



Kenneth R. Whitten

Local Harvest On the North Slope

by Geoff Carroll

It's mid-October and my companions and I are chopping holes in the river ice so we can put sinking gillnets under the ice and catch some fish for the winter. We hear a snogo approaching and look up to see my wife Marie and her uncle Whitlam Adams, known on the North Slope as Anugi, returning from a caribou hunt. There are legs and antlers sticking up from the freight sled Whitlam is pulling, so we walk over to see what they got. We roll a young bull, a cow, and a calf off the sled. They all look to be in good condition and promise to be fine eating. Local people hunt almost exclusively for meat. The only time big bulls are pursued is in early fall when they have a thick layer of fat. Among other uses the fat is made into Eskimo ice cream by rendering it and whipping the oil into a froth as it cools. Later in the fall, after rutting season has begun, experienced hunters avoid shooting bulls.

We then return to the ice and finish setting our net. The first step is to cut a series of holes about 25 feet apart. Then we dangle a weighted line through the first hole and catch it with a hook on a long pole pushed through the next hole. The line and weight are pulled up through the second hole. This process is repeated until the line reaches under water from the first hole to the last. Finally, the rope is tied onto a net and, by pulling on the rope, the net is pulled down through the first hole and is stretched between the two end holes.

The last chore before lunch is to check the net we had put in the night before. We tie the long rope onto one end of the net and pull the net onto the ice from the other end. We pick about 30 fish out of the net and use the rope to pull it back under the

ice. The fish are a combination of Arctic and least cisco plus humpback and broad whitefish. They are all good eating, but the Arctic cisco are the real prizes and are perfect for eating raw frozen.

We have lunch in a small cabin with Whitlam and his wife Mary on the bank of the Meade River. Most North Slope families have access to at least one hunting camp from which they base much of their inland hunting and fishing. These camps are usually a tent frame or cabin next to a lake or stream and are scattered across the entire coastal plain. People travel to the camps by boat, snogo, and, occasionally, airplane.

We traveled about 40 miles to get to this camp. Hunters travel widely across North Slope lands. Most of the region is roadless and local hunters are very skilled at navigating without maps or compasses over what appears, to the uninitiated, to be featureless tundra. Experienced hunters often drive snogos to hunting areas that are between 10 and 150 miles from town. To be able to navigate to these places hunters must know the country very well, have a well developed sense for subtle changes in terrain, and use environmental cues, such as wind direction and orientation of snow drifts, to determine direction.

After lunch we go out to skin and clean the caribou. As we are cleaning the caribou, Whitlam keeps a sharp eye out for any other caribou coming into view. He has shot three, but he could still take two more before he reaches his daily limit of five.

Caribou regulations are liberal in this area (Game Management Subunit 26A), partly because there is an abundant re-

source and partly in recognition of local hunting practices. At last count there were at least 360,000 caribou in 26A and 4,585 residents. A common local hunting practice is that a skilled hunter often does the hunting for many people.

During the fall and spring, Whitlam is a whaling captain and, as with many North Slope providers, hunting, fishing, and trapping are year-round activities. While most people hold down steady jobs, hunting at least part-time throughout the year is an enjoyable necessity because most people prefer wild meat, and store-bought food is very expensive.

Yearly Harvest Cycle

During spring (April through June), when leads of open water develop in the sea ice, the primary emphasis in most coastal communities along the Chukchi Sea coast—Point Hope, Wainwright, and Barrow—is on hunting bowhead whales and other marine mammals, such as bearded seals, ring seals, beluga whales, and polar bears. King and common eider ducks are harvested during spring migration. Because spring leads are too far offshore for whale hunting along the Beaufort Sea coast, the communities located there—Nuiqsut and Kaktovik—and Interior communities—Atkasuk and Anaktuvuk Pass—hunt and trap terrestrial animals during this time. During May and June, when whaling winds down, but before all the snow melts, coastal people travel inland and hunt geese, primarily white fronts, from the central flyway. Grizzly bears are occasionally harvested.

When the river ice melts and the sea ice moves away from the coast during July and August, people travel in boats to hunt.



Geoff Carroll



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Henry Huntington



Henry Huntington

(From top to bottom)

Quinn Carroll, the author's son, helps catch whitefish for the winter.

Gillnets, set under the ice, provide Arctic and least cisco as well as humpback and broad whitefish.

Jenny Peneak butchers caribou in Ekokpuk Valley.

Caribou roasts at Ekokpuk Creek.

Walrus, bearded seals, and ring seals are harvested in the ocean and people travel up rivers and along the coast to hunt caribou. In July, Point Lay villagers have their annual beluga whale hunt driving the animals into a lagoon to be harvested. People from Nuiqsut boat up the Colville River to hunt moose in August. Moose occasionally wander out onto the northern plains and are harvested by people from coastal villages. August is the prime time to hunt eider ducks as they migrate south. Using nets placed along the coast and in rivers people catch salmon, whitefish, burbot, char, and grayling.

From September through November, the first snow falls and rivers and lakes gradually freeze. Caribou are in prime condition and hunters travel by boat and snowmachine to harvest them. Dall sheep, moose, and grizzly bears are harvested by Anaktuvuk Pass people and coastal people who travel inland. Some muskoxen are harvested, mostly in the eastern North Slope. People ice fish using nets and jigging apparatus. The coast is generally still ice free and small coastal fish such as capelin, Arctic cod, tomcod, and smelt are also caught during this time. Bowhead whales are hunted during their fall migration by the villages of Kaktovik, Nuiqsut, and Barrow along the Beaufort Sea coast. During the winter (December through March), hunters harvest ring seals and polar bears on the sea ice. Arctic foxes are trapped both on the sea ice and on land. People ice fish, usually with hooks and lines. Wolves, wolverines, ptarmigan, and caribou are harvested across the North Slope. Some muskoxen are harvested in March.

Relative Importance of Harvested Animals

The number of various types of animals harvested varies from one community to another. Marine mammals are the most important subsistence resource in the coastal villages. For example, according to the North Slope Subsistence Study done by Steven Braund and Associates, during 1988, in Barrow 56 percent (329,296 lbs.) of edible subsistence food was from marine mammals, 32 percent (190,459 lbs.) from terrestrial mammals, 8 percent (58,825 lbs.) from fish, and 4

percent (21,434 lbs.) from birds. In Wainwright, 69 percent was from marine mammals, 25 percent from terrestrial mammals, 4 percent from fish, and 2 percent from birds. In Barrow, Wainwright, Kaktovik, and Point Hope, bowhead whales are the most important subsistence animals, with caribou second. In Point Lay, beluga whales are most important. There the beluga harvest generally takes place over a two- or three-day period and, according to an Alaska Department of Fish and Game Subsistence Division study, this hunt supplies up to 65 percent of the annual subsistence harvest. While some individuals from inland communities travel to coastal villages to hunt marine mammals, most of their harvest is terrestrial animals; and caribou are the most important subsistence species.

When we are done butchering the caribou, Mary takes some ribs to make a delicious caribou soup for dinner, with slices of frozen bowhead *maktak* on the side. Outside, the air is so clear we can see the lights of Barrow and Atkasuk as well as nearby camps, while the northern lights undulate overhead among the stars.

The next morning we rise at sunup, pull our nets, take the fish, and pack our sleds for the ride back to town. We are still hunting on the return journey, but see not a single caribou in an area where, last year at this time, there had been tens of thousands.

It occurs to me that this variability is the essence of North Slope hunting. Animal movements and availability are not always predictable. Fortunately, there are many options. If one type of animal is not available a hunter can usually compensate by harvesting more of something else. In addition there is an extensive system of trading and sharing among and within villages. Through this system, inland villages receive such things as marine mammal products and coastal villages obtain wolf and wolverine pelts. Because hunters are versatile and because of this ancient sharing and trading practice people enjoy a variety of animal products and seldom need to do without.

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