

# Inuit use dogs for hunting, fun

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for the Tundra Times

SISIMIUT, GREENLAND — So far, I've ended up going on short dog-sled trips — about four hours — but as the sunshine floods back, I'll get more experience.

The start off, once harnessed up, has the same frantic charge as several memorable occasions back home in Alaska. Only here in Sisimiut we start up a hard-packed city street with only a 1-inch-thick rope to step on as a brake.

Two people really are essential: one on sled and brake, one running in front with the whip to fend the dogs back and to yell warning to kids and old folks toddling along our path to jump out of the way.

The sled is not made for standing at the helm, as the runners do not extend back behind the uprights, nor are the uprights built to withstand any wrenching forces or heavy leaning.

As soon as it is foreseen that we no longer need the brake, we run abreast of the sled until we can make a flying leap onto it. Two caribou hides are strapped to its broad flat seat for easier landing and warmth.

If we aren't fast enough — or the dogs slow enough — to jump onboard, we must keep pace with a hand or two on the stanchion. In our case, though, our dogs haven't been that fast.

It's mostly a problem, then, when we've got fresh snow to wade through beside the trail, or at the very start when the dogs are fresh and don't want to make the requested turns. *Ili-ili* means turn to the right. *Yuu-yuu* means to the left. Both are enforced by the crack of the whip at the dogs' other side.

Some teams are obedient enough to navigate un-habitual routes on command. But some, like ours, just as



often necessitate a mad race up front by the dog driver, where he cracks the whip in front where all the dogs can see it.

I was surprised, though, on the well traveled sled trunk trail out of town to see meeting teams pass each other without mingling. The rule is to keep to the right, as car traffic does.

You may already know about the fan formation of teams here, as opposed to the file of pairs used in Alaska and much of Canada. This means that in fresh snow all dogs have to break trail all the way, and it wouldn't work well at all along wooded trails.

Also, as the dogs are free to switch from side to side, the traces can get very tangled.

Our team is new, as someone shot Akkati's dogs last summer, so they haven't found their most comfortable positions and cause us to stop to untangle the traces about once an hour. But a more experienced team probably would require it only at the end of the day.

Untangling the lines is much easier than I anticipated: Each line ends in a small knot and all are in a slipknot. It is easy to unslip them and shake out or unbraid them from the short end.

This arrangement is invaluable for those who hunt polar bears with dogs. The driver can very quickly set free many or all the dogs to chase the bear, tire it and bring it to bay.

There are no polar bears in this area just north of the Arctic Circle on the

west coast, though. There are caribou inland, some foxes and hares and ptarmigan. But most life is in or on the sea: seals, fish, seabirds.

The dog harnesses are just the same as in Alaska, made these days of nylon webbing. Other accessories are similar, though Alaskans don't use the whip.

People here start practicing with the whip when they're little kids, and they can be very precise. It is usually cut in one 10- to 12-foot-long piece from walrus hide, about 1/2-inch wide, and tied to the end of a 2-foot long stick. It enforces instructions to the dogs of when, where and how to travel and how intimate to be with each other.

Dogs here very rarely are provided with houses and are not cooked for as in Alaska. Many get a 100 percent raw meat and fat diet, though some may get more leftovers.

Greenlandic dogs are furrer than many Alaskan sled dogs, and certainly bigger than our sprint racers, but on the whole less care is taken of their breeding. There are free-roaming dogs most of the year in all northern towns. However, there is not the cross breeding with other types as in Alaska, as it is forbidden to import non-Greenlandic dogs.

Especially farther north, many Inuit still use dogs to make their living by hunting. But around here, while we may use them for hunting, too, mostly people mush dogs for the relief of getting out of town, for fun and racing.