

CURRENT INUIT LIFESTYLES IN NORTH WEST GREENLAND.

Greenland is the world's biggest island with a population of only 58,000 people. The Inuit or 'the people' as they prefer to be known live only on the coastal margins of this island. Most of the population lives on the west coast of Greenland stretching from Cape Farewell to Upernavik. The entire east coast is populated by 3,500 people. The north west section of Greenland from Savissivik to Siorapaluk is home to just under a thousand polar Inuit. Greenland runs its own internal affairs with Denmark dealing with external matters such as defense and foreign affairs. Greenland's main income (90 percent) is from the export of fish products. The service and tourist industries also represent an important source of revenue. Our traditional view of the Inuit as hunters of animal products is undermined by the fact that only 2,500 claim to earn some level of income from this primary activity. Yet it still acts as an important source of food in the outlying towns and villages in Greenland. All other goods and services must be transported within Greenland by ship, plane or helicopter.

The north west area of Greenland is still the most traditional area in the country. The main settlement is Qaanaaq which is home to 650 people. The rest of the population is dispersed between four permanent settlements in the district. The climate varies from -30 degrees centigrade in winter to 6 degrees centigrade during the summer. Transport within the area is determined by the weather and the time of year. The 'dark time' between November and February limits travel between the settlements. Sledge travel using dogs is possible between March and June. Small power boats are used for inter-settlement transport and hunting during the summer months. Entry to the area is only possible on the twice weekly Dash 7 aircraft of Air Greenland. During the month of August 3 to 5 expedition boats arrive with tourists from other countries.



Qaanaaq Greenland (R MOLONY)

Avia is one of the 70 hunters in the district. It is a hard life as the income he generates from hunting is not enough to support his family on its own. His wife Nina works at the small hotel in the town of Qaanaaq. However she hopes to work at the Qaanaaq hospital when she is finished her training as a nurse. She helps her husband by processing any of the animals that he catches. They have two sons but neither wants to follow the hard life of the subsistence hunter as the town offers a number of other jobs in the service sector. Their Father must go out in all weathers to hunt for the animals that the area provides. The main animal hunted for food and clothing throughout the year is the seal. However Avia hunts according to what the seasons provide him with. During the 'dark time' when the sea freezes he catches polar cod through holes in the ice. The return of the light allows him to travel much longer distances to hunt for seal as they come up to breath at their aglu or breathing holes. If he is lucky he may have a 20 per cent chance of catching one. But the ice highways will break up and Avi will await the return of the Narwhal. There is a limit of 30 for the district and he will band together with five other families to catch the quota. This animal can only be hunted from a kayak using a harpoon attached to a sealskin float called an Avataq. He is successful but this hunting group only manages to catch 2 Narwhal during the entire season. The whale's skin called mattak is eaten raw and is a big source of vitamins for the Inuit. Some of the meat is preserved for the coming year or distributed to relatives or friends. Avia is also allowed to hunt both caribou and musk oxen but this means a long boat journey to the north of Siorapaluk. The more experienced hunters tend to hunt in this area also for both walrus and polar bear. These are more difficult to catch. A walrus is capable of sinking the hunter's boat and the polar bear is only hunted by the most experienced subsistence hunters.



The dangers of travelling along the ice foot. (R MOLONY)

TRAVEL AND SURVIVAL

The hunter will leave his home at Qaanaaq and set off with his dog team to Siorapaluk some 60k.m. away to the north. His 4m long sledge is pulled by a fan shaped arrangement of 11 to 16 dogs. The dogs pull with great energy as they bound across the shore ice and then the smooth ice further out to sea. It's not a bad day as we have been furnished with the local clothing suitable for this purpose. This consists of an anorak, polar bear trousers and sealskin boots and gloves. The temperature during this March day is about – 20degrees centigrade and the weather is calm. We relax as our dog team travels at 8-10 m.p.h. Our hunter will follow the coast as this is part of his mental map of the area. At times the ice is thin and we travel on the foot ice. The hunter is constantly on the lookout for thin ice or rock avalanches from the nearby cliffs. The journey passes with the whooshing noise of sledge runners on different surfaces. Snap goes the whip as the hunter asserts his control over his wild team of dogs. Out here it is man against nature at the edge of the known world.

Around him are the various bases from which explorers like Kane, Peary, Rasmussen or Herbert launched their expeditions of discovery. Only by using his methods could they be successful. Yet the earlier breaking up of the sea ice is changing his lifestyle as a hunter. The nets at Kangeq have been lost due to this break up. We leave the protection of the ice foot for the final dash to Siorapaluk after a warming drink using our primus stove. The dogs become excited as they near this most northerly village in Greenland. Here 62 people carry on a life where subsistence and modernity exist together. The mobile phone mast and racks of meat display these contradictions. Hospitality however is still offered to us as our team pull into the village.



Siorapaluk meat storage (R MOLONY)



Checking the catch under the frozen sea ice at -20 degrees centigrade (R MOLONY)

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ACTIVITIES

1. FIND OUT THE LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE OF QAANAAQ AND SIORAPALUK COMPARED TO WHERE YOU LIVE.
2. DRAW UP A TABLE SHOWING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE UK AND GREENLAND.
3. WRITE A 12 LINE POEM USING GEOGRAPHICAL WORDS TO DESCRIBE THE LIFESTYLE OF AN INUIT SUBSISTENCE HUNTER IN THE 21ST CENTUARY. (DIFFERENTIATION GIFTED PUPILS TO WRITE A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE ON THE EFFECTS OF GLOBAL WARMING ON THE PEOPLE OF THE ARCTIC.)

KEY WORDS-ECONOMIC ACTIVITY-SUBSISTENCE-PRIMARY-SECONDARY-TERTIARY-GLOBAL WARMING-LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE.