

Conservation Woven Deep in Native Hunting Philosophy

Printed in Tundra Times
Feb. 4, 1963

By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

"Do not kill animals you do not need," Tony Joule, at the Inupiat Paitot meeting at Kotzebue last October, quoted this ancient advice that has been handed down from generation to generation in the Arctic.

This advice has been honored to a great degree down through time to the present day. To defy it is to invite loss of respect from the populace of a community.

Infractions have been and are usually made by those of arrogant nature. Fortunately those are few and far between. The advice has always had the general respect of the people and therefore observed quite faithfully.

The Eskimos and Indians in their pursuit of game were not and are not heartless killers of animals, as they are sometimes pictured. They were and are very much aware of the finality of death and have made attempts to atone for the kills they have made in order to survive.

Beautiful Weapons

The famous archaeologist Dr. Helge Larson, director of the Arctic Institute of Denmark, had this to say:

"The Eskimo hunters were not heartless killers of animals. You will notice that on their weapons, like the harpoon, they carved beautiful and intricate designs. There was a reason for this and it had been handed down from generation to generation. The ancient Eskimo hunters in making their weapons beautiful and attractive had convictions that the animals they took did not like to be killed with ugly weapons."

There have been kills of animals that would seem to take slaughter proportions. This has been done because hunters knew the take could be stored for future use.

Sigloaks

The people along the Arctic Coast, apparently for centuries, had sigloaks, underground food caches, to store meat a year or more at a time.

The sigloak was usually excavated on high ground with the idea of having the deepest chamber above the water seepage level. At Point Hope, at the westernmost point of the Alaska mainland, sigloaks were excavated among the old village ruins that were above seepage level.

This community of ancient whaling culture, built its sigloaks

with roof supports of whale jawbones, shoulder blades, ribs, vertebrae, and slabs of rocks. Wood was not used because it rotted in a comparatively short time.

The Point Hope sigloak usually had two or three chambers or shelves at different levels. The deepest chamber was used to keep a frozen meat supply. Whale meat and muktuk were stored in it, the choice diet of the Point Hope Eskimos. This deep chamber kept meat frozen during the summer months.

The upper chambers were used for storing walrus, oogrük, seal, and other meats. These levels during summer were usually at about freezing point or at slightly warmer temperatures. This was desired because at these temperatures the meat went through a process of curing or tenderizing. The Eskimos had a liking for meat that was cured to the point of pungent aroma.

Wasted Nothing

As was pointed out at the outset, the natives took animals proportionate to their needs. Through experience they had learned to waste nothing of what they had. The animals they took were utilized where almost every part of it was used for food or clothing.

This manner of utilizing of animals was probably due, in part, to times of food shortages when hunting conditions were unfavorable.

Akin to Animals

The natives in the Arctic regions, as well as those in the Interior, in having to survive through hunting economy, had become akin to the animals they hunted.

The animals were indeed vital to their existence and a great many of them had to be taken. In taking them hunters did not always feel justified to kill them. They made overtures of apologetic nature to the animals they had to kill.

"This feeling must have been quite general. No doubt the advice, "Do not kill animals you do not need," sprung from this attitude.

There were other overtures of atonement the ancient people of the north made toward their animals. Mentioned earlier was the beautifying of the weapons. Others were made in legends, songs, and dances.

One great hunter on the Arctic Coast, not long ago, came across a wolverine. This animal's fur was much desired for hood ruffs on the arktegee, or the parka.

The animal passed within easy shooting distance. Upon closer scrutiny, he found the fur was not of desired quality and he let it go on unharmed. He said, "Why should I shoot it? Its fur was not good for anything."

Grieving Reindeer

Back in the 1920s most villages in the north had reindeer herds which they used for food and clothing.

In the month of August when the hair of the animal was prime for parkas, the herds were rounded up and butchering for food and clothing ensued. One of the most desired parka material was the skin of half-grown fawn.

Male fawns were butchered for this purpose. After butchering, the herd was driven off into the hills.

It was usually the job of the women to skin and dress the fawns. Therefore, they remained for some time on the butchering grounds.

And Women Wept

About an hour and a half after the herd had been driven off, there appeared one by one, back from the hills the mothers of the butchered fawns bellowing for their young. This proved too much for some of the women and they broke down and wept.

On another occasion, a pair of walrus, apparently mates, were in the water a short distance from the beach in summertime. Hunters at once got their rifles and shot the male.

Its mate lingered for a lengthy period out of rifle range and trumpeted its grief.

One woman who had witnessed the incident said with feeling, "It was so sad. She was crying for her male, but what can we do?"

King Loon

One young Eskimo hunter was hunting ducks. A king loon flying majestically approached him within perfect shooting distance. He raised his shotgun and fired. A flurry of feathers flew off the giant bird indicating that he had made a direct body hit.

The king loon quivered visibly then spread its wings straight out and glided beautifully, landing with a smooth spray of wake on the quiet waters of the lake.

The young hunter started to stalk it at once in order to put it out of its misery. As he did so, the head of the great bird began to droop until its bill

was halfway into the water.

When he thought he was close enough to shoot, the loon raised its head high, arched it and dived into the water. It came up far out of shooting range. As the young hunter watched the head of the king loon drooped once again.

Many years later the hunter said, "I have never forgotten that loon. In the first place its meat is not good to eat. Even dogs will hardly touch it."

"The thing I can't forget was the way that big loon took the shot. It would have toppled any other bird. Even under such circumstances, that king loon had dignity."

"That incident has haunted me and since that time I have never taken any animal I didn't need."

Eased Conscience

There were probably many such incidents that involved man and his animals in the Arctic country. Native hunters and their families were far from being heartless when it came to killing animals. A great hunter was a considerate man who actually felt something akin to kindness toward the animals he hunted.

In his attempts to make atonements, upon finding the vital necessity of taking game for survival, he eased his conscience somewhat and at the same time attempted to establish a compatibility between himself and the animals he hunted.

In attempting to do this, he left a saying, "Animals will not fear a man whose soul is good and who is kind and generous."



CARIBOU ON THE HOOF — This caribou, pictured loping along with an unseen migrating herd, has represented subsistence for the Alaska Natives down through the centuries. Not only the meat, but all parts of the animal are used in some way by the Native who realizes the caribou's value to daily life.