

**Blue Mussel Winter
Harvest Testing Program**

Akulivik 1996

**Final Report
97-03-27**



**Programme d'essai
et d'expérimentation
halieutiques et aquicoles**

**Fisheries and
Aquaculture Testing and
Experimentation Program**

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Citation

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Introduction

The blue mussel is widely distributed in Nunavik and is used as country food, both in summer and winter. In summer, intertidal mussels are harvested by hand. In winter, intertidal mussels are harvested by hand at communities, such as Salluit and Kangiqsujaq, where tidal amplitude is great (5 m) and allows access to mussel beds through broken and rafted ice. In Akulivik, where tides are smaller (0.4 m) and ice cover is continuous, subtidal mussels are harvested through holes in the ice using long scoops (Mesher and Doidge 1995).

The methods used to harvest mussels for subsistence purposes were observed in 1995 (Mesher and Doidge 1995). The objectives of the present study are:

- to improve gear design and harvest techniques,
- to assess if mussel harvesting has the commercial potential to create seasonal employment for one or two persons.

During the last two weeks of March 1996, we visited Akulivik to work with two hunters who are active mussel harvesters. Assessment of gear and sample collection was made at this time. Video tape was taken to document the extent of the mussel beds, the scooping techniques and the effect of scooping on the habitat.

Gear Development

Design of scoop

Scoops have been used to harvest mussels in Akulivik since the early 1980s (Figure 1). The basic design consists of a metal hoop and net attached to a long pole, usually made of 2"x3" (4 cm x 6 cm) wood. Harvesters make their scoops from available

material. Hence, individual scoops vary in design, and improvements have been made over the years (Mesher and Doidge 1995). Finding suitable net material has been a problem in past years (H. Alayco, pers. comm.).

Two prototype scoops were made similar to that shown in Figure 1. The scoop basket threaded to the handle via 2" (5 cm) diameter pipe connectors. Initially, the handles were made of 6' (1.8 m), 2" (5 cm) diameter sections of PVC pipe having a solid spruce core. A PVC covered, round pole was thought to be easier and more comfortable to grip in the cold. The wood core was used to reinforce the hollow piping. Up to four, 6' sections could be bolted together to form the handle.

The PVC-wood handles proved to be too flexible and didn't permit the scoop to be driven into the substrate. Initially the handles were replaced with 1 1/4" (3.2 cm) galvanized steel pipe. Although sufficiently strong, these proved too heavy for easy use. Finally, it was decided to return to the 2"x3" (4 cm x 6 cm) wooden handles commonly used by most harvesters.

The initial scoop design had a square shape. The tip of the scoop, which contacts the substrate, was modified to a curve to allow greater penetration of the substrate. A band of steel, 3 cm wide was welded onto the leading edge of the scoop, perpendicular to the handle. The purpose of this band was to act as a small shovel. Stiff nylon netting, 1 cm stretched mesh, was used to form the basket of the scoop (Figure 2).

Harvesting Operations

Site selection

In winter, mussels are harvested in areas where water depth is approximately 4 m. The favoured place for subsistence harvesting ($60^{\circ}48'56''\text{N}$ $78^{\circ}14'13''\text{W}$) is 2 km NW of the village of Akulivik (Figure 3). This site is also harvested in summer. The area is adjacent to a rocky islet where a moderate tidal current is present.

Access to mussel beds

In winter, the sea-ice above the beds is 2 m thick. To gain access to the beds, a hole, approximately 1.5 m in diameter, is made in the ice using ice augers and chisels. This is fairly heavy work requiring about three hours of strenuous work by two or three people.

At the harvesting site, the water was 4.1 m deep. Through a hole 1.5 m wide in 2 m ice, a scoop, with a mouth 30 cm wide, can scrape a 5 m long strip which covers an area 1.5 m^2 of sea-bottom. The potential scraping area beneath the hole is 19.6 m^2 , but it would be difficult to harvest the total area scraping radially.

Scooping techniques

The technique used for scooping varies little between operators (Figure 4). The scoop is fed into the hole at the lowest angle possible for that size of hole and thickness of ice. This is done to maximize the distance scooped. The leading edge of the scoop is pressed firmly into the bottom. Using the edge of the hole as a pivot, the scoop is then drawn towards the operator using a vertical jiggling motion. On passing the vertical position, the operator continues to push the scoop away until the handle forms a 60° -

45° angle to the horizontal. The scoop is then lifted to the surface by hauling along the handle. The scoop basket is then inverted which dumps the mussels on the ice.

Sorting is usually done by another person while the first person keeps scooping. Mussels, 4.5 cm or greater in length are to be kept for consumption. They are de-clumped and cleaned of debris (Figure 5). They are then placed in a bucket of sea-water to prevent freezing - ambient temperatures can be -30°C. Under-sized mussels are thrown back down the hole. When approximately 5 kg of mussels have been processed they are transferred to onion bags. The bags are then secured with a rope and suspended from one of the holes in the ice. Further cleaning is accomplished by rinsing the bag in the sea-water. Mussels left suspended in the sea for one or two days cleanse themselves of sand and silt.

Assessment of mussel beds

Density and yield

Initially, it was planned to use a Petersen grab to assess mussel density. Previous sampling at this site (AK-1) indicated that the bottom could be soft (Mesher and Doidge 1995, KRC 1994). However, at four holes which were made in the ice, the grab failed to sample due to a hard, rocky bottom.

As an alternate to grab sampling, video footage was taken using a Hi8 camcorder (SONY Model TR81) in an underwater housing (Amphibico Inc, Lachine, Quebec). Analysis of the video revealed that the distribution of mussels was patchy. Mussels occurred on both rocky and soft bottoms. Scoop marks were clearly seen in existing beds. Other areas, which have been heavily scooped in the past, were more or less barren containing only empty shells.

Four holes were made in the ice between the rocky islet and a shoal, ca 75 m to the south (Figure 6). Hole #1 was made as a continuation of a line made by other harvesters, close to the shore of the rocky islet. Holes #2 and #3 were closer to the shoal. The fourth hole was made in the same line series as hole #1. Yields at holes #1 and #4 were poor totaling less than 2 kg. At holes #2 and #3, initial scooping rates were similar to the 20 kg/hr experienced in winter sampling in 1995 (Mesher and Doidge 1995), however scooping success diminished after half an hour when ca 9 kg of mussels had been gathered.

Growth rates and age structure

The age of a mussel is determined by taking a thin section from the shell through the umbo region using a diamond-tipped slow speed saw. Annual growth increments are represented by light and dark bands in the nacreous layer of the umbo (Lutz 1976, Thompson, Doidge and May 1993).

In Nunavik, mussels fall into two broad categories by region: fast growing, large sized mussels of Ungava Bay and slower growing, smaller mussels of Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait (KRC 1994). Mussels at Akulivik fall into the latter category.

The age structure of the mussel beds was obtained from a scooped sample (Figure 7). The modal age of the sample of 53 mussels was 11 years. Younger age classes (1 -8) are generally absent. Some small mussels slip through the mesh of the scoop but many mussel beds in Nunavik show a similar age distribution (KRC 1994). The lack of young could result from sporadic success of annual recruitment or the exclusion, by competition or other means, of small sized mussels from the beds.

The mussels sampled on March 29, 1996 show the same general growth characteristics of those from the same site in February 1995 (Figure 8). Mussels reach harvestable, ie commercial size of 4-5 cm, by 4 to 5 years of age. By age 7 years, growth in size has almost ceased; the mussels range in size from 5 to 8 cm. With adequate recruitment, and ignoring the effects of predation, it would take about five years for depleted beds to re-seed themselves and grow to a harvestable size.

Commercialization

Market and supply

There is a ready, although limited, market for mussels in Akulivik, which is a village of 300 people. Mussels are sold at the local Co-op for \$1.00/lb (\$2.20/kg) (Mesher and Doidge 1995). Sometimes an over-abundance of supply exists; mussels have spoilt in the store in the past (Co-op manager, pers. com.). However, this can be avoided by leaving mussels in the onion bags in the sea until needed for use.

Product assessment

Test yields from the scooping operation were too low to assess the effects of freezing the product on taste and appearance. Mussels, however, do have tolerance to freezing. People in Akulivik consume mussels, both cooked and raw, which have been previously frozen.

Commercial potential

High air cargo tariffs between communities limit commercialization of mussels to within communities (KRC 1994). Mesher and Doidge (1995) compare the economics of winter versus summer harvesting, based on a daily yield of 100 kg of commercial grade mussels. The data from March 1996 indicate that this yield estimate is too optimistic; the yields-per-hole in 1996 were close to half of those in 1995.

Yields would be greater if the holes were situated over dense mussel beds. Mapping of the mussel beds in summer, using an underwater video camera, would allow harvesters to concentrate on denser mussel beds, on softer bottoms. Also, if holes were easier to make, more time could be spent harvesting.

Presently, low yields, coupled with the arduous task of making the hole in the ice, appear to make local commercialization on the small scale unviable. If yields-per-hole were higher, commercialization, which would employ one to two people, may be possible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Without prior knowledge of the density and location of mussel beds, and easier ways of making holes, commercialization is not economically feasible.
- Mapping of mussel distribution, in summer, using underwater video coupled with a geographic positioning system (GPS) would enable harvesters to maximize yields per-unit-effort, and may make a small commercial operation economical.
- Biomass could not be assessed in winter due to the difficulty of making holes in the ice and the Petersen grab did not work on the hard bottom. Mussel density could be measured in summer using an underwater video camera on a grid system. If making holes in the ice was feasible enough to allow a commercial operation, catch-effort data could be used to indirectly estimate the biomass using the Leslie method (Ricker 1975).
- The design of scoops has been optimized within a reasonable cost for home construction.
- The use of chainsaws, modified to cut ice, should be investigated as an alternate to using ice augers for making holes in the ice.
- Onion bags are the best containers for mussels. They allow mussels to remain alive in storage in the sea for later use, at the same time as allowing the mussels to cleanse themselves of sand and silt particles.

Acknowledgments

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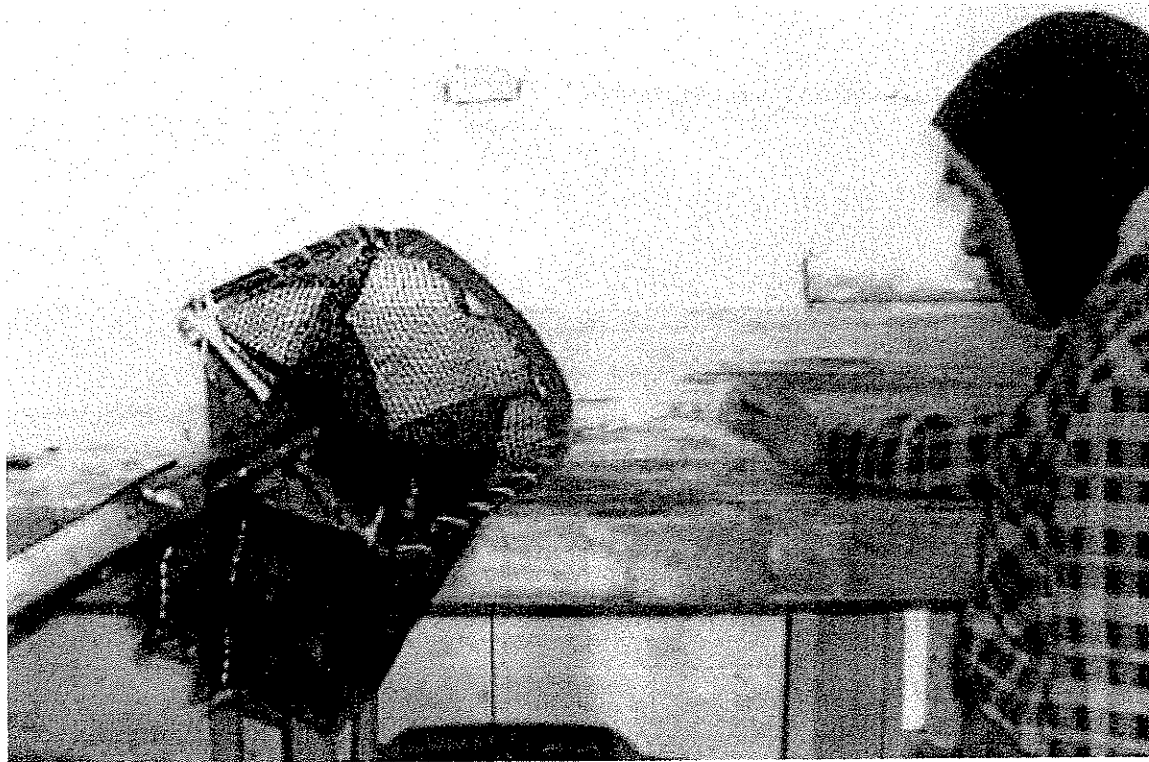


Figure 2. Details of scoop basket. Nylon netting is attached to metal frame. This scoop has a 3 cm metal band on its leading edge. Akulivik, March 1996.

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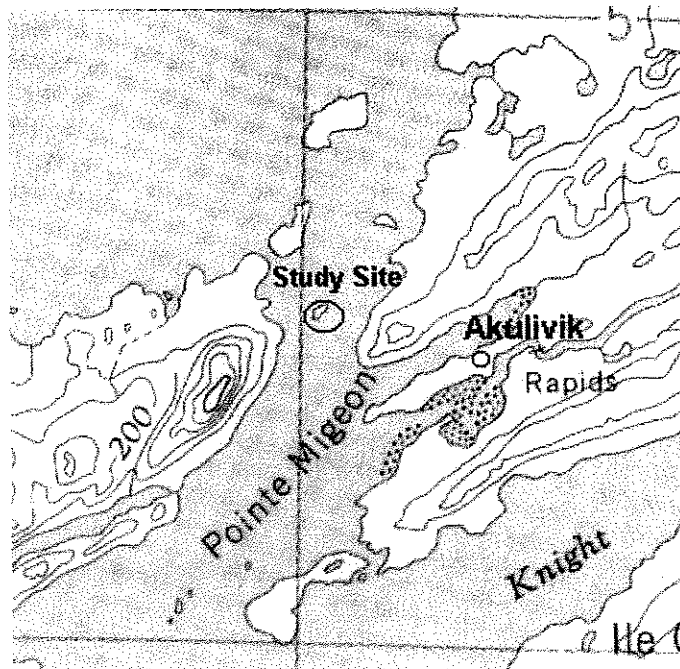
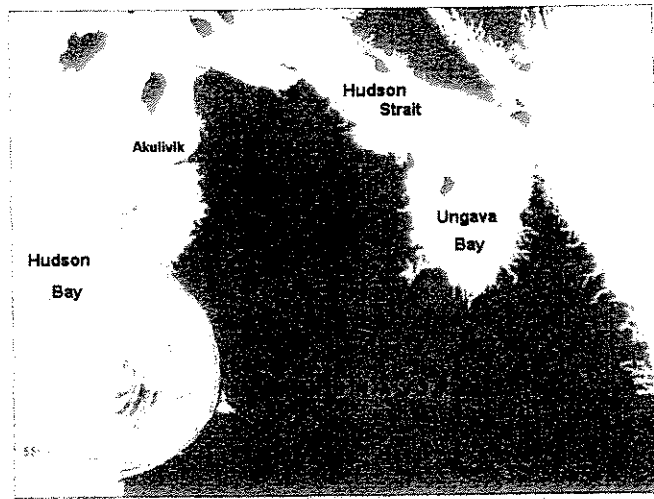


Figure 3. Study site situated 2 km NW of the village of Akulivik on the northeastern Hudson Bay coast.

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Figure 5. Sorting, declumping and cleaning mussels on the ice.

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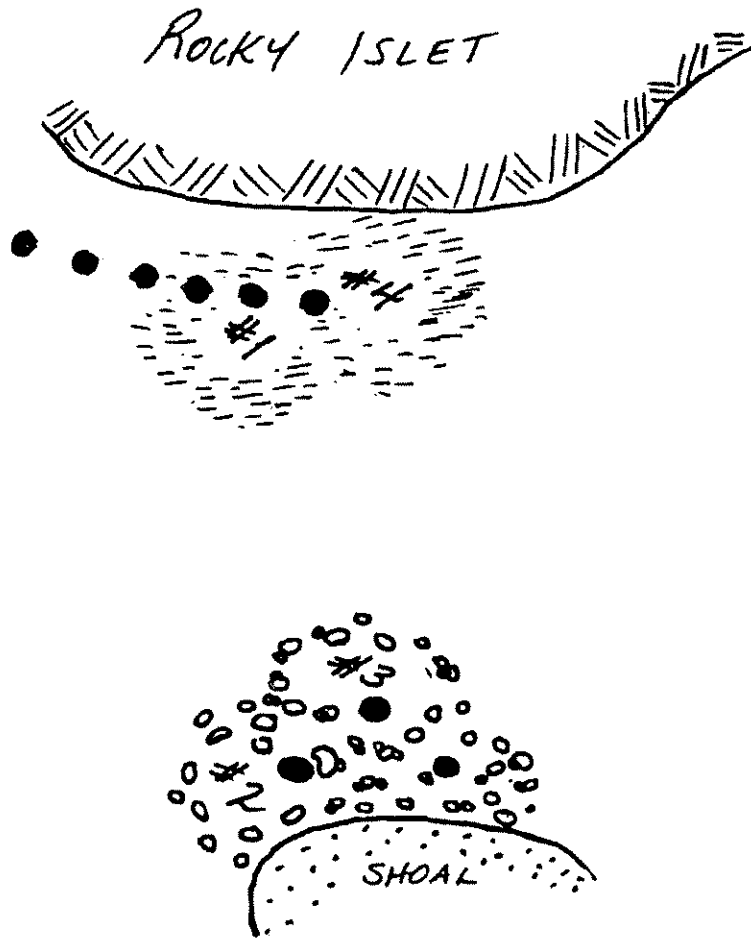


Figure 6. Field sketch of the sampling site. Black circles represent holes in the ice. Bottom is flat and smooth at holes #1 and #4, rocky and uneven at holes #2 and #3. Un-numbered holes were made by subsistence harvesters. The distance between the shoal and rocky islet is approximately 75 m.

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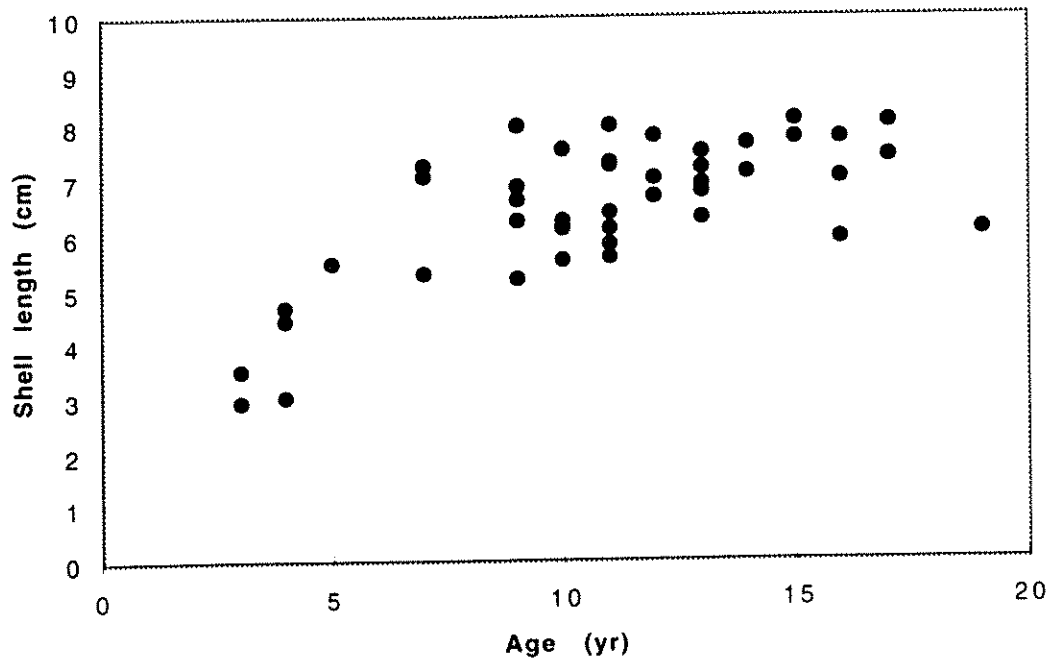


Figure 8. Age - length relationship of mussels from Akulivik, March 1996.

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