

The Tuktu and Nogak Project: Inuit Knowledge about Caribou and Calving Areas in the Bathurst Inlet Region

By *Natasha L. Thorpe*

AFTER AN EXHILARATING SPLASH INTO THE RIVER, we threw on dry clothes and climbed back into the boats to resume our search for caribou. We had not brought enough “kabloonag” food with us, and a caribou would make the difference between returning to Umingmaktok or staying out on the land for the night. No sooner had the boat eased into full throttle than did excited voices—screams of “tuktu! tuktu!”—sound over the noise of the engine. Noah expertly slowed the boat, turned towards shore, and reached for his rifle. On the shore, a mammoth bull darted across the open tundra. Nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. Noah aimed while Lena, Mary, Bobby, and I held our breaths and sent warning messages of “hush!” to our growling stomachs. The first shot screamed “tuktu!” and ricocheted off a rocky outcrop. The bull was stunned and bolted inland. Noah fired again and again, but the boat was rocking and challenging his balance. Lena, a skilled elder, stood up to take over. Two shots later, narrow misses, she handed the rifle back to Noah, giggling and shrugging. Meanwhile, the bull continued to run away from us, and butterflies of fear collapsed inside me: we would not eat caribou tonight. Suddenly, just as I had given up, the bull stopped, contemplated, paced back and forth, and then charged back towards us, full speed ahead. This time the boat was steady, and when Noah fired, the bull froze, then collapsed to the ground... “How come he came back to us?” I asked. The elder responded, “Because he knew we were hungry.”

Bathurst Inlet, July 1997

Aboriginal and northern peoples depend upon healthy populations of caribou for hunting, ceremony, and tradition. For the Inuit of Umingmaktok (Bay Chimo) and Kingaok (Bathurst Inlet), caribou are of particular importance, since the Bathurst herd migrates through and calves in areas nearby. People of these communities recognize that the abundance and survival of the Bathurst caribou herd rely upon the health of a larger ecosystem where everything is interconnected: knowing caribou from an Inuit perspective means knowing the relationships between the spiritual, cultural, ecological, and biophysical aspects of the environment. Today, this understanding of the world is referred to as “traditional ecological knowledge.” In Nunavut this is an awareness born from the survival, experience, and wisdom of many generations of Inuit who have maintained a reciprocal relationship with the land.

Traditional ecological knowledge is central to Inuit culture in general, and to the sustainable management of lands, resources, and wildlife in particular. Since lifestyles



Caribou grazing east of Bathurst Inlet, June 1997.

in the Bathurst Inlet region are changing at the same time that elders are passing on and taking their wisdom with them, efforts to document this knowledge are critical. Mineral exploration and the potential for mine development, along with other land use issues, further compound this imperative. For these reasons, a two-year study entitled The Tuktu (caribou) and Nogak (calves) Project (“the project”) was initiated in February 1997, with the primary goal of documenting and communicating Inuit knowledge about caribou and calving areas in the Bathurst Inlet region.

THE TUKTU AND NOGAK PROJECT BEGINS

The idea for the project was suggested by Gerry Atatahak, who was heading up the Naonayaotit Study (“the study”), a broader and more regional traditional ecological knowledge study in the West Kitikmeot region, run by the Kugluktuk Angoniatit Association on behalf of the Kitikmeot Inuit Association. Through my continued work for various agencies in the North last year, I became interested and involved in the Naonayaotit Study, working with Gerry and others to draft interview questions. Gerry suggested that a more intensive and localized study was needed in the Bathurst Inlet region, where the calving grounds of the Bathurst caribou herd are located.

Over the course of the following year, Gerry helped me to cultivate input and support from other northern agencies for a project proposal that was subsequently funded by the West Kitikmeot Slave Study Society in Yellowknife. Starting in May 1997, I left Yellowknife to meet with the communities of Umingmaktok, Kingaok, Ikaluktutiak (Cambridge Bay) and Kugluktuk (Coppermine). The two

latter communities were visited so as to include individuals who have lived, hunted, or traveled in the Bathurst Inlet region. I spent the next few months living and learning in Umingmaktok, with brief visits to Ikaluktutiak and Kingaok to raise awareness and solicit input.

The project was founded on the principle that a methodology that is responsive to community initiatives is most effective. Thus, the main objective of the first field season was to evolve the project in response to community direction. This “emic” methodology—community driven and directed—lacks the formal structure typical of other studies (Pike, 1967). A central component of this approach is to allow adequate time to establish a local advisory committee with the responsibility to develop the methodology and goals and ultimately direct the project.

RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY DIRECTION: PROJECT GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

The advisory committee—The Tuktu and Nogak Board—was formed over the course of the first summer and consists of local community members, primarily elders. A senior research partner, Eileen Kakolak of Umingmaktok, was hired to work with the project along with two youths, Karen Kamoayak of Umingmaktok and Vanna Klengenber of Ikaluktutiak. Together, we arranged several meetings with elders and community members, which led to the decision that the most appropriate forum in which to discuss Inuit knowledge about caribou and calving areas in the Bathurst Inlet region would be expeditions on the land. These trips would also serve as meaningful educational experiences in the form of elder-youth exchanges. One such expedition occurred this summer; part of it is described in the opening paragraph of this paper.

Meetings with community members helped to clarify the study area and the goals of the project:

- to develop a traditional ecological knowledge framework within which to understand better the complexity and uncertainty of our knowledge concerning caribou in the region;
- to preserve and communicate Inuit knowledge with a view towards improving wildlife management and minimizing potential impacts on local environments; and
- to develop research skills and offer training opportunities for community members, to encourage community-based projects in the future.

The chosen study area comprises the historical and current hunting grounds of the communities of Umingmaktok and Kingaok, with a focus on the region between Bathurst Inlet and the Queen Maud Bird Sanctuary.

Community sessions in November 1997 helped to clarify how these objectives will be met, and what issues exist concerning the use and storage of information to be documented through this project. For such important decisions,



Koaha Kakolak of Umingmaktok scouts for caribou, June 1997.

community members felt that they needed time to think and talk about how they wanted the project to evolve and what their common visions were. Thus, it was decided that it would be most appropriate to wait several months after the first summer field season to discuss these issues further.

It has been suggested that maps and recordings be translated and transcribed for storage and use by local hunters and trappers organizations, as well as at a regional location, such as the Kitikmeot Inuit Association in Ikaluktutiak. Recordings and transcripts may be converted into text format for interactive computer use, for example, by schools or regional wildlife and environmental agencies. Spatial information may be converted into a geographic information system (GIS) format so that it is compatible with projects currently run by the Nunavut Planning Commission and the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board.

CAN INUIT KNOWLEDGE BE COMBINED WITH SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH?

It is important to the Inuit of the Kitikmeot region, and to other stakeholders in Nunavut, that both Inuit knowledge and scientific research concerning caribou and calving grounds be documented and communicated (Ferguson and Messier, 1997). It is hoped that results from this project will assist local community members and regional resource and environmental managers in the challenge of making informed decisions on the basis of limited historical scientific data and Inuit knowledge, which is both recorded and accessible.

The project will build upon earlier works, such as the Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Studies (Freeman, 1976) and the *Nunavut Atlas* (Riewe, 1992). Local and historical information about caribou documented through the project may help to ensure a more holistic approach to wildlife management. Such an approach would be based on the broad expertise of Inuit consultants that could, where appropriate, be used along with scientific information to assist northern

communities, agencies, and interest groups (Gunn et al., 1988; McDonald, 1988; Nakashima, 1990). For example, results from this project could be combined with the ongoing scientific research on caribou migration and habitat being conducted by Anne Gunn (Government of the Northwest Territories, Yellowknife) and others. A shift towards this holistic approach may become a viable alternative wildlife management framework for the North, especially given the complexities and uncertainties that make decision making in a multi-use environment such a challenge.

SOUTHERN RESEARCHER A *HIK HIK*?

I was walking back from the Co-op across the ice, sloshing around in my new Sorrels, when I looked up to see a young boy squatting down and jigging for fish. Curious, I quietly approached him to see if he had caught anything yet. We sat in silence for several moments. Suddenly the stillness was broken by a seagull that squawked as it flew overhead. The young boy, eyes still fixed on his fishing hole, pointed to the sky and softly explained to me, “That is a Naoyak.” I nodded, glad to learn my first word of Inuinnaqtun. Several moments later a flock of Canadian geese flew over us. “What do you call those?” I asked. The boy hesitated, then replied, “I don’t know. I forgot what my Granny told me.”

Umingmaktok, June 1997

Many Inuit call us southern researchers *hik hiks*—or ground squirrels—because we come up only in the summer. Unlike *hik hiks*, I stretched my intended short summer visit into several winters when I first moved to the Northwest Territories. My experiences with a variety of northern stakeholders—Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Environment Canada, GeoNorth Environmental Consulting, and BHP Diamonds Inc.—included everything from collecting water samples at remote water bodies to visiting sites on the land, where stone circles and ancient tools told stories of fishing, hunting, and trapping. Although it was difficult to leave my original roots in the West Coast rain forest, I discovered a whole new world of wonder in the tundra of the Northwest Territories.

The open spaces above the tree line spoke of infinite possibilities—no barriers, no limits. However, as a young environmental scientist and physical geographer working in the North, I began to feel that there were boundaries—at least in the realm of my limited scientific understanding of northern land, resources, and wildlife. It was during this time that I became interested to see if and how two ways of knowing, namely Inuit observation and Western science, could be steered towards some sort of balance.

I was extremely fortunate that Gerry Atatahak provided me with the opportunity to explore this question by working in partnership with a community advisory committee for the Tuktu and Nogak Project. Consequently, I returned to graduate school at the School of Resource and

Environmental Management at Simon Fraser University (SFU). Here I fortuitously connected with my advisors, Drs. Evelyn Pinkerton and Chad Day, and Gary Kofinas of the University of British Columbia who has done impressive work with Canadian Porcupine Caribou user communities.

As the opening paragraph of this section suggests, in some cases, children in the Bathurst Inlet region are forgetting what their elders have told them. As a new generation emerges with the coming of Nunavut, documenting and communicating this wisdom, in a way that ensures that initiative, direction, and control reside with community members, becomes critical. As a student working in northern communities, I have learned how to unlearn much of what I thought I knew. I am honored that community members have let me see a glimpse of the ocean through a crack in the sea ice.

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