

Elders offer advice on how to butcher a polar bear

by Linda Akeya

Chukchi News and Information Service

SAVOONGA — Polar bears are among the biggest and most powerful animals on earth. They have strong hind legs, which makes them fast runners, but they also can use their front legs to kill a human being or other animals, such as seals, walrus and fish — with only one swing.

I had no experience in butchering a polar bear; therefore, I asked one of my uncles about it. He invited me to watch him and the men in my village skin a bear since they are the ones who know best.

Cutting a polar bear is very easy, just like saying the alphabet or counting ones, twos, threes and so on.

To start, you turn the body over so that the bear is lying on its back. Then you cut from the belly button all the way to the chin and continue across the arms from one end to the other, just like a cross.

From the belly, you cut to the bottom of the body and to the legs. The easy part is now over, but the hard part comes in butchering the hands and feet.

First you must separate the nails from the joints of the hands and the feet. It is a tough thing to do, so do not rush. If you don't know how to separate the joints, ask someone who does to help you.

Once the front is finished, you need to remove the skin from the meat; it is like peeling the skin from an apple.

Cutting the back part of the body is a lot quicker than the front. It takes only a few minutes to skin the back, but you still need to be very careful not to make holes in the skin.

If you do make a hole you can sew it up later when the skin is complete-

ly dried.

At this point, the head should still be attached to the skin. Just like cutting the feet and hands, you need to take some time on the head.

For the last step, the meat is separated from the bones and the guts are thrown away.

The skin is then washed at the beach and hung to dry at a food-storage shelter or outside the house of the person who killed the polar bear.

Our culture says that whoever sees the polar bear first, on land, gets to keep the skin.

But on the ocean, the boat captain gets to keep the skin, even if one of his crew members may have seen it first.

The captain gives out the meat to whoever would like it. This tradition has been going on for many generations.

Some people can't stand eating the meat, and I am one of these people. But I wouldn't mind keeping the fur.

The polar bear's white-yellowish fur is long and thick. It's beautiful and can be made into different things, for instance, a jacket, mittens, hat, ruff, mukluks or even Eskimo yo-yos.

Linda Akeya, a Siberian Yupik Eskimo, is working toward a degree in elementary education and hopes to teach in her village of Savoonga or elsewhere in Alaska. She grew up in a family of nine children and learned the Siberian Yupik dialect, Eskimo dancing and hunting games from her parents.

She wrote this piece in a writing class at Chukchi Campus, a branch of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi Campus.