Baked Alaska on The Menu?

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (Op-Ed) 771 words

KAKTOVIK, Alaska -- Skeptics of global warming should come to this Eskimo village on the Arctic Ocean, roughly 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle. It's hard to be complacent about climate change when you're in an area that normally is home to animals like polar bears and wolverines, but is now attracting robins.

A robin even built its nest in town this year (there is no word in the local Inupiat Eskimo language for robins). And last year a (presumably shivering) porcupine arrived.

The Okpilak River valley was historically too cold and dry for willows, and in the Inupiat language "Okpilak" means "river with no willows." Yet a warmer, wetter climate means that now it's crowded with willows.

The warming ocean is also bringing salmon, three kinds now, to waters here. The Eskimos say there were almost no salmon a generation ago.

"The weather is different, really different," said 92-year-old Nora Agiak, speaking in the Inupiat language and wearing moose-skin moccasins and a jacket with wolverine fur. "We're not getting as many icebergs as we used to. Maybe the world moved because it's getting warmer."

In the past, I've been skeptical about costly steps (like those in the Kyoto accord) to confront climate change. But I'm changing my mind. The evidence, while still somewhat incomplete, is steadily mounting that our carbon emissions are causing an accelerating global warming that amounts to a major threat to the world in which we live.

Alaska has warmed by eight degrees, on average, in the winter, over the last three decades, according to meteorological records. The U.S. Arctic Research Commission says that today's Arctic temperatures are the highest in the last 400 years, and perhaps much longer.

The U.S. Navy reports that in areas traversed by its submarines, Arctic ice volume decreased 42 percent over the last 35 years, and the average thickness of ice below water declined 4.3 feet. The Office of Naval Research warns that "one plausible outcome" is that the summer Arctic ice cap will disappear completely by 2050.
"We've got climate change," Robert Thompson, a native guide, says flatly. He notes that pack ice, which always used to hover offshore, providing a home for polar bears, now sometimes retreats hundreds of miles north of Kaktovik. That has caused some bears to drown and leaves others stranded on land.

(After a polar bear was spotted outside Kaktovik's post office one snowy morning, the locals explained what to do if you bump into a famished polar bear: Yell and throw stones, and above all, don't run!)

For hundreds of years, the Eskimos here used ice cellars in the permafrost. But now the permafrost is melting, and these ice cellars are filling with water and becoming useless.

Kaktovik's airstrip, 50 years old, has begun to flood because of higher seas, so it may be moved upland. Another native village, Shishmaref, has voted to abandon its location entirely because of rising seas.

In the hamlet of Deadhorse, I ran into an Arctic native named Jackson Snyder, who said that winters were getting "a lot warmer -- doesn't get much below 50 below anymore."

That may not seem so bad. But while there will be benefits to a warmer Alaska (a longer growing season, ice-free ports), climate change can also lead to crop failures, spread tropical diseases and turn Bangladesh into tidal pools. The pace of warming may be far too fast for animals, humans or ecosystems to adjust. My advice is that if you're planning a dream home in New Orleans or on the Chesapeake, put it on stilts.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, reflecting a consensus of scientists, concluded that human activity had probably caused most global warming in recent decades. It predicted that in this century, the seas will rise 4 to 35 inches.

Some 14,000 years ago, a warming trend apparently raised the sea level by 70 feet in just a few hundred years. Today's computer models don't foresee a repeat of that, but they also can't explain why it happened then.

That's why I'm changing my mind about the need for major steps to address carbon emissions. Global warming is still an uncertain threat, but it may well become one of the major challenges of this century. Certainly our government should do more about it than censor discussions of climate change in E.P.A. reports.

Unless we act soon, we may find waves lapping the beaches of Ohio,