

Timely Migration of Tomcod Proved Arctic Lifesaver

Published in Tundra Times
Nov. 19, 1962

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Tomcod, the little fish that never seems to travel on schedule but seems to turn up when most needed, is perhaps one of the important living things in the existence of man in the Arctic.

In the past, there have been lean years in the north when the little tomcod made its timely appearance to relieve the meager diet the Eskimo experienced when hunting conditions were unfavorable.

Usually by the millions, the tomcod teem in the sea under the ice.

When a run is heavy, the

Eskimos pick up their special made hooks and, literally, dip them in and pull them out, hooking the little fish with almost monotonous regularity.

Hooks to catch tomcod have to be made specially.

The men carve inch and a quarter long pieces of walrus ivory into shapes something like a curved teardrop. Four of these are made on which a hook or barb is fastened.

A sinker is also fashioned out of ivory. This is carved like a teardrop, also, and polished. This sinker is also made into a large hook with four prongs. It is about three inches long.

When the hooks have been made, the men take seagull wings,

split the quill into sections and gently scrape them smooth. These sections are about eight inches long. Four of these quill pieces are required.

When ready, the men carefully fasten them to the bottom of the sinker.

At this stage, when the sinker is held up in the air each of the hooks flare out gently in four equally spaced directions. The idea is to keep the hooks from tangling while being used.

The hookmaker is now ready to attach the long hook line to the sinker.

The hook line is made out of baleen or whalebone, which he has split into long strings. If the baleen is 10 feet long, he has a

10-foot long baleen string. He scrapes them carefully and rounds them into a string less than an eighth of an inch in diameter.

He makes several of these depending on the length of the length of the baleen. He ties them together with a special knot them will not slip.

This done, he fastens the line to a short fishpole. This pole is about a foot and a half in length. It is made out of wood, the ends of which had been carved out forming an oval with a slit opening at each end.

The baleen fish line is then coiled on the pole from end to end. Women usually fish for tomcod. Often, they drive dog-teams taking along with them one or two of their children who are big enough to help.

A hole in the ice is made with a long-handled ice pick. Tomcod fishing begins. When a run is especially heavy a sled load is caught in a short time.

It is very common to catch a tomcod in each of the four hooks on the line and some are snagged on the sinker hook.

For lure, anything reddish or yellowish is attached to the hooks.

In the fall of the year in the Arctic heavy winds usually rage creating huge waves breaking along the beaches. At such times many tomcods are washed ashore. They are picked up still wiggling fresh out of the sea.

As food tomcod is not necessarily a favorite diet of the Eskimos but it is a welcomed

change from the other foods.

It is served boiled, fried or frozen. It is also dried, strung through the gills and hung after the innards have been removed.

Husky dogs relish tomcod. The little fish apparently furnish a vitamin the dogs need. In 12 days or two weeks after a diet of some tomcod the coat of the dogs take on a sheen and the dogs are happy and healthy.

In ancient times the women skinned the tomcod, dried the skin and used it as a container for their fine sinews. It kept the sinew in perfect consistency for immediate use.

The little tomcod had a definite role in the survival of the people in the Arctic. Its presence in great numbers in the Arctic seas must be the reason why the hair seal and other sea mammals abound. Thus, the tomcod must be classed as one of great importance in the existence of man in the Arctic.