

## CANADIAN INUIT IN A MIXED ECONOMY: THOUGHTS ON SEALS, SNOWMOBILES, AND ANIMAL RIGHTS<sup>1</sup>

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An ancient North American Indian legend predicts that when the Earth has been ravaged and the animals killed, a tribe of people from all races, creeds, and colours would put their faith in deeds, not words, to make the land green again. They would be called "The Warriors of the Rainbow," protectors of the environment.

(from a Greenpeace U.K. pamphlet ca. 1984)

If the world [of fashion] ...is changed by a viable social movement ...in fact a southern movement, an urban movement which will affect ...trapper, Native or non-Native ...should social change within one social group be restricted by the result it will have on another social group, especially when such social change is perceived in the urban social group ...as being progressive.

(Paul Watson, Sea Shepherd Society, 1985)

### CANADIAN INUIT AND SEALING

Students of Inuit<sup>2</sup> society and culture have, from the inception of systematic research, documented and commented upon the extensive use made by Inuit of various species of pinnipeds as sources of food, fuel, clothing, and utilitarian artifacts (see, for example, Balikci 1970). While many seal species are of local or regional importance, one, the ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*; natsik<sup>3</sup>), is present year-round in the area occupied by Inuttitut-speaking Eskimos from northwest Alaska to east Greenland. In the Canadian Central and Eastern Arctic, the ringed seal represents the single most reliable food-money resource species available throughout the winter to coastal-dwelling Inuit.

Studies on Canadian Inuit, beginning with Boas's work (1888), have placed much of their emphasis on the ringed seal as an enabling factor in Inuit winter ecology and adaptation. Analyses of this adaptation have included specific artifact complexes (see Maxwell 1974-75; Wenzel 1984), ethnohistory and cultural ecology (Boas 1888; Nelson 1969, 1981; Freeman 1984), evolutionary ecology (E.A. Smith 1980), settlement and community

patterning (Balikci 1968; Damas 1968, 1969a, 1969b), and food sharing and alliance formation (Van de Velde 1956; Damas 1972a, 1972b; Wenzel 1981).

While much of this work was concerned with the reconstruction of traditional Inuit man-environment relations, attention also turned to the economic and ecological aspects of Inuit sealing under the emerging conditions found in the Canadian Arctic in the 1960s. These were the relocation of many small family-based "camp" groups into large regional settlements, the introduction of new technological items, and the opening of southern Canadian, American, and European markets to new northern products, of which ringed sealskins were an important addition. It was Foote (1967a, 1967b), who first suggested that, under the cash-economic conditions developing in the north,<sup>4</sup> the ringed seal-Inuit relationship noted by anthropologists was undergoing a subtle, but perceivable, set of changes which would continue with increasing momentum (Usher 1970; L. Smith 1972; Moyer 1978; Müller-Wille 1978).

The trend in this shift was toward the submergence of the simple subsistence and barter condition that had arisen early in this century between Inuit and Euro-Canadian mercantile-commercial interests, in which Inuit traded specific commodities directly for imported items. Rather, beginning circa 1948, cash became an intermediate variable, especially for the acquiring, operating, and maintaining of the new, imported harvest technologies which replaced the traditional Inuit items. Moreover, money rapidly became not only an intermediate, but also a strategic, resource, principally because of the escalating costs associated with these new artifacts and the fluctuating value of Inuit-produced commodities on outside markets.

By and large, the situation in the Canadian Arctic at the end of the 1960s was one in which Inuit found themselves living under a dramatically modified socio-cultural situation. Regional community and settlement patterns were based on a centralized village model which was implemented by federal government agencies to facilitate administrative responsibilities and which did not consider local ecologic and demographic

factors. Furthermore, the basic "tool kit" required to carry out primary local economic activities, that is, renewable-resource harvesting, underwent change in order to meet time/distance problems caused by resettlement. The essence of this was that hunters were no longer situated in direct proximity to the resource areas which they knew best. In order, therefore, to continue successful harvesting, for domestic and export purposes, Inuit came to rely heavily on new forms of transportation, especially the snowmobile (see Hall 1971; L. Smith 1972). Last, the shift to a true money economy, in which cash became the single most important variable in the maintaining of local harvesting systems, affected nearly every aspect of the subsistence regime.

By the early 1970s, however, a rough equilibrium between harvesting costs and harvester income was struck. From 1971 through 1974, a typical hunter's equipment inventory at Clyde River, on the east coast of Baffin Island, cost \$4,045.00. At this time, individual harvester effort in the community, averaged over this three-year period, produced \$3,102.77 in cash income, of which \$1,370.27, or 44 percent, was contributed by the sale of ringed sealskins, while the remainder was provided by polar-bear skins, arctic-fox pelts, or narwhal ivory. In relation, therefore, to annual harvester requirements for capital equipment and expendable costs, the sale of sealskins and other furs provided over three-fourths of a hunter's needs.

The nature of the local Inuit economic adaptation by this time was one which could best be termed a mixed-economy. Writing two decades earlier, Wilmott (1961) characterized the emerging system among Inuit as a dual economy in which Inuit harvest activities separated into two streams: production for use (food) and commodity production for export (furs). E.A. Smith (1980) and Wenzel (1985a) have taken the view that Inuit harvesting has the integrated function of producing cash for the maintenance of needed equipment and food for human bio-energetic and social maintenance. Within this mixed economy, however, ringed-seal harvesting can account for seventy-one percent of

all utilizable biomass and fifty-four percent of harvest-related cash income.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE POLITICS OF ANTI-SEALING AND THE INUIT

Inuit, from their own perspective, have always seen themselves as separate from the generally stated focus of the seal protest movement. The fact that a protest, ostensibly directed at stopping a non-Native, heavily commercial-industrial kill of newborn harp seals (Pagophilus groenlandicus) in the waters of Atlantic Canada, has had its worst social and economic effects on Inuit has gone virtually unnoticed (see Foote 1967b; Wenzel 1978; Williamson 1978). Indeed, while the protest movement has never addressed Inuit sealing, it has tacitly brought the same pressures to bear as those exerted on the non-Native industrial hunt (see Table 1).

The first two decades of protest, from 1955 to 1975, appear, in fact, to be a time when the protest, mainly composed of animal-welfare advocates, raised genuine and valid questions about the methods then employed in commercial harp-sealing and about the overall viability of that species under unregulated harvest conditions. Appeals to the public, based on the ecological and moral soundness of the harp-seal hunt, led to several episodes in which sealskins, including ringed seals taken by Inuit, declined precipitously in value. The first such occurrence was in 1965-1967, when prices for sealskins in northern Canada fell from a high of nearly \$15.00 per sealskin to \$3.80 (see Table 2).

This decline struck Inuit at a time when two important events were occurring. The first was that a broad, external market for ringed-seal pelts was just being developed. This assisted in reviving a moribund aspect of the Inuit economic reality, that is, the need to replace arctic fox, never an abundant or reliable resource, as an exportable commodity. The second event was the replacement of dog traction, because of the newly imposed reorganization of local Inuit populations, by motorized, and high-cost, transportation. For the first time, it became acutely apparent that a hunter's participation in

TABLE 1

## EVENTS IN THE ANTI-SEALING CAMPAIGN

- 1955 The first public statements opposing the commercial hunt for harp-seal pups.
- 1967 The "Save the Seals" campaign is launched. Inuit are first affected by the seal protest.
- 1971 The seal protest is joined by groups in the United States and Europe.
- 1976 Greenpeace Canada becomes involved in the harp-seal protest. For the second time, Inuit sealing is damaged by the southern protest.
- 1977 Greenpeace Canada's seal policy encompasses aboriginal activities for the first time. Greenpeace shifts its focus from an endangered-species argument to outright opposition to all sealing activities on moral grounds.
- 1982 The European Economic Community proposes a voluntary boycott of seal imports. All members agree.
- 1983 The West German delegation to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources proposes placing all phocids on the IUCN endangered listing.
- 1984 The Inuit Circumpolar Conference and Indigenous Survival International publicly confront the anti-sealing movement. Canada forms a Royal Commission to investigate all aspects of the seal controversy.
- 1985 The European Economic Community members reinstitute their voluntary ban for four more years. Greenpeace International is asked by the Greenlandic Home Rule Authority, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, and Indigenous Survival International to publicly differentiate between Inuit sealing activities and the harp-seal hunt; Greenpeace refuses.

TABLE 2  
 VOLUME AND VALUE OF SEALSKIN PRODUCTION  
 NORTHWEST TERRITORIES, 1961-1985

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Sealskins</u>	<u>Average Value (per Skin) (\$)</u>	<u>Total Value (\$)</u>
1961-62	10,470	4.65	48,685.50
1962-63	27,844	8.49	236,735.16
1963-64	46,962	14.78	691,706.50
1964-65	68,332	11.08	757,118.56
1965-66	51,197	5.97	305,646.09
1966-67	46,355	6.82	316,141.10
1967-68	19,460	3.80	73,948.00
1968-69	27,479	7.68	211,038.72
1969-70	31,185	8.64	269,384.34
1970-71	37,282	9.22	343,832.24
1971-72	30,819	9.81	302,334.39
1972-73	26,363	15.10	398,081.30
1973-74	36,391	17.36	631,747.76
1974-75	40,468	17.10	692,002.80
1975-76	34,270	23.65	810,485.50
1976-77	48,407	18.50	895,529.50
1977-80	-----NOT AVAILABLE-----		
1980-81	31,586	21.54	680,530.00
1981-82	19,214	19.37	372,253.00
1982-83	11,870	15.55	184,595.00
1983-84	5,766	9.02	52,057.00
1984-85	3,747	7.07	27,420.00

SOURCES: 1961 to 1977, Jelliss 1978; 1980 to 1985, Department of Renewable Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories. The 1980-1985 figures refer to production in the Baffin Wildlife Management Zone only.

harvesting was dependent not only on his own abilities, but also on southern political and economic trends of which Inuit were barely aware, let alone able to influence.

The next major round of seal-hunt protests began in 1975 and continued for three years. The major difference at this time, however, was that elements within the protest movement consciously included Inuit sealing within the scope of their objectives (Hunter 1979: 368), although this aspect of protest policy was never publicly articulated. From this time on, it became clear that all forms of sealing, not only the commercial exploitation of harp-seal pups by Norwegians and Euro-Canadians, were to be opposed.

The essence of this position coalesced in 1982, when the European Parliament (EP) and the European Economic Community (EEC) considered condemning Canadian sealing and imposed a voluntary boycott on seal products. In considering the case of Canadian Inuit, one European parliamentarian (Weber 1982) noted that Inuit sealing was not carried out by traditional means nor for traditional reasons. Rather, because the bulk of Canadian Inuit sealing is done either by snowmobile on the sea ice or, in summer, by power boat, and because large numbers of the seal-skins are sold and not converted into traditional items, this representative saw no reason that Inuit should be included under the subsistence clause of the EP and EEC resolutions on sealing.

The decision in Europe to ban seal imports brought the position of Inuit clearly into focus with regard to the anti-sealing movement. Inuit from Canada and Greenland made their views vigorously known (Anonymous 1983; Heinrich 1983; Peter 1983), arguing that ringed-sealing, while an important component of the aboriginal northern economy, was a critical link in the social and cultural life of communities. Furthermore, Canadian and Greenland Inuit firmly expressed the opinion that the anti-sealing protest deliberately made no provision to differentiate Inuit from non-aboriginal activities and represented a form of reverse imperialism by the countries and people who

introduced the fur trade to Inuit (Peter 1983). More recently, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (1985:1), representing Inuit of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, went so far as to term southern attacks on Inuit resource exploitation as "patronizing overlordship vis-a-vis [Inuit] society and culture."

In turn, the protest movement has hardened its position(s) toward recent Inuit criticism. Arguments range from insistence that sealing is no longer a real issue because world fashion has turned away from furs (Watson 1985) to, at their worst, statements that Inuit culture and society have undergone deep internal change and that, in the interests of all concerned, the protest could only assist in completing this change (Best, 1984). Indeed, as Wenzel (1985b) has pointed out, these arguments are fraught with contradictions, especially in that they disregard the historical relationship of Inuit to the political-economic systems that surround them and of the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Inuit society.

Opponents within the anti-sealing movement have forcefully put forward two main arguments against Inuit seal harvesting. The first is that ringed-sealing, with its accompanying sale of seal pelts, only perpetuates a colonial-mercantile relationship (Boe, 1984). The second, noted by Moore (1983), is that the sale of ringed-sealskins by Inuit feeds the worst kind of consumerism in which Inuit become increasingly reliant on non-indigenous technologies, while for southerners it is the seeking of luxury commodities at the expense of wildlife and the environment.

The reality for Inuit is that sealing has direct influence on the nutritional, economic, and social well-being of their communities. In nutritional terms, ringed seal represents not only the most reliable and easily available local food resource, but also one of qualitative importance for the protein and B-complex vitamins it provides (see Boles et al. 1983; Borre nd and Schaefer and Steckle 1980).

From the perspective of local economics, the sale of ringed seal skins has several important aspects. Foremost, until the

EEC boycott, these sales provided an important local option for individuals who saw wage-labour as a less desirable means of securing cash, especially because full-time employment often meant emigration from the home community to a distant locale (Wenzel 1983). Second, the cash invested in hunting technologies serves to facilitate the exploitation not only of seals, but of other renewable resources of significant, if seasonal, dietary importance, even if they do not provide an accompanying money component (i.e., caribou and beluga whale).

The ringed seal is the only species that provides both food and money and is not strictly limited by conditions imposed by the natural or social environment. Species such as caribou are seasonal and produce little cash; arctic fox are present in many areas only in low numbers and, although they have a high cash value, are little valued as food; polar bear offer both food and money in large quantities, but are protected by stringent national and international regulations. The ringed seal, on the other hand, is available year-round, access is not restricted by imposed regulation as to season or number harvestable, it is locally available in high numbers and harvested individuals are rapidly replaced, it is both a high-quality and desired food source and has an accompanying high-potential monetary value.

The social value of ringed-sealing exists at two levels within Canadian Inuit society. The first is that sealing, and the entire harvesting regime, have an educational function in which the environment serves as a setting for the transmission not only of hunting skills, but also of a much wider range of societal values. From the Inuit perspective, it is a teaching situation where the older generation is able to pass on the knowledge it possesses to the young, a process called isumagsayug (Wenzel 1981). Included by Inuit in this knowledge-set is the importance of sharing, cooperation, and patience. According to Inuit, the importance of these values can only be developed through experience in the appropriate milieu (Wenzel 1985c).

Finally, for eastern-arctic Inuit, ringed-sealing, and hunting itself, may be said to be part of the self-image of

Inuit. In terms of object-relations, Inuit are not separate from the seals they hunt. Perhaps it is in this area that the views of Inuit and seal protesters are in greatest variance. Steven Best, of I Kare Wildlife Coalition, argues that if an inability to sell sealskins detracts from Inuit engaging in harvesting, then he fails to see any link between sealing as an economic activity and Inuit arguments that it holds cultural importance. Best (1985:10) carries his argument further by stating that if imported technology has assumed such a dominant role in Inuit activities, then "... they are incapable of maintaining a self-sustaining society...."

For Inuit, the situation is a complex one. The harvesting of all species is heavily reliant on imported technology. This technology, however, literally carries a heavy cost, with basic equipment costs rising from \$4,045.00 in 1972 to \$10,956.00 in 1984. What is also true is that these items, especially the snowmobile, alleviate some of the more pernicious difficulties faced by Inuit in terms of the need for greater mobility because of past government settlement policy and subsequent population growth. In addition, the snowmobile allows harvesters to reduce the length of absences from their community and family, while still participating in socially and culturally meaningful activities. Ringed seals have come to have even greater importance than formerly because they provide not only food, but also, until 1982, relatively sure access to much of a harvester's basic cash requirements. It is paradoxical, therefore, that the anti-seal hunt protesters, through their insistence that the sale of sealskins by Inuit is immoral, have not only placed the whole of Inuit subsistence activities in jeopardy by bringing into question the strongest component of the contemporary mixed economy, but are also asking Inuit to turn back the clock on a successful adaptation.

If a snowmobile is perceived to have greater utility than a dog sled, then the ownership of a snowmobile will become one of the criteria defining the traditional Eskimo hunter. (Kemp 1971)

## NOTES

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2 Inuit is the term used by Inuttitut-speaking Eskimos to denote themselves. It will be used here in preference to the broader term, Eskimo, which includes the Yupik Eskimos of southern Bering Strait (see Burch 1984: 3).

3 Natsik is the Iglulingmiut term used for ringed seal by the Inuit of northern Baffin Island and western Foxe Basin.

4 Among these conditions were: 1) rapidly expanding local human-population aggregates caused initially by camp-to-town emigration, followed by enhanced survival throughout the general population due to improved health care; 2) increasingly limited access to certain species because of government regulatory measures; 3) the introduction of new harvesting technologies, especially the snowmobile, which enhanced needed geographic mobility; and 4) the upwardly spiraling cost of all imported artifacts.

5 Figures are based upon data collected by the author from Clyde River, NWT, between 1971 and 1981.

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