



MUSK OX CALVES—This year's young calves are nonchalantly passing by their herder Bruce

Baker. The musk ox farm is located near the University of Alaska. —Photo by RUSS CARTIER

Misunderstood Animal— Domestication Aims to Benefit Arctic People

By PAUL WILKINSON

('Oor ngmak' — the domesticated musk ox. Part 5.)

The purpose of the Musk Ox Project is not to raise domesticated musk oxen on experimental farms, nor even to run them on commercial farms. The aim of the Project is to provide an opportunity for those peoples of the Arctic who are interested to acquire herds for themselves under the supervision of the Producers' Co-operative.

It is hoped that the first such herd in the world will be started in Alaska in 1972.

The location of his herd has not yet been decided, for it depends on many complex factors, such as grazing rights and equitable settlement of the Land Claims Bill.

The choice of a location for the first commercial farm will obviously have to depend to some extent on the musk ox itself, for the farm will have to be located in an area with sufficient food and water for the animals. Above all, however, it will be the interest of the people involved which will be the deciding factor.

The task of the Musk Ox Project will be to provide the initial textile training. The organization and management of the station will be worked out jointly by the individuals concerned, the Producers Cooperative, and the Musk Ox Project.

In the early days of the station, the Musk Ox Project will act as an advisor when required, using its 20 years of experience in raising domesticated musk oxen to provide information on management and veterinary practices.

Similarly, the Musk Ox Project will make available to the Cooperative and the commercial farm its expertise and contacts in the field of textiles, helping to establish the qiviut industry on the firmest possible basis.

Increasingly, however, the responsibility for the success or failure of the domesticated musk ox industry will be transferred to the Musk Ox Producers' Co-operative and to the individuals concerned.

The farm will probably be run by two herders and their families, who will be paid a good salary by the Cooperative in accordance with their high responsibility. Knitters will continue to be paid for their work by the Cooperative, which will also eventually become respon-

sible for future textile training classes and the marketing of qiviut products.

The precise way in which the farm will be operated will depend on the actual circumstances of its location. It is safe to say that the animals will be managed much less intensively than they are at the experimental farms, although they will still have to be checked regularly to make sure that they are in good health.

Because large areas of land will be available, unlike the situation near Fairbanks, expensive hay-feeding will be very much reduced, and hay will probably be provided only as a supplement to the diet, to 'attach' the animals to the farm and herders.

Fencing, another expensive item, will also be much reduced, and it is hoped that in some cases it may be possible to eliminate most fencing by training the calves born on the commercial farms to be ranged.

This will be greatly helped by the fact that the musk ox is not migratory. The central part of the farm will have to have fenced off areas for breeding and qiviut collection.

The annual routine will be similar to that on the commercial farms. Most of the work will be concentrated in spring, when calving and qiviut collection occur, and arranging the selective breeding will also require a certain amount of work. In brief, the farm will be run in such a way as to obtain a good profit and to maintain the animals in excellent health.

The salary paid to the herders cannot yet be decided, but it should be high. The knitters will continue to earn as much as they want depending on how much time and energy they have.

It has been said that the domesticated musk ox industry will fail, just as did the reindeer industry. It is important, however, to recall several facts:

Firstly, that the musk ox and the reindeer are very different animals, and that musk ox herding does not involve leaving home and family for long periods to be with the animals.

Secondly, the economic benefits to be derived from the domesticated musk ox are much greater than from reindeer, and they will be spread more evenly throughout the community than was the case with the reindeer industry.

Thirdly, we are dealing with a very different social and econo-

mic situation than existed earlier in the century when the reindeer industry was established.

Finally, looking back on it we can see that many, very obvious mistakes were made in establishing the reindeer industry. Knowing of these mistakes we must learn from them and not make them again.

The most encouraging factor so far has been the continued support received since its earliest days by the Musk Ox Project from the native peoples of Alaska, both through their official organizations and as individuals. There could be no better guarantee than this of the success of the domesticated musk ox industry.

It is important to remember that the musk oxen which have been transplanted to parts of the North Slope, the Seward Peninsula, and elsewhere are not domesticated ones, but wild musk oxen put there by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Villages which are interested in the domesticated musk ox, and which think that they might be suitable for a musk ox farm are asked to contact the Musk Ox Project.

Although it may seem rather funny, the job of the Musk Ox Project is to put itself out of a job, for the sign of its success will be when the Musk Ox Producers' Cooperative is managing the entire musk ox industry itself, and when the Musk Ox Project is no longer needed even as an advisor.

As similar commercial farms are started in other parts of the Arctic, it would be desirable to link the various cooperatives under the wing of an International Cooperative, which would co-ordinate designs, prices, and quality on an international basis, thus assuring the maximum benefit to all involved and guaranteeing a high reputation for excellence for all qiviut products.

To an important degree, the success or failure of the domesticated musk ox industry throughout the world will be determined by the success of the world's first commercial musk ox farm in Alaska, and the progress of this farm will be watched with interest by many people within and outside the State.

All the indications point to success, but this success will be won only with the cooperation, hard work and enthusiasm of all those concerned.

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