

The Hiukitak School of Tuktu: Collecting Inuit Ecological Knowledge of Caribou and Calving Areas Through an Elder-Youth Camp.

By Natasha L. Thorpe

LENA KAMOAYOK awoke at her usual time (4:00 a.m.) and began to prepare her teaching props. She squatted into the gentle light coming through the opening in her tent and, with her army knife, she expertly sliced through the Frosted Flakes box. She sawed with excited determination, fastidiously tracing the outline of a caribou she sketched. Within minutes she had produced a target. She would use this to teach the youth how to hunt with a bow and arrows that were already made—she'd crafted them last month, and they had been sitting in a sacred box in her *tupiq* (tent) ever since.

When the youth awoke several hours later, Lena scarcely let them finish breakfast before she wandered up the hill towards the row of *talut* (hunting blinds). Silently she beckoned the youth from the caribou skin tent and towards her outdoor classroom. Here they would learn how to hunt caribou just as their ancestors have done at this same place for generations.

Hiukitak River, August 1998

Like Lena, many elders in the Bathurst Inlet region feel strongly about teaching their youth about traditional Inuit ways of living on the land. Surviving in the North requires a reciprocal relationship with resources such as caribou. Such a relationship necessitates understanding the environment from both detailed and holistic perspectives. For generations, Inuit living on the land have learned from their elders and developed this expertise through experience. This intergenerational and experiential knowledge can be termed Inuit ecological knowledge or IEK. Scott (1998:313) defines this as *metis*, or “a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment.” In other literature, IEK has often been referred to as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Incorporating IEK into community life and resource management will assist the Canadian Inuit as they begin to govern their own territory of Nunavut.

To help meet the challenge of sustainable resource management within Nunavut, community members and decision makers benefit from well-documented and easily accessible IEK. For communities, sharing and recording IEK provides cultural continuity through storytelling. Further, more interactions between elders and community members, particularly youth, are important because they foster community pride and empowerment. For decision makers, IEK often contains critical information about an



Lena Kamoayok shows Joseph Jr. Tikhak how to hunt using a bow and arrow. Hiukitak River Elder-Youth Camp, Bathurst Inlet, August 1998. Photo by Natasha Thorpe.

environment in question when proposed land uses must be considered. This is the situation for people of northern communities and organizations in the Kitikmeot region. Currently, they must contemplate mining activities on lands used by the Bathurst caribou herd for migration, calving, and post-calving. In addition to increasing mining exploration and development, local community members are spending less time on the land practising traditional ways of living. Most serious is the fact that elders are passing away before their knowledge of caribou and calving areas of this herd is documented. Such documentation is being done for several other herds in North America. For example, Ferguson et al. (1998) have documented IEK of



Senior Researcher Sandra Eyegetok tries her traditional hunting skills. Hiukitak River Elder-Youth Camp, Bathurst Inlet, August 1998. Photo by Natasha Thorpe.



Elders share IEK with youth at the Hiukitak River Elder-Youth Camp, Bathurst Inlet, August 1998. Photo by Vanna Klengenber.

caribou on southern Baffin Island and the Gwich'in Elders (1998) have recorded information about the Porcupine, Bluenose, and woodland and mountain caribou. In addition, the Heritage Society in Iqaluktuutiaq is currently working to document IEK on many topics.

For all of these reasons, community members in Iqaluktuutiaq (Cambridge Bay), Umingmaktuuq (Bay Chimo), Qingauk (Bathurst Inlet), and Qurluqtuq (Kugluktuk) requested research to document and communicate IEK concerning caribou and calving areas of the Bathurst herd of barrenland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*). I was invited to participate in an intensive two-year research project known as the *Tuktu* (Caribou) and *Nogak* (Calf) Project. The project's community advisory board insisted that youth play an important role in all research. More specifically, it was stated that no stories should be told or lessons shared unless at least one youth was present. One potential way to meet this goal was through an elder-youth camp at a traditional caribou-hunting site. The board decided to use this approach, and the camp became a critical component of the project.

This paper is the first formal report of the elder-youth camp recently held at the Hiukitak River near Bathurst Inlet in the Kitikmeot region. I begin by providing a background on the methods used in developing the project, focusing on how the research and research team developed, and why the camp became a key component of the methods. Next, I show how a camp can be a reliable, effective and fun way to record and communicate Inuit ecological knowledge (IEK). Throughout this section, I explore gender-related differences in expertise about caribou.

METHODS

Consulting communities, establishing research relationships, and creating an advisory board are necessary steps in the early stages of conducting IEK research. In this

way, research methods are designed by and for communities. Project results are more meaningful to Inuit who have controlled the research throughout its duration. This fundamental understanding guided the inception and development of the project.

Community-directed participatory action research forms the methods for this work. Elders from four communities formed an advisory board to make decisions about methods. Elders in each community felt it was important to have at least one woman and one man representing the interests of each community. I worked with these advisors and community research partners and together, we consulted with other elders before deciding upon appropriate research methods.

It was decided that IEK must be documented through a combination of structured, semi-structured and semi-directed interviews with local caribou experts (Huntington, 1998). In some cases, a "names in a hat" majority decision-making process was used to choose the caribou experts. In other communities, interviewees either volunteered or were nominated. While the decision-making process differed in each community and depended upon the issue in question, the key similarity between processes was that the community controlled how the research methods were designed and executed.

There is a great advantage to basing IEK projects in a neutral and central location where people can easily monitor, oversee, and contribute to the research process. This became apparent when elders were consulted about establishing an office in Iqaluktuutiaq in order to transcribe, translate, and verify audiotapes from over 30 interviews. Although the local designated Inuit organization, the Kitikmeot Inuit Association (KIA), offered us space, the elders insisted that the office be at the elders' centre. It was not that they objected to KIA, only that they thought that the elders' centre would be a more comfortable, convenient, and sensible meeting place. In this setting, it was agreed that interviewees will feel more relaxed when the



Elder Jack Alonak tells stories about caribou as Sam Itkilik of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation takes footage. Hiukitak River Elder-Youth Camp, Bathurst Inlet, August 1998. Photo by Natasha Thorpe.

transcripts were read back to them during the verification process. Since the elders' centre is a frequent meeting place, the elders can actively and regularly participate in writing reports and reviewing transcripts.

Choosing and Training the Research Team

In each of the four communities involved, I was instructed to work with a senior research partner and at least one youth. The board and other community members presented several candidates for the position of senior research partner. In Iqaluktuutiaq, none of these people were available, so advertisements for the position were posted in main centres and agencies in each community. However, it turned out that word-of-mouth served as the best way to spread the news. Sandra Eyegetok was hired as my full-time senior research partner in Iqaluktuutiaq, and part-time research partners were hired in each of the other three communities. In addition, over fifteen youth were given employment because the elders felt that their involvement was critical.

Ongoing training for me, my research partners, and youth is an important feature of this research in terms of building capacity. Research partners and young assistants are trained in methods of conducting research on oral traditions, such as computer and mapping skills, safety, and plant identification. In turn, I am taught to be sensitive to cultural ways and to track, hunt, and butcher caribou.

Continuous training provides the group with skills to work together and maximize their respective expertise. Inuit elders and hunters share their knowledge about wildlife, climate, vegetation, and other issues related to caribou and calving areas. Research partners and youth contribute their expertise on the North in general and their communities in particular. My strength is that I understand *qabloonaq* (white people) ways and can share my knowledge about "computers, papers, and pens." (G. Kuptana,



Arnold Angivrana learns to skin a caribou from elder Paul Omilgoitok. Hiukitak River Elder-Youth Camp, Bathurst Inlet, August 1998. Photo by Natasha Thorpe.

pers. comm. 1998). Together, we co-operate to draw upon our diverse strengths and experiences.

Organizing an Elder-Youth Camp

Bringing together elders and youth on the land can be an effective and exciting way of teaching younger generations about traditional ways while at the same time documenting IEK. The elder-youth camp formed a critical component of the Tuktuk and Nogak Project.

The week-long camp was held in August 1998 on the shores of the Hiukitak River, a traditional caribou hunting and camping site just south of Umingmaktuuq and north-east of Qingauk. Nine elders, eight young assistants, and five project staff attended. A week was the length of time requested by the elders and proved to be a reasonable duration. However, once it was over, camp participants wished two weeks had been planned. The camp ran fairly smoothly, but it would have been easier to orchestrate with fewer participants.

It was interesting to observe how the board chose the location and season for the camp. The Hiukitak River site was chosen in part because it is distant from the current calving grounds: it would be disrespectful and disruptive to be too close to where the cows are calving because this is a sensitive time for the animals. Mid-August was the best time to hold the camp for two reasons. First, the bug season is finished. Second, in August there are always *pangniqs* (bulls) at this camp, a traditional hunting location and caribou crossing.

Using an Elder-Youth Camp to Collect IEK

The land provides a unique setting for elders to give hands-on lessons in traditional ways of living related to caribou. Youth learn through experience, practise their language, and connect with their elders and mentors in this



Camp participants gather in front of a caribou skin tent made by Ella Panegyuk. Hiukitak River Elder-Youth Camp, Bathurst Inlet, August 1998. Photo by Bobby Kakolak.

setting. At the same time, researchers and youth can document IEK.

An elder-youth camp can be a reliable way of collecting IEK for two reasons. First, by organizing daily lessons around what they feel are the most important caribou-related activities (e.g., hunting), elders prioritize which IEK is most relevant. They screen out superfluous stories by choosing to share only those containing the most important material. Chosen in this way, the information recorded is more useful for the project as well as for community members and decision makers.

Second, elders want to communicate IEK in a way that ensures cultural continuity. Since they are teaching youth rather than adults, elders are more apt to ensure that traditions are presented clearly and accurately, whether through animated stories or in straightforward discussions. When necessary, the youth can ask the elders to repeat or restate their observations and provide more detail. During the Hiukitak River camp, many elders explained their fear for those who do not know traditional ways of living on the land, such as how to hunt caribou. They feel that people without this knowledge may be in danger. In a camp environment, elders feel a strong sense of responsibility to communicate IEK for the survival of Inuit culture, tradition, and subsistence.

THE HIUKITAK SCHOOL OF CARIBOU

The youth, elders, researchers, and I sat down in a circle near the *talut* (hunting blinds), crunching colourful mosaic fractals of autumn as they lowered their bodies onto the tundra. Perched on this viewpoint we could see the giant willows below—a tangled mess of ancient arms and legs frozen beside a sliver of silver sand. Peering from the tangled willows were ten white canvas tents in a rough circle around one caribou skin tent. The arrangement of the tents mirrored our learning

circle—the new world embracing and enveloping the old. On the floodplain across the river, a lone wolf cautiously stalked a caribou, frequently creeping back to her den to mind her pups.

Hiukitak River, August 1998

At the request of the elders, we met in this circle every morning to pray and to assess the weather before deciding which skills to teach the youth. Certain people would volunteer or be nominated to lead a particular activity, such as using a *talut* (hunting blind) to hunt caribou with a bow and arrow. If there was not enough time to include all the activities on one particular day, we would tentatively plan them for the next. There was no need for a formal camp schedule (other than to assign camp chores), and flexibility was important because of variability in weather and people's energy levels.

Daily activities included caribou hunting, skinning, packing, and butchering, as well as fishing, storytelling, drum dancing, sewing, cooking, hiking, and, playing traditional games. One day when several bulls were wandering along the floodplain across the river, the men decided to teach the young men how to hunt caribou. The young women, much to their disappointment, were not invited. Instead, the elder women made sure that they stayed back at camp to learn how to sew and later, to prepare caribou meat. It was a privilege for me, a woman, to join the men on this hunt.

Men Know about Hunting and Packing Caribou

While the men were hunting, they shared IEK of the relationship between caribou and the environment. We recorded discussions about the types of plants that caribou like to eat and where they are typically located. For example, the elders explained that caribou like to graze on willows and that the tallest willows grow beside rivers. They also shared some essential hunting tips such as standing downwind from the caribou so they don't smell you, and seeking out the fattest bull by the size of its rump. They answered many questions from curious youth.

When the gun fired at the caribou, it was like a starter pistol that began a race of sprinting young men who jumped from their hiding spot and ran across the tundra to where the bull lay dead. Once everybody was gathered around the animal, the elders explained that each community has a slightly different way of butchering. Special attention was given to one youth who had never been caribou hunting before. The elders were careful to repeat their lessons to make sure he understood and encouraged him to participate frequently. Pride and confidence burst from this young man as he came of age by skinning the caribou.

Packing the caribou back to camp proved to be an exciting challenge for the young men. The elders showed them how to carry the legs like a yoke on their shoulders

and the rib cage as a suitcase on their back. First they placed the prized heart and liver inside the ribs, then sealed the animal up by pulling the diaphragm from the sternum across the base of the rib cage and securing it on the severed spine. The young men took turns carrying the caribou back to camp, grunting and panting along the way. They trudged stoically across the tundra until the weight stopped them and, sweating, they passed the parcels along to the next boy. The elder men followed behind, both proud of and amused by the young men's efforts.

Men have special knowledge about caribou, particularly concerning interactions between caribou and the land, for example, grazing, rutting, migration, and calving behaviour. The youths helped to elicit this understanding as they asked questions throughout the hunt as part of their requisite role as research assistants. I decided to save my questions for when we returned to camp and remained silent to allow the hunt to proceed naturally. This worked well because I was not disruptive. Perhaps more importantly, this encouraged the elders to relive an empowering and positive experience once back at camp. In this way, my research partners who were not able to attend the hunt could participate in the questioning.

Women Know about Butchering and Preparing Caribou

There is a clear distinction between the roles of men and women with respect to caribou-related activities. For example, when the caribou was delivered back to the camp, the men retired for tea and the women prepared to show the young women how to make *mipku* (dry meat), savour *patiq* (marrow), and check the quality of the meat. When one young man wanted to join them, the elder men and women teased him and explained that this work was for women only. Perhaps the older women wanted this sacred time with the younger women and felt that the atmosphere would have changed with one male present.

As the elders began working with the young women, they communicated that part of surviving on the land is making sure that you prepare caribou for everybody in the community to enjoy. Using an *ulu* (knife), they sliced the meat into various sized wedges. Some pieces were thick for the elders since it is easier for them to chew slightly raw meat. Others were thin and dry, as the younger people prefer them. The elders ensured that the young women understood the importance of sharing in Inuit culture by thinking of everybody when preparing food.

Men appear to have better knowledge about caribou and ecosystem relationships at a holistic level, whereas women have superior knowledge at a specific level. Women know about meat quality because they work intimately with it during preparation. They know to look for pus, swelling of the joints, or a bad odour that might indicate a sick caribou. They can tell the types of vegetation that a caribou has been eating because of the smell and taste of the meat or the stomach contents. For example, caribou taste more like lichens in the winter and like willows in the summer. It is

important to recognize the respective expertise of men and women when documenting IEK of caribou.

As in the hunting expedition, the youth were required to ask questions and record their observations during the meat preparation. As women, my research partners and I observed the elder-youth interactions and participated where we could. This was an effective way to record IEK, in part because we felt comfortable asking other women questions as they were working,

CONCLUSION

Continuity of Inuit culture is possible only when elders teach the young people the traditional Inuit ways of living. An elder-youth camp can be a powerful method of documenting and communicating IEK. In an outdoor classroom, older generations of men and women can share their respective expertise with Inuit youth through storytelling and by demonstration. This ultimately fosters community empowerment and education. These two attributes will guide young men and women as they prepare to make challenging resource management decisions in the new Canadian Inuit territory of Nunavut.

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