

TOUGH MUSK OX TREK SUCCESS



PROF. JOHN TEAL, JR.—Teal, world's foremost musk ox authority, is smiling with satisfaction after his latest successful musk ox expedition.

—LARSERAK SKIFTE Photo

Professor Teal Finds Brawn Not Science Best In Capturing Musk Ox

By THOMAS RICHARDS, JR.

Staff Writer

If one were to cross the northern sea eastward at a latitude of one-half degree north of Point Barrow, Alaska, he would travel thousands of miles before intersecting northern Greenland at Musk Ox and Franz Joseph Fjords.

Here, in a landscape of gravel and rock and 5,000 foot cliffs, large herds of musk oxen thrive. It is perhaps the best place to capture the truly unique, Arctic mammal—in the remotest portion of a remote island.

Professor John Teal, Jr., of the Institute of Northern Agricultural Research, returned to Alaska Sunday from his latest musk ox expedition.

"It was my eighth musk ox expedition, and my nineteenth Arctic expedition. It was very successful. The area has the most musk oxen of any place in the world," Professor Teal said.

The objective of this expedition was to capture musk ox calves to populate the Institute's newest station at Bardue, in north Norway. On the expedition with Professor Teal were two men from the musk ox project at the University of Alaska.

"Our ship was called the 'Harmoni,' not for the singing but for the spirit of friendship among the men," Teal said.

"It was a sealing ship. We were 14 in the expedition and 12 in our ship's crew. The majority of the men were involved in maintaining the animals after

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they were captured," the professor said.

The small vessel, easily surmounted criticism from Norwegian papers, one of which claimed the voyagers would not capture one musk ox in three months of trying.

The real challenge came from the weather and ice conditions.

"In order to get to northeast Greenland, we had to go through 120 miles of drift ice even to reach the coast.

"The big problem on the expedition was the weather. It was about to cave in on you at any moment. You can easily get trapped up there," Teal added.

The expedition's ship had succeeded where others failed. The professor explained that ships were still trapped on ice conditions so poor that they are rated among the worst in modern history.

Having conquered the ice, Teal and his fellow capturers traveled inland by helicopter to the huge cliffs and spacious field where the musk oxen were thickest.

The three capturers other than Professor Teal were Peter Strong, President of the American-Scandinavian Foundation of New York; Jim Buckley, brother of conservative columnist William F. Buckley; and Larserak Skifte, a Greenland Eskimo student at the University of Alaska's Musk Ox Project.

"All our captures took place under the most amazing conditions. In some places, there were five-thousand foot cliffs dropping straight into the sea," Teal said.

"As to my technique, I have been more primitive than I ever have been before. Of the 41 animals we captured, I tackled exactly 27 in the open fields.

"My favorite thing now is to walk up to the calves in the open fields and tackle them. There is some danger from the adults, but to capture a musk ox, you have to think more or less what a musk ox would think," stated the professor.

"It is kind of mystic," Teal added.

He staunchly opposed the use of immobilizing drugs in any form.

"We never use immobilizing drugs because of the danger of killing the animals.

"In all my expeditions, I've never used immobilizing drugs and we have always been successful," Teal said.

In order to meet the requirements of the Bardue Station, Teal had to maintain a distinct

ratio between the males and the females. As he explained it, this was one major problem of the expedition.

"Because of their plumbing, you cannot tell the sex of the young musk oxen until late September. On the very last day, we wound up catching eleven animals in order to get two to bring home.

"We have to paint their rear ends white so that we don't catch them a second time," he said.

Teal outlined several of the more significant conclusions of the expedition. "The overwhelming question in this country is what do the animals eat. Most of the landscape is gravel and rock. Maybe, every two miles there might be a small patch of half-inch tall grass.

"They eat grass, but they don't need very much. Nature has adapted this animal to the Arctic north."

Teal added this observation might prove to invalidate the claim that the musk oxen are over-ranged at Nunivak Island.

He noted another observation: "We saw piles of bones where Norwegian whalers in 1928 and 1929 apparently thought you had to shoot all the adults to capture the calves."

Despite the isolated butchering, the animals were not depleted. "We were particularly impressed that the range of the musk ox is so sparse that no man could believe they could be alive there, but that is where they occur in their largest numbers.

"Five to eight per cent is the largest calf crop of the musk ox in most places. There, they were ranging to twelve per cent. The herd in Greenland numbers more than 10,000."

As they searched for the musk ox, the men discovered places where in modern times existed tribes of Greenland Eskimos.

"We also did some archaeological work on the expedition," Teal said. "We found places where men, Greenland Eskimos, lived 600 years ago. It was a very fragile existence. They needed their seal and their caribou."

After capturing forty-one musk oxen within six days, the animals were placed in the hold for the voyage to Norway. Here, they met with other difficulties.

"Our next biggest problem was to get out and through the ice. Going back, we had to penetrate 200 miles of Arctic pack ice. We were lucky to get out. There are still ships trapped in that ice from this summer.

"We went through three days

of heavy storms to get all the calves back to Norway. We didn't lose one of them. In the hold, the musk ox were in the best place of all," Teal said.

He described the Norwegian reception as enthusiastic. "Europe in general seemed to go ape over the whole thing," he said.

"We established a station at Bardu under the direction of men trained at the University of Alaska. We hope it will bring benefits to all the poverty stricken people of Scandinavia."

The Bardu, Norway, musk ox station is the fourth established by the Northern Agricultural Institute. The original pilot program was the Huntington Center, Vermont station, in operation since 1954.

The University of Alaska Musk Ox Project has made Alaska home base for the Institute's stations, which now encompass the entire non-Soviet northern arctic.

A breeding-educational station, men trained at the University manage other outposts. Larserak Skifte, the Greenland Eskimo, was trained at the University and was instrumental in establishing the Bardue station.

The Institute plans to open a station in south Greenland, at Sukkentopper. When it does, young Skifte will be its manager.

"The Norwegian station was the first time where the so-called native people end up teaching technology to so-called modern peoples," Teal stated.

"We hope the guys we train will act as missionaries, go back to their villages, and teach their people how to use the products of the musk ox. Their are 27 families in Alaska that make a substantial part of their income from musk ox wool. There are six such families in Quebec.

"Welfare is a situation that native people hate more than anything else. Musk ox can be the solution.

"Our great delight is that we are in the have-proved stage, and this is just the first stage of it," said Teal.

With the Greenland expedition, Professor Teal and the Institute of Northern Agricultural Research have ventured in their expedition to all the major areas of the Arctic.

"It was, by all odds, our most dangerous and our very best expedition ever," Teal reflected.

As the Institute pursues its goals, the rest of the world watches with interest—the northern Eskimo populations watch with anticipation and new-found hope.