

# MUSK OX MAY AID ARCTIC



OOMINGMAKS LINE UP FOR CHOW—Oomingmaks (musk ox) are lining up, without being coaxed, to get tidbits from their herdsman, Terry Hall, at the musk ox experimental farm of the University of Alaska. According to Prof. John J. Teal, Jr., in charge of the project, the animals are exceptionally intelli-

gent, fun-loving, and affectionate. The animals become very tame and it is not unusual to see one of them in the apartment of the herdsman, Terry Hall and Larry Rubin who live on the musk ox farm taking care of the herd.

—Photo by University of Alaska

## Domesticated Animals Offer Economy Bolstering Industry

The musk ox—an animal which once faced extinction—may in the not too distant future help stimulate the economy of the Native people of Northern Alaska.

Plans for an experimental project in rearing musk ox for profit in an Alaskan village are now being made at the University of Alaska.

There, on a special farm, research in domesticating musk ox is being carried on by Professor John Teal, Jr. and three other people. Professor Teal is one of the leading world authorities on the animal.

The research team has found out that musk ox, contrary to popular belief, is very intelligent and gentle and its members have become endeared with dedication and affection for the animals.

Their devotion to the animals is not hard to understand when one witnesses the work going on at the farm. One cannot believe his eyes nor his imagination to find the musk oxen so tame and, yes—affectionate.

Their fierce, bulky appearance belies their basically placid nature. They have no fear of man. In fact they actually seem to enjoy being around him.

This lack of fear almost proved to be its undoing during the time when the great buffalo herd on the prairies of the American West became almost extinct by overhunting.

About that time, the Hudson

Bay Company of Canada began using musk ox hides to too carriage loads. In the period of five years, the hunters for that company killed 14,000 of them. The introduction of the firearms, of course, took its toll and the animal almost became extinct.

The musk ox was easy to hunt because of its natural instinct to crowd around its wounded or slain member. This made it simple for a hunter to kill off a number of them without chase.

**WRONGFULLY NAMED**  
Eskimos called the animal "oomingmak" or "the boarded one." The name "Musk Ox" originated in the 17th century when a group of French explorers, who tried unsuccessfully to find a Northwest Passage, reported to their king that they had run across an animal with "musk" which was used for making perfume at that time.

"The animal has no musk and it isn't an ox," said Dr. Teal.

Prof. Teal told the Times that the musk ox is a ruminant animal of its own family. Its ancestry is a relic of the

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Ice Age. Its closest family is the goat and antelope family but the relationship "is very, very, very distant."

Lack of musk is due to the fact that the animal has no sweat glands.

## FUN-LOVING ANIMALS

The musk ox farm of the university has a battered sled, and why is it battered? Once in a while, the herdsman hitch one of the animals to it and when it gets going, some of the musk ox jump on the sled to enjoy a ride.

"A very strange sight indeed," said Professor Teal with an amused smile.

## INTELLIGENT ANIMALS

The musk oxen are very intelligent and easily domesticated. A young calf can be taken from a wild state and in one day (hearn) to trust man and suckle milk out of a bottle in his hands.

"They are very intelligent which is obvious when they line up one by one, uncoaxed, outside the barn before feeding time and then enter the barn to step on the scale to be weighed.

"In order to tame them when young, all we have to do is to feed them milk with a nipple which convinces them that man is their friend and they become much tamer than cattle and eventually very affectionate," said Professor Teal.

## DUKSUK

And then there is Duksuk, the largest male in the herd of 32 musk oxen on the university experimental farm of 23 females and 9 males, who seems to enjoy being the leader—and no wonder.

The personnel of the farm has shortened his name to

"Duke" from "Duksuk," Eskimo name of the island from which he came.

"Hey! Duke!" shouted Larry Rubin, one of the two herds-men at the farm.

A large bull rose out of a cluster of the herd and lumbered over on a half gallop and came right up to Larry, who fed him some special pellets out of a bucket for his reward.

"We have names for different ones and when they're called, they come to us," said Larry Rubin.

## WHY THE EXPERIMENT?

"This summer, six villages on the northwest coastline of Alaska will be studied for their social structure, grazing areas, and village enthusiasm for the placement of 15 to 20 musk oxen on an experimental basis," stated Prof. Teal.

"From this study, one village will be selected and its men will be trained in herding and management and the women will be trained to weave the underwool of this animal which should serve as an agricultural basis for economic life in the Far North."

The musk ox is a fine meat animal and the taste of the meat is very much like beef. The animals have very good hides. The average hide is 500 pounds.

"I would never eat it myself," said Teal. "I have been much too wrapped up in

the animals for 17 years and have become much attached to them."

## VALUABLE WOOL

The chief cash item of the musk ox is its wool that is under the shaggy coat of outer hair. The animal sheds the wool in spring that weighs approximately six pounds, valued at about 200 dollars.

The wool has been given a commercial Eskimo name of "Qivuit" by Prof. Teal and this word has already appeared in crossword puzzles.

The wool is similar to cashmere but it has half the diameter and twice the length. Shearing is unnecessary, of course, because the animal sheds it at about six pounds a year.

Life span of the musk ox is about 20 years and in that time, the animal would produce about 3,000 dollars worth of unprocessed wool.

## MAKES FINE SWEATER

Prof. Teal said that it takes about four ounces of Qivuit to make a sweater which could cost approximately 200 dollars. Qivuit can be made into scarfs, suits, or any item that can be made from cashmere wool.

"The major textile firms in the country are very interested in marketing the underwool," said Teal. It is hoped that the Native women can be trained to spin and weave Qivuit in order to obtain money from the sale of the yarn which would give a cash income to villages and thereby reduce the need for welfare as well as establish an

economic base on a local level."

## TOUGH ANIMAL

Oomingmak is a tough animal that can withstand extremely cold temperatures.

Their food intake is very little in comparison to other ruminants and nature has built them to conserve what they eat.

In winter, they eat grass digging for it in the snow and they also feed on low bushes.

Like other ruminants, they are susceptible to diseases of the rumen. This became evident in the oomingmak farm in Vermont of which Prof. Teal took charge. The susceptibility might be due to the climate foreign to the animal.

## HERD FROM NUNIVAK

Part of the present herd of 32 was captured from Nunivak Island in 1964 where the animals ran wild. They were all young when taken.

The Professor and his co-workers plan to breed the animals "when they are old enough" and they expect the propagation to be similar to that of cattle in which the females bear one calf a year.

"However, a new system in research stage at the present time, will be tried whereby hormone is injected to enable a female to have multiple births—in other words, twins," said Dr. Teal.

## NO PUBLIC FUNDS

The musk ox experimental farm at the University of Alaska is being sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation of

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# Musk Ox . . .

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Battlecreek, Michigan with no public funds involved.

"From the beginning, the project was to find an agricultural basis for economic life in the Far North utilizing animals and plants of that region which involved reindeer and musk ox," said Teal.

The university farm is one of the group of Institute of Northern Agricultural Research and the main institution is at Huntington Center in Vermont.

## DEVOTION

Prof. Teal supported the research project in its beginning stages with his own funds because at the time, it was not considered feasible by the public.

He is a professor of animal husbandry and human ecology and is a director of the Northern Agricultural Research here at the university.

He is married to Penelope and they have four children, Pamela, Ptarmigan, John Alden and Lansing, "who were raised looking out of their windows at musk ox."

The Professor is 45 years old.

His able and devoted helpers in the project are: Miss Helen Griffiths, secretary, who also knows a great deal about musk ox; Terry Hall, herdsman; and Larry Rubin, herdsman.

Prof. Teal has written a book entitled, "THE GIFT OF DOMINION," and it is being printed by Harper Brothers.

The title of the book was inspired by a verse in Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 26:

"I give you dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the beasts of field."

(Editor's Note: The editor was ably assisted by Mrs. Laura Bergt who took notes during the interview of Prof. Teal.)