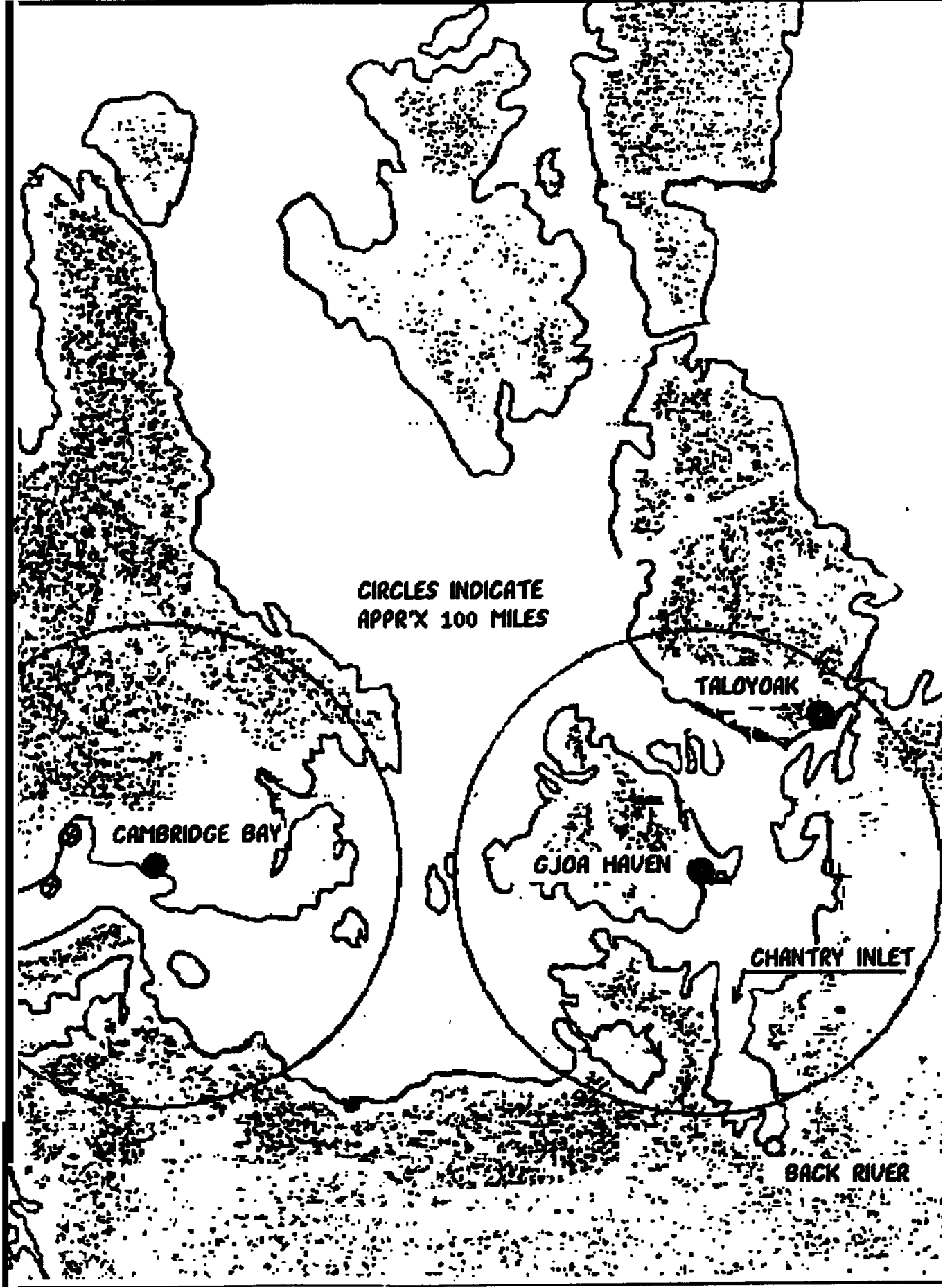


***Report On A Trip To The Back River,  
November, 1993 To Investigate The  
Possibility Of A Commercial Fishery  
Type of Study: Feasibility Studies Fisheries,  
Kitikmeot Fishery  
Date of Report: 1993  
Author: G.n.w.t. - Economic Development &  
Tourism (Kevin Smart)  
Catalogue Number: 3-8-6***



CIRCLES INDICATE  
APPR'X 100 MILES

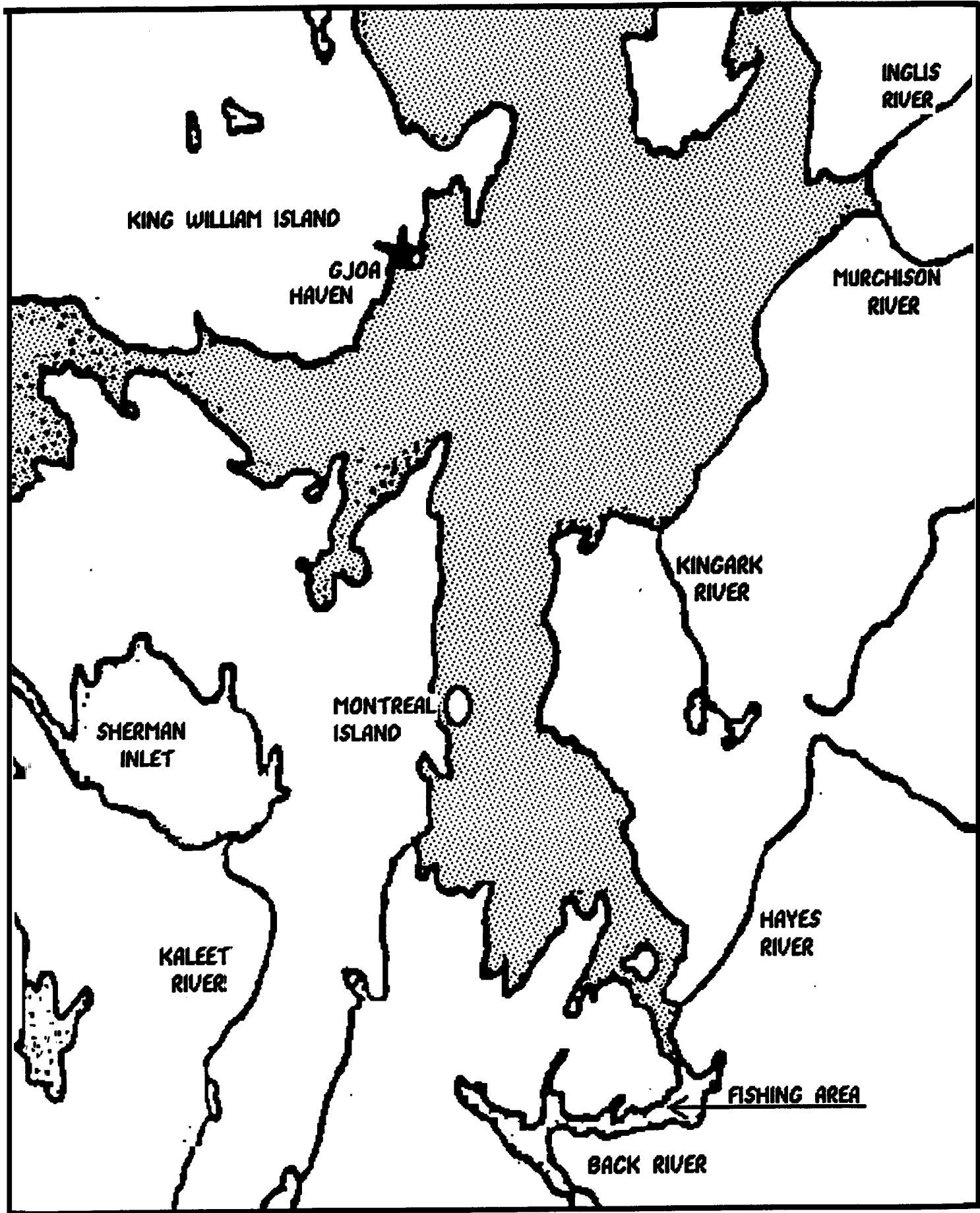
CAMBRIDGE BAY

TALOYOAK

GJOA HAVEN

CHANTRY INLET

BACK RIVER



## Back Riuer Fishing Trip

The purpose of this trip was to determine the feasibility of a commercial fishery in this area.

This trip started out from Gjoa Haven on the 19th of **November** 1993. The party was made up of four Inuit and myself. The first priority was to rent two snow machines **with** kamotics, one for myself and the other for James Saituq. The others, Ben Putuqaq, Saul Rtsalook and Mathew Kammemaleq, had their own equipment. The next task was to get food and supplies. I left the selection up James, Ben and Mathew. Tea, coffee, pilot biscuits, sugar, flour, baking powder assorted canned meats, **sweet** biscuits plus some prepared dinners were purchased in the co-op store, along with spare sparks plugs, head lamps for the **skidoo's**, and spare parts for the Coleman lamps and stoves. The boxes of food was divided into five lots and packed on the kamotics. The next item was gas. **We** had figured on **200** gallons of gas plus 29 liters of oil and 15 gallons of naphtha for the Coleman stoves which would be used for cooking and heating. The trip **was** to last **two** weeks. Arrangements were made to meet at the gas depot at 4.38 p.m.

The weather at the time **was** windy and **30** below C. Evergone **was** on hand and as **we** proceeded to fill the five gallon containers with gas, I asked, who had my containers? I was told, that is "**your** problem -you look after your own things". I told them that I was a stranger in town and had no idea who to ask for gas containers. The long and short of it was that I bought a used 45 gallon drum, and had it filled up. **By** this time my four buddies had departed as they had their gas. I managed to hoist and secure the drum on my kamotic and departed for my sleeping quarters, which was at the community Regional office, as the hotel was booked, as well as the bunk house. I used the office for four nights, fortunately it was heated, had a wash

room and a coffee maker. **Any** port in a storm!

Plans were made to get underway by 8.30 in the morning, and not surprisingly, no one **showed on time**. **Mathew** came by at **9**, and seeing no one, took off to round them up. I went looking for James and found him in his kitchen. He directed me to Matthew's house and when I got there he **was** just coming out of Ben's house which was next door to his. Ben was still asleep. I drove down onto the ice and waited for the crew to arrive. James arrived in twenty minutes, he looked at how I had secured the gas drum on my kamotik, obviously did not like what he saw and refastened it. **Again** I said to James that I have to fill up my skidoo and as he had six full gas containers lashed on his komitak I could use one of them but he said he had mixed oil in all of them this was not suitable for my machine as it was oil injection. I took a couple of pictures of ourselves dressed as **we** were in caribou kamiks caribou pants and parkas. **We** were prepared for a cold trip and with this type of clothing the wind does not penetrate. Mathew arrived shortly and, without stopping, proceeded to cross the ice and head for Chantry Inlet into which the Back River empties some 100 miles away. Our final destination was thirty miles **up the Back River**

James took off after **Mathew** and I followed. The weather was fine a light wind **blowing**, the sun a few degrees above the horizon, the temperature about 35 below. It was not long before my skidoo came to a stop. Out of gas and, when I look back at my kamotik, I saw that my drum of gas was no longer on it. So much for James's re-packing. My two buddies by this time were just dots on the horizon. I figured that eventually they would miss me and come back to see what the problem was, so I just laid back on the seat of the skidoo, which was quite comfortable, and waited. I was still in view of the town and, if required, could easily walk **back**. **After** fifteen minutes or so I could see one skidoo coming back and meanwhile some one in the village realized there was a problem and came out to investigate. He arrived

at the same time as Mathew. Mathew asked what the problem was and when I **explained** that I was out of gas, he replied that I had to look after my own equipment. **However** he then took off and retrieved my drum of gas. When he returned with the drum, I told him I had no way of transferring the gas from the drum to the skidoo. I needed a tool to open the bungs on the drum, a spigot to put into the drum and - a container to transfer the gas. Mathew looked at me and said that that too was my problem and maybe I should go back to the uillage. He then promptly took off across the frozen sea to catch up to James. Meanwhile my uisitor from the uillage was taking all this in, not saying much until Mathew left. We got to talking and it turns out that we knew each other from work we did together the past winter, although I thought I recognized the uoice it was difficult to get a clear picture of his face nor he mine as we were pretty bundled up with parka hoods **up and** face masks on. His name was Max Kammemmalik. He commented to me at the time that these people have little regard for anyone but themselves, - "**survival** of the fittest"- I suppose. I learned that Max was a brother to Mathew, but that he had spent some time away from the community at school in Inuuik and worked some where **in Alberta**. He **understood** my **predicament and** left to go back to the uillage to get the necessary tools to help me transfer the gas and was back shortly with a spigot, a **five** gallon container and his new hatchet to open the bungs on the drum. While we were refueling Saul appeared on the scene had a brief chat and took off after the other two. Max left his equipment with me.

Just as I was getting under way, Ben appeared. He still had to go to his camp somewhere off to the **westward** to collect his ice auger and said for me to follow the other trail and he would eventually catch up to me. We both then departed in different directions and Max left to go back home.

I then proceeded to follow the trail, which at times would be lost to **view** where the wind had covered the tracks with snow. I eventually came to a place where skidoo tracks went in all directions, around an area of rough ice which was impossible to go through. The tracks eventually turned West. Over the land by this time it was ' starting to get dark and my plan **was** to turn back before total darkness fell, when off in the distance I saw the headlight of a skidoo approaching. Ben finally caught up to me and off we trauelled with me **in** the lead for which I was thankful because should I breakdown, Ben would see me. Ben was the oldest of the group and in my terms, had the most common sense. The next obstacle we came to was a wide crack in the ice with open water about twenty feet across, which ran for miles, we followed this crack until we came to a place where the ice was thick enough for us to cross.

**About** twenty minutes later we came upon James who had his skidoo tipped ouer and was in the process of repairing one of the skis. It looked like he would be under way shortly. **We** continued on and **eventually** in the dark came upon Saul and Mathew who were waiting for James so **we** all stopped to wait. **We** shared a thermos of hot coffee and eventually James showed up, this being the first time we were all together on the trip. flfter a cup of coffee and some crackers we went to start up our machines. Rt first Mathew and Saulgs machines would not start then Saul's finally got going, but **Mathew's** machine had a broken starting cord and some part came loose, so out came the tools and they began dismantling some parts in order to get at the part requiring seruice. One skidoo was positioned and left running so as to prouide light on the subject. The temperature was around **40** degrees below but working in bare hands remouing nuts and bolts which were white with cold did not seem to bother these fellows. Finally all machines were running and off we went, I followed the leader, we traueled **for about** a half hour and then noticed that Ben and James were nowhere to be seen. UJe waited a while and

there was still no sign of them , **we** decided to set up camp for the night. Uie were half way up Chantry Inlet at a place called **Montreal Island**, located on the west side of the Inlet. Montreal Island is one of the places where the remains of some of the ill-fated Frankin , Explosion remains were found, in their attempt to find the North West Passage.

We had pitched our 8' x 10' canuas tent on the hard-packed snow and put doum musk-ox and caribou skins for bedding when **we** heard the sound of a skidoo approaching. It was Ben with James sitting on the kamotic. James% skidoo had lost a piston and had to be abandoned, along with his kamotic and some of his supplies. It **was** not long before they too had their tent set up, had supper, and turned in for he night.

The next morning it **was** blowing, cutting visibility to iess than fifty yards. There was a discussion as to whether **we** shoud trauei because visibility being so poor it woud be difficult to see the skidoo in front, and if separated, it **would** be difficult to get back together. **Rfter son.e** consultation it **was** decided to proceed, euen though we could see oniy about fifty yards. Once we got underway, our group stayed close together. With one machine abandoned, one person had to ride on the kamotic and James and i shared this priiiege. Riding on a kamotic is not comfortable and is a iot coider than on a skidoo. Euery two hours or so we woud change piaces. There were times as i was driuing, blowing snow woud melt on my exposed forehead where it **would** cause water to run ouer my eye brow forming an icicie between my eye brow and my eye iash making it hard to see out of one eye. 1 could not puli it off as it was firmiy attached, the oniy way was to remoue one of my hands from my mitt and **place** the palm ouer my eye, using the other hand to steer the snow machine. it took a coupie of attempts to melt the icicie as my hand cooied off quickly.

It neuer ceases to amazes me how these inuit managed to keep



on track when traueling in white out conditions. **UJind** direction is usually constant, which giues one a good idea, but traueling long distances ouer barren land or ouer miles of open frozen sea with absolutely no landmarks to go by is a deueloped skill. Night trauel (and **eueryone** trauels in the dark, as there is uery little daylight), **on** clear nights is not a problem as it is possible to nauigate by the stars, as long as the direction of the destination is known. Compasses in this part of the world are useless, as **we** are too close to the North Magnetic Pole.

We stopped frequently under these conditions for a smoke and a **tête a tête**. Quite frequently Saul would ask me which direction to go, as he enjoyed testing me. On one occasion, while 1 was riding on the kamotik with my back to the wind, I felt my kamotik **slow** down and stop. I got off anticipating an other smoke break and warm **up**, when **Mathew, who** was behind me, started shouting. I turned to see what Ben **was** up to, as he was towing my kamotic. I could see Ben's skidoo beside the front of my kamotic but no Ben although I could hear sounds. By this time **Mathew** was up beside me and **we** found Ben under my kamotic. He was completely out of sight buried beneath my kamotic. It took all our strength to lift the heauy-ladened kamotic high enough for Ben to crawl out and, while he was shaken up, there was nothing broken. **UJhat** happened **was** that as he was driuing along, his machine hit a jagged piece of ice, throwing him off the skidoo onto the ice. He could see the kamotic, which **was** being towed by a thirty foot length of rope, barreling down on top of him, so he rolled ouer just in time so that the two kamotic runners passed on either side of him and that, coupled with the heauy caribou clothing he was wearing cushioned the blow, otherwise it could haue been serious. Once he was on his feet and composed, we all had a good laugh. **UJe** then continued on our way and eventually came to a stop had a mug of coffee and a biscuit. **We** were now at the mouth of the Back **River** and had only about thirty miles to go. **UJe** arriued at our designation

in a total white out and I never saw any sight of land all the way up.

The first thing we did on arrival was to cut holes through the ice to try for a trout. We got five trout in a half hour but as by now it was getting dark, we went to set up our tents. This was the same place, where Mathew and his family had spent their winters in a igloo thirty years ago. It was not long before the tents were up and we had our bedding down and sleeping bags in place. It was time for lunch which consisted of mugs of tea followed by coffee and "quoq" -raw frozen fish. I shared a tent with Saul and Mathew. Mathew went outside and brought in a twelve pound frozen trout which he cut into three even pieces, a piece for each of us. It is eaten by cutting off bite-size frozen pieces with a sharp knife and eating everything including the skin. This pattern was followed every other day for the ten days we were there, about three pounds of fish a day per person. On alternate days the trout was boiled. This was followed by tinned meat, more coffee and sweet biscuits.

One important function that is carried out every time one goes out is to make sure that every bit of snow is brushed off so that your clothes are always dry, Caribou parkas are rolled up tight so that the blowing snow does not get inside the parka, then it is tucked away outside. With two stoves burning the tent is quite warm, and for the first week they kept two burners on all night.

That night the fishing gear was overhauled in preparation for next days fishing. The next morning the wind was cold and had picked up to blizzard force, so we had breakfast and went fishing four or five miles from camp. We cut numerous holes using ice chisels, which is not easy work through three to four feet of ice. Two months later it would be six feet. The depth of water where the fish were was about two feet and we were using hand lines. My rig consisted of a stick with notches on both ends with the line wrapped around it. For a lure I had the largest Red Devil the store had and I replaced the hook with

a shark hook because that was what the others were using, For bait we cut up white fish. Find so, many hours were spent each day crouched over a hole hoping to jig a trout. Every once in a while **we** would get one any where from ten to thirty pounds. The crew had a **great laugh** on the first day when a large trout grabbed my **hook and pulled** the whole works out of my hand and **down** through the hole. I lost everything. I quickly learned to wrap the line around my wrist to prevent any further losses. We placed snow block walls in a semi-circle near the jigging hole behind which we could crouch to get some shelter from the persistent winds,.

After the second day of fishing, when we arrived back at camp the wind was picking up, so **we** decided to make our tents more secure We **did this by building** snow block walls around the tent to a height of five feet and then stretched a tarpaulin over the top of the tent and anchored the tarp to the top of the block wall. The tarp was weighed down by laying large frozen trout around the perimeter, a novel way I thought, and different, but quite effective. That night the wind must have blown at least sixty to seventy miles per hour and we were quite comfortable in our snowhouse-tent except for the loud flapping sounds. We were glad nothing came loose considering that with the wind and the temperature, the wind **chill** effect was more than **100 below** zero. Some sounds are difficult to adequately describe, such as the sound of expanding ice booming and cracking during a very cold night when sleeping in a tent on a frozen lake and the ice cracking under your sleeping bag. The sounds are quite different from what one would hear anywhere else.

The **following** morning found our equipment buried and the snow hard enough that one could walk on it and barely leave a mark, and the sound of the crunch under foot would take you right to the ground. **We** fished for the **next** ten days under cold weather and white out conditions but these conditions did not hamper the determination of the crew to fish, I know of no other people who

would consistently keep fishing under those extreme conditions. They are a tough people.

If you are dressed warmly it is not so uncomfortable, although it would help considerably to have a more permanent, warm place **for** a base camp. I would also have liked to have taken more photographs, but it was so cold that it was necessary to keep the camera under the parka to **keep** it from freezing, or the film would snap in the cold. As for holding a camera with bare hands it was not long before the hands would freeze.

I might add that going to the **"bathroom"** becomes an unwelcome chore and one does not bring a book to read on such occasions.

After **six** days in camp with the two stoves and one lantern burning all night, stock was taken of the naphtha supply, and it was discovered that we had only four gallons left, enough for only two days. Five gallons had been inadvertently left on the abandoned komatik, which was now **fifty** miles away. This meant that **we** had to conserve **our naphtha**, so **only** one stove was used for cooking and it **was** turned off during sleeping period. Discussions were held in the other tent and it was **decided** that someone would have to go back to Gjoa Haven and pick up supplies. I said that I would go back with one of them and stay back as I had all the information I required.

The following night another discussion among the four Inuit **was** held with the consensus being that I would travel with James to Gjoa Haven and he would pick up supplies and return alone. IJJe were to take one skidoo and a kamitok and plans were made to leave the next morning. This decision did not sit well with me, as I did not agree with the decision for one skidoo to travel one hundred and thirty miles with no radio to keep in contact, and no tent for shelter should **we** break down. Other factors bothering me were that my traveling partner was from Taloyoak and unfamiliar with the area and the

visibility **was** poor with blowing snow.

I mentioned some of these concerns to Saul, and he said that he **was** already talking to Gjoa Hauen and told them of our plans, so they would keep in touch. If **we** did not turn up at a designated time some one would come out to look for us. The problem of no tent was not a concern as James had a snow knife and could build a snow house. I did not say any thing that night, but in the morning I still said that it would be foolish to travel under such conditions and Saul agreed. I then went over to Bengs and Jamesss tent and told them. They were relieved as it seems that they wanted someone to make a decision. I told them the only way for us to travel would be all together and they agreed. Shortly after we were all off fishing with no more talk of splitting up.

The long euenings in the tent were spent talking of past experiences these people went through. **Mathew**, who was born right where we camped, spoke of the hard winter they experienced here when he was a boy of fourteen. That year there was no caribou, ptarmigan or hares and uery few trout or white fish. Winter was almost over when word finally got through to Gjoa Hauen that the people in the Back Riuer were in poor shape. **An** airplane was dispatched and flew over the scattered camps dropping food. Stories were told of other uarious experiences such as hunting wolverines and wolues. There were a number of stories of uarious polar bear hunts and trapping trips. **They** neuer turned in until after 11 p.m.

On the morning of our departure the weather improved and we could see the landscape. The land is low except on the East side of the lake where we were camped. FHthough part of the Back Riuer, where **we** were the riuer widened into a large lake miles long. It took us a couple of hours to break camp, shouel out the komotics, load the trout (which were three to four feet long) and the rest of our gear and we were off. By 2 p.m. darkness was upon us but the stars were bright and the going was good, so with a couple of stops for coffee, by 6

p.m. **we** could see the lights of Gjoa Hauen. When we were on the edge of town **we** stopped, banged our hands together to warm up and everyone went his own way. I went to the hotel and noticed the thermometer outside the building, it read 39 below.

I was looking for a good warm meal and as I entered the hallway of the hotel I could see the help in the kitchen along with the cook (who **was** also the manager) preparing **meals** for the guests. I had been traveling almost 10 hours and had nothing since breakfast except a couple mugs of coffee and a hot meal would be welcome. I asked the cook about supper and a room for the night. He said the hotel was filled up and that I had to give four hours notice if I wanted supper. He knew I just came off a long trip as I **was** still wearing my caribou parka, covered with frost and snow. I **was** not in a good mood nor **favorably** disposed towards the cook when I left the hotel.

**As** I was leaving the hotel to look for a place for the night, I met one of the construction people going into the hotel, I told him of my situation and he suggested that if I could not find a place they had a heated construction shack which I could use. That sort of eased my mind and I told him that I **would** get back to him later.

When I left to go on the trip I left the keys to the office and the building on the secretary's desk, so all I had to do was find out her name and where she lived. I knew somebody who had worked in that office, so I went to his home and fortunately he **was** in. He invited me for supper and asked me to stay there for the night, which I **did**. I had left my belongings in the office, which included my brief case and my airline ticket to go back to Cambridge Bay.

The next morning I made some inquiries and found out **who** had the office key. It took quite a lot of running around, but **we** managed to get the key to the office **where** I picked up my belongings and got to the airport just in time to catch the plane out to Cambridge Bay.

## FISHING ACTIVITY

The area where **we** fished **was** located about thirty miles up from the river's mouth. At this point the river widens to form a large lake. The area **we** fished ranged from near our tents, which were set on the ice, to about ten miles up the lake. **We** usually started off by cutting four holes through the ice, usually close to the shore line or near an island. After a half hour or so **we** had no results we would move a couple of miles away and cut four more holes, the ice was about three feet thick.

The method of fishing was quite simple, **we** used a large Red **Devil** six inches long and attached a large hook. Some of these hooks were actually shark hooks. The fishing lines were eighty to one hundred pound test and were coiled on a section of curved caribou antler which provided a good grip. The hooks were baited with either **whitefish** or trout, whitefish being the better bait.

To thaw the whitefish, which was frozen solid as a rock, it **was** placed in the hole and held briefly submerged against the ice where it stuck on. In short order the fish had thawed sufficiently to slice pieces off for bait. It **was** interesting to observe how quickly the fish stuck to the ice and thawed. Once the hooks were baited they were **lowered** in the hole and held on to by the fisherman who use a jigging, and at times, a circular motion. The area where we found the most trout was in about **two** feet of water, close to the shore with grass on the bottom.

There were times when, fishing about thirty feet apart, with one fishing in two feet of water the other in six feet, the one in **shallower** water got the most fish. In one instance one fisherman had **sixteen** trout while the other had but one. The trout, once hooked, were

hauled out where they quickly froze on the ice. When fishing was good, a second hole was cut and an other line reeled through the handle of the ice chisel or the scoop.

Cutting a hole with an ice chisel does take some effort. The hole is cut in a circle of about fourteen inches in diameter by chopping with the chisel to a depth of eight or so inches, then the ice is scooped out with a long handled ladle or scoop. This procedure is then repeated, making sure that the walls of the hole are perpendicular, until the water is reached. **As** soon as this happens and water starts gushing in the hole, chopping continues to clear all ice at the bottom. Floating loose ice is then scooped out and fishing begins.

Daylight hours are short at this time of the year in these latitudes, and once darkness sets in, trout **don't** seem to be as active. We did attempt fishing in the dark near our tent with no success. We caught sixteen hundred pounds of trout plus one catfish which was about ten pounds. I worked our catching rate at ten pounds per hour.

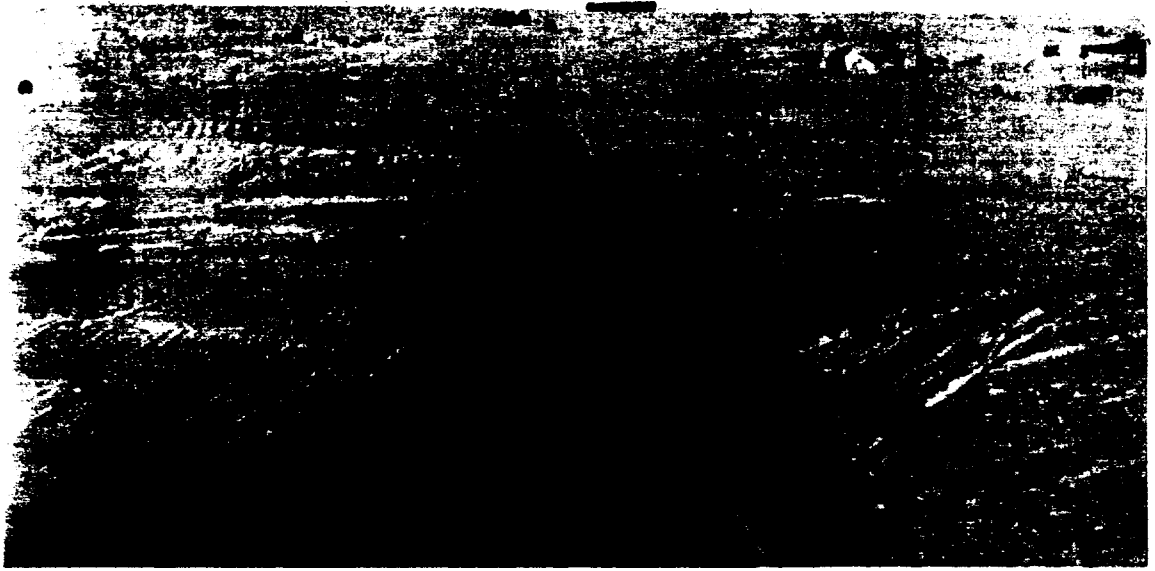
It is my estimation that in this trial fishery, even if **we** caught many more trout than **we did** then:

- a) it would still be not **viable** should the price in the market remain as it is. The cost alone of transporting the trout back to Gjoa Hauen would almost equal the market price, as trout, even such good trout as these, does not command a high price
- b) the distance is too great for economical transportation.
- c) trout, being a slow growing fish, could be subject to over fishing.
- d) while the best returns would be in sport fishing, but then again the cost of transportation would put it out of reach of most people

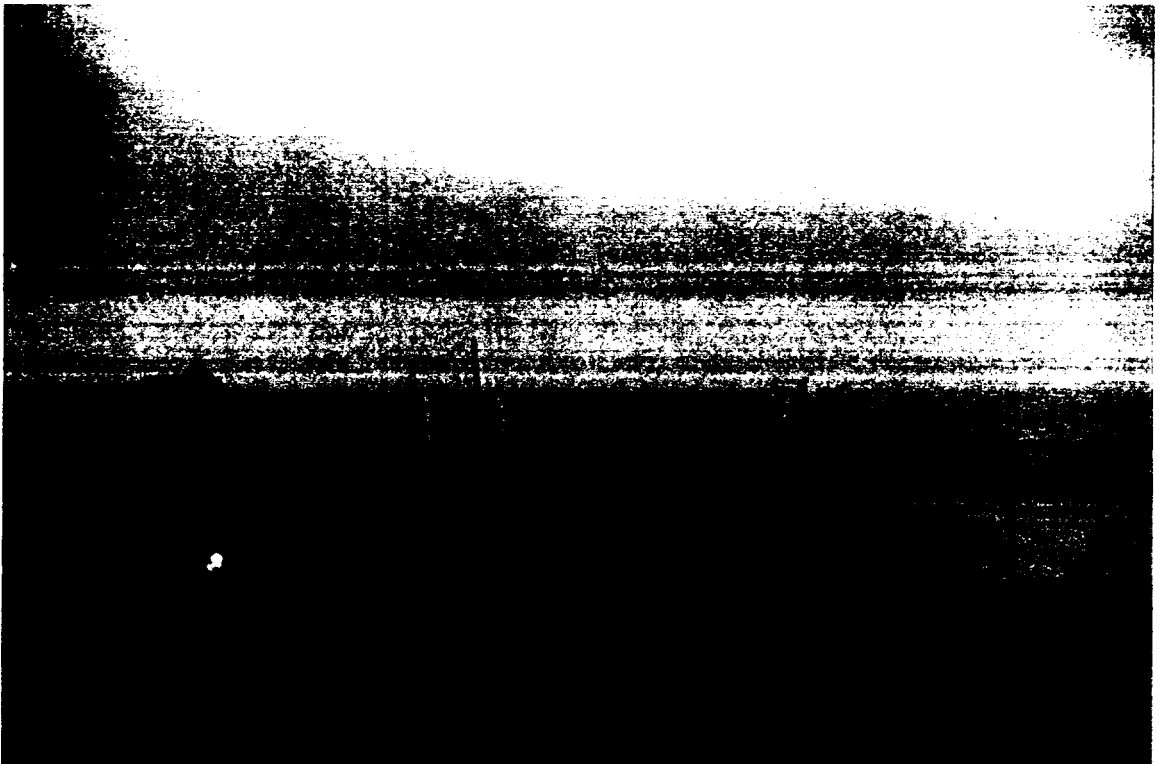


**Cost Incurred to carry out a test fishery at the Back River**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>costs</b>
Fishermen's labor	\$ 10.00/ hr.	NWT Workers Training Fund	<b>\$3200.00</b>
Snow machine rental	\$ 75.00/ day	<b>O &amp; M funds</b>	<b>\$3000.00</b>
Food & supplies		<b>O &amp; M funds</b>	<b>\$600.00</b>
Gas; oil; naptha		<b>O &amp; M funds</b>	<b>\$800.00</b>
			<hr/>
		<b>Total costs</b>	<b>\$ 7,600.00</b>



**KEVIN SMART WAITING ON THE CE IN FRONT OF GJOA HAVEN FOR THE REST OF THE PARTY TO ARRIVE**



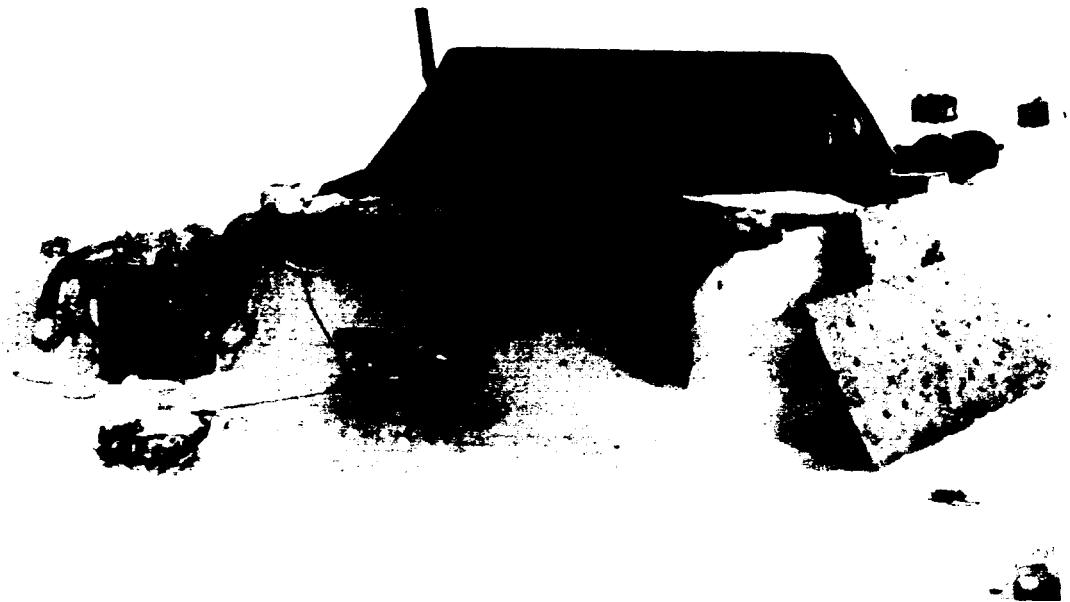
**BREAKING UP OVER NIGHT AMP NEAR MONTREAL LAND ABOUT HAL WA O THE BACK RIVER**



KEN SMART PREPARING TO LOAD TROUT ON TEE KAMOTK



JAMES SAITUQ STARTING TO PACK-UP WHILE BEN PUTUQAQ STANDS BY



**TROUT USED AS BALLAST TO KEEP THE TENT FLY SECURE TO THE TOP OF THE SNOW  
BLOCK WALLS**



**BREAKING UP CAMP FOR THE TRIP BACK TO GJOA HAVEN.  
BEN PUTUQAQ SHOVELING OUT ONE OF THE KAMOTIKS**



BEN PUTUQAQ CHOPPING A HOLE  
THROUGH THE ICE WITH A CHISEL.  
NOTE FROST BURNS ON HIS FACE.



OUR TENT ON THE BUCK RIVER



**BEN PUTUQAQ IN FRONT OF OUR CAMP WAITING FOR HIS SNOW MACHINE To WARMUP**



**BEN PUTUQAQ TROUT FISHING. NOTE SECOND LINE FASTENED TO A CARIBOU ANTLER  
REEVED THROUGH THE HANDLE OF THE ICE CHISEL.**