small, corporation-owned store sells groceries according to available shipments.

Nearly all wage and salary workers, 87 percent, are in local government, which includes tribal government. (See Exhibit 3.) This is common in rural areas, where local government provides essential services. Local government also includes the public school, which has around 30 students and three teachers.

The city provides most local amenities. It operates a coin-operated laundromat for part of the year, in the same building as its health clinic. The laundromat doubles as a coffee shop and a place to socialize, as the island is dry, having banned sale or import of alcohol in 1978.

The city also runs a diesel-generated electric power plant, a post office via federal contract, a heliport via state contract, and a water treatment plant. Other services include search and rescue, volunteer fire service, bingo, and a community center.

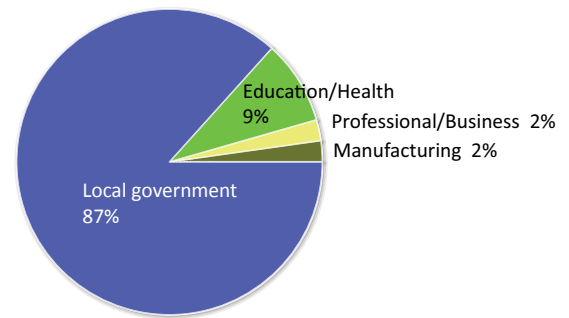
Commercial fishing and mining have played minor economic roles in the past, although little remain today. Diomedes has just a handful of commercial fishing licenses.

Seasonal work pops up occasionally, such as construction every few years when there's a project. Diomedes also has a small number of seasonal jobs in transportation. Transportation is one of the many areas in

The cost of living is high. In July 2017, a gallon of heating fuel cost \$6.50 in Diomedes, and gasoline was \$6.76 a gallon.

3 Most Work in Government

WORKERS BY INDUSTRY, DIOMEDE, 2016



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

which Diomedes stands out from everywhere else in the country.

Transportation obstacles and a changing climate

Reaching Diomedes is no small feat. A supply barge arrives just once a year, and other boats are rare because of the difficulty of docking at the rocky shoreline. Helicopters arrive a few times a month, including a weekly mail run, although planes that can land on the ice sometimes deliver more frequently during the winter.

Any deliveries or other trips to the island, where the wind blows constantly and storms are typical, are weather dependent. Residents are used to delivery delays, intermittent service, and frequent power outages.

If you can arrange a trip to Diomedes, you don't need permission, but you'll pay a fee of \$100, good for one year, that the city charges every person who arrives.

In the winter, when the Bering Strait freezes over, residents carve out a runway so small planes can land to bring in supplies. Because the ice runway is only available part of the year even in a typical winter, limited helicopter service began in 2012. The state-funded upgrade came with a matching federal subsidy called Essential Air Service, which provides passenger service to remote U.S. communities and serves 43 other Alaska communities. Diomedes is the only EAS community in the United States served by helicopter rather than airplane.

October and November are typical storm months for Diomedes, but after that, the ice freezes solid until June. That changed in 2017, however, with increasing water temperatures and a record low year for Arctic sea ice.



Millions of seabirds nest each summer on the cliffs that border most of the island. The waste from so many birds further complicates the pursuit of clean drinking water. Photo courtesy of Flickr user Weston Renoud

While the small amount of tundra bears scant vegetation, the area is rich with fish, crab, beluga whales, walruses, seals, polar bears, and seabirds. Eggs are abundant each summer when nearly 2 million birds nest on the cliffs.

An unusual late storm hit the island in December, but the real crisis came in February 2018, when the ice still hadn't frozen over. Near the end of the month, another storm with gusts up to 86 mph broke up what little ice there was and blew the chunks onto the village, severely damaging homes and the limited infrastructure and leaving the town exposed to the waves.

There's been talk over the years of relocating the village to Native land at Lost River, and the changing climate isn't the only reason.

Usable land and clean water are major challenges

Because of the uneven ground, permafrost, and rockiness, real estate is limited. The island has few houses relative to its population, so multigenerational homes are a necessity. Diomedé had 38 occupied homes at the last census and a handful of vacant homes that weather and time had rendered unlivable.

Because of the terrain, all houses sit on stilts. As there's no landfill, most garbage is burned. The island has no roads or buried utilities, and the inability to dig means it also lacks a cemetery, so a burial site lies open above the village. Residents traditionally sewed bodies up in walrus skins, but now coffins lie exposed on leveled rock and gravel, slowly worn by time and the elements. People stay away from the area out of respect for the dead and their artifacts.

One of the persistent challenges is water and sewer, as only the clinic and the school have year-round service. All homes have honey buckets, for which the only disposal is onto the ice or into the sea.

Although amenities are limited, residents know how to work with what's available. The city has a small seasonal water treatment plant, and some running water comes from a treated spring. Once the limited storage tanks are drained, usually by March, residents melt snow for drinking water.

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