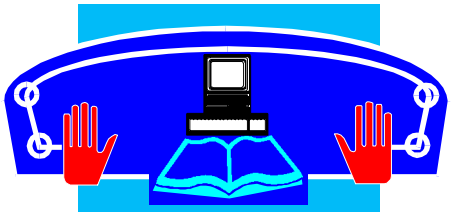

Conservation Subsistence And Commercialization Northern Wildlife Futures; The Labrador Inuit Perspective

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Author: Popovitch-penny, Sadie

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CONSERVATION, SUBSISTENCE AND COMMERCIALIZATION NORTHERN WILDLIFE FUTURES: THE LABRADOR INUIT PERSPECTIVE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For the Labrador Inuit the primary, land-based, resource in northern Labrador is caribou. Labrador Inuit have hunted caribou since time immemorial. Every year they travel into the barrens of the Labrador/Quebec Ungava Peninsula in search of caribou, which supplies a critical food base for their people. Labrador Inuit culture, economy and survival is closely tied to the caribou of the George River herd. Because of this dependence the Labrador Inuit have developed an intimate knowledge of caribou behaviour and migration patterns over the years. They have developed a knowledge and respect of environmental and geographical factors affecting the health and availability of the herd. The one thing above all else that they have come to know is that you can never take the caribou for granted. You can never say with absolute certainty where the caribou will be, when or if they will come at all.

Rules and customs were developed by the Labrador Inuit to meet the demands of the Environment as well as the needs of the

people, and these rules were codified by the council of elders. (1)

This customary law provided the basis and the principles for the wise use and management of their hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering activities.

Their knowledge of the land and the wildlife was accumulated over the years through an intimate relationship with the environment, and was passed down from generation to generation. Being a hunter involves much more than just being able to shoot well, or to unobtrusively stalk game: it involves a well-developed knowledge of ecological and environmental factors and how to use this knowledge to the best advantage and to ensure survival on the land. (2) Traditional resource use is guided by the fundamental principle of harvesting only what the hunter needs to maintain himself and his family without threatening the resource.

Traditionally, the Labrador Inuit depended upon a hunting, trapping and fishing economy for their living: fresh food was acquired through hunting and fishing; while cash was earned through fur trapping, fishing and seal hunting. (3) Anti-harvest groups have eliminated the market for seal pelts from the north coast economy and are now threatening fur trapping. Fishing, though important, is limited by an extremely short

season and decreasing inshore catches. In the spring the economy of northern Labrador, already depressed, suffers extreme hardship. Unemployment insurance benefits are cut off for the Labrador Inuit fishermen in May, because that is when fishermen in the south begin fishing, while the fishing season in northern Labrador does not commence until July.

At this time the fishermen desperately need money to prepare for their fishing season but are forced to try and survive for two months with no cash income at all. Thus, with the major source of income for the Labrador north coast being a fishery limited to a few short months and government programs, if available, the situation is really very bleak. Critics who point to government programs as a godsend, fail to realize that when the benefits are analysed (UIC, Welfare, Family Allowance) in real terms, they amount to little more than a poverty situation according to national standards.

2.0 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN COMMERCIAL HARVESTING

In January of 1985 the Labrador Inuit Association (L IA) submitted to the Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth a proposal for a Commercial Caribou Hunt in northern Labrador to be operated by The Labrador Inuit Development Corporation (L IDC). LIA proposed a Pilot Commercial Hunt in March - April of 1985 to test out the

market potential for caribou meat and to test the field situation. The Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth approved a requested quota of 500 animals for the commercial hunt. The meat would be sold in Labrador only.

Funds from the Native Peoples Agreement were made available to LIA to develop a preliminary feasibility study for a commercial caribou operation. This money was used to get preliminary engineering designs prepared for a freezer facility in Nain.

The hunt which was conducted in the spring of 1985 provided high quality caribou meat to the residents of Labrador at competitive prices, provided an income for caribou hunters in the northern coastal communities, increased the employment opportunities and self sufficiency of northern Labrador, and provided the Labrador Inuit with experience in developing a renewable resource. The hunt was managed in such a way as ensure responsible hunting practices and contribute to management of the George River Caribou herd through (among other things) increased data collection.

The Commercial Caribou Hunt was a new and very different operation from the system that regulates the slaughter of domestic animals to supply the meat market. Therefore, it was important that LIA/LIDC work together with the appropriate

departments to determine what regulations would be appropriate to ensure the meat met health and safety standards.

It would be impossible to inspect individual animals before they were shot. The animals are wild and can be spread out over a large territory; conditions can be extreme in temperature and weather. Caribou cannot be herded for a hunt in Labrador because herding is against Provincial Wildlife regulations. Therefore, it was important to develop a way of ensuring that the animal that was killed in the field was healthy and could be certified as such.

During this initial pilot, the Federal Department of Agriculture provided expert advice with respect to Federal Meat Inspection requirements. Dr. B. Kiric, Regional Veterinary Supervisor of the Veterinary Inspection Directorate in Moncton, N.B. , travelled into the harvest area with the hunters and observed base camp operations and plant operations for one week. In April of 1985, he submitted a “Feasibility Study Report on Commercial Slaughter of Caribou in Labrador in order to meet Federal Meat Inspection requirements.” (4)

Based on the outcome of the initial Pilot Caribou Hunt it was clear that the Labrador Market alone could not sustain a full scale commercial operation. LIDC felt very strongly that markets

should be sought and developed province-wide. The corporation predicted that the province-wide demand would be such that the commercial harvesting of caribou would become an economically viable proposition and would warrant the capital expenditure required to put the appropriate infrastructure in place in Nain.

LIDC sought government assistance (Provincial and Federal) for: (a) approval of the hunt and commercial distribution of the meat; (b) a quota of 1000 animals over an 8 week period; (c) veterinary services from the Agriculture Branch of RAND; (d) training of a local meat inspector; (e) use of fish plant facility for processing; clearing, and maintaining a 3000' ice strip; and (f) financial assistance for advertising and promotion. Full support was forthcoming from the appropriate government departments.

A full scale advertising and promotion campaign was launched early in 1986 including: (a) a recipe contest; (b) production of a recipe book; (c) a caribou banquet for 200 guests; (d) newspaper advertising; and (e) a T.V. commercial.

The hunt commenced on March 4 and ended on April 21. LIDC engaged a total of 16 hunters and five plant workers during this period. The total take (over a 6 week period) was 929 animals.

Dr. H.G. Whitney, Director, Animal Health Division for the Provincial Department of Agriculture was invited to visit the hunt, observe the operation and make recommendations. LIDC requested this assistance for 2 reasons:

1. To provide some assurance to potential customers that the meat was of good quality; and

2. As the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador has no current meat inspection regulations it was of value to LIDC that the future commercial caribou hunts be considered during the development of such regulations.

This reflected LIDC'S concern for the consumer and the reputation of our developing business enterprise. Also, LIDC was aware of the fact that, if the possibility developed for inter-provincial trade of caribou meat, then inspection would be carried out under the direction of Agriculture Canada. Therefore, in collaboration with Dr. Whitney, it was important to. begin incorporating Dr. Kiric's recommendations, under the supervision of a qualified veterinarian.

In the inspection of domestic meat slaughter there are usually four areas that are discussed: (1) the choice of healthy animals (2) the humane slaughter of the animal, (3) the proper

handling of the carcass to avoid contamination, and (4) the adequate disposal of offal, contaminated carcasses and any other non-useable by-product of the slaughter. However, the overriding principle, according to Dr. Whitney, was that for the commercial caribou operation to work, those involved must care enough to make it work. People working with the minimum of facilities who are concerned with the product they are dealing with can do a much better job than uncaring people with the most advanced conditions available. In this he felt that LIDC had the advantage. LIDC had a very small chain between the live animal and the finished product. Every individual concerned is in fact an investor in the project whose return is dependent on how hard he/she works. In a large, modern slaughter facility there are so many employees involved, each of whom is paid a salary independent of the immediate success of the enterprise, that the potential for weak links in the chain are much greater. Any loss of quality impacts much less on the individual, having little direct effect on their income. This is not intended to criticize anyone but rather to point out the reality of having an incentive to drive someone to try for the best.

Dr. Whitney addressed all issues favorably in accordance with LIDC's acceptance of Dr. Kiric's recommendations. He congratulated LIDC for having a trained local meat inspector through the auspices of the Federal Veterinary Inspection

Directorate and the cooperation of Dr. Pham at the Antigonish Abbat toir. He was impressed by LIDC's concern with the humane slaughter of the animals, the quality of the product and the control that was maintained during handling. (5)

The Provincial Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth were also very involved in this hunt. Their Regional Wildlife Biologist, and Technicians were present throughout the hunt for data collection and observation.

As well, LIA had a hunter trained as a field technician to stay in the field at all times to assist in data collection and in decisions relating to the actual hunt. In addition, this hunters assessment of the hunting procedures was submitted to LIA/LIDC and discussed with the rest of the Labrador Inuit hunters who did not participate in the commercial hunt. This is to ensure that the 'integrity of the Labrador Inuit hunting procedures (which include respect for the principles and practices of conservation) is protected.

From the point of view of stimulating the local economy and establishing a market for caribou meat, the pilot market test was certainly successful. However, lack of proper processing and freezer storage facilities in Nain were major impediments to the continuation of the commercial hunt.

Proposals for a permanent Commercial Caribou Processing Facility were submitted to the appropriate funding agencies on April 30, 1986.

The work plan submitted provided for tenders being awarded by July 5, 1986, with site development commencing on August 15, allowing for a facility completion date of February 20, 1987. With February 20 being the completion date, a full scale spring harvest, utilizing the new facility was envisaged.

The review process proved to be complex, involving the Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth, the Native Economic Development Program, the Industrial Regional Development Program, the Newfoundland and Labrador Development Corporation, The Federal Business Development Bank, The Bank of Nova Scotia and the Atlantic Enterprise Program.

Because of the complexity of the funding arrangements proposed, summer vacations, etc, it was not until September that the proposal was presented to the appropriate board level. Although the project was approved as presented to the respective boards, final approval was not forthcoming until October, thus, precluding any possibility of meeting the targeted completion date.

In September, based on favorable discussions with the funding agencies concerned, and after obtaining "Letters of Comfort" from the appropriate bodies, LIDC decided to risk awarding the tender for the site development and foundation.

This work has now been completed. However, building construction will not be able to proceed until the summer of 1987, with completion scheduled for winter of 1988.

The 8900 sq. ft. facility, will be constructed in accordance with Federal Meat Inspection Regulations and will contain a receiving area, a processing area, a packaging area, a chill room, a dry storage area and office space. The total projected cost is $1.8 million. When the facility is operational, there will be two federal meat inspectors assigned. One will be stationed in the plant; the other at the base camp.

However, it is now apparent that the first commercial operation utilizing the new facility will not take place until late winter/early spring of 1988.

In order to provide a desperately needed income for Inuit on the north coast, to provide continuity of supply, and to realize a return on the investment in advertising and promotion efforts made in 1986, LIDC has organized a spring hunt for 1987,

utilizing the Nain Fish Plant for processing as in previous years, with full support of the province.

The 1986 commercial hunt was a learning experience, particularly in relation to field operations. From first hand experience and discussions with Dr. Hugh Whitney, Provincial Agriculture and Dr. Bronco Kiric, Federal Agriculture, the LIDC has conceived a mobile base camp plan for all future hunts. The base camp will consist of specially designed arctic tents for accommodations; three-sided tents with specially constructed alluminum railing system for evisceration; inspectors tent with appropriate heating and lighting facilities for examining the eviscera; and an appropriate kitchen tent. When animals are eviscerated, tagged and inspected they will be placed on pallets ready for airlift to Nain.

There will be 20 resource harvesters involved in the hunt, a base camp manager, a veterinarian provided by Provincial Agriculture and a senior wildlife biologist and team of technicians provided by the Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. LIA expects to put an equivalent team in the field to ensure cooperative and appropriate data collection and monitoring along with the provincial government. The processing operation will employ a manager, meat inspector and 10 plant workers. Thus, the entire operation will provide approximately 10 weeks' employment to 33

north coast Inuit during the most economically depressed time of the year.

3.0 COMPATIBILITY OF CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES AND COMMERCIAL WILDLIFE HARVESTS

The Labrador Inuit respect the principles of conservation and their hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering activities clearly reflect this commitment. The George River Caribou herd, the largest in the world, is a shared resource between the provinces of Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. Labrador Inuit are isolated from the Governments management regime. They believe that a Joint Caribou Management Board would provide a management regime for the George River Caribou herd that would protect the animals, the environment and the aboriginal hunts in an integrated and cooperative approach. Based on existing models, such a Joint Management Board would have representation from the principal governments involved in management of the herd and the aboriginal users who harvest the herd. Cooperatively, through the board, they would address issues such as research, data collection, quota allocations, methods of regulating harvest, priority hunts, a caribou herd management plan, and a monitoring program that is intended to facilitate maintenance of productive caribou habitat. A Joint Management Board could respond more effectively than separate governments or interests

because its mandate and its membership would protect the herd, its habitat, and the aboriginal harvesters as its primary function. It would provide a forum and a process that would be able to anticipate and address specific and broad management related issues in an appropriate manner. The Labrador Inuit Association believes that Quebec and Newfoundland should cooperate in forming an appropriate management board for the George River herd now, while the herd is healthy and increasing.

For the past two years the LIA has aggressively pursued the need for a Joint Management Board with the federal government and the governments of Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. LIA considers the lack of a Joint Management Board to be potentially one of the most critical threats to responsible management and therefore continues to urge Quebec and Newfoundland to establish a Joint Management Board. (6)

The experience of the Labrador Inuit Commercial Hunt is best analysed in the context of its compatibility with traditional hunting and the principles and practices of conservation as respected by the Labrador Inuit.

The first and vital factor of the commercial enterprise, is the fact that it is run by the Labrador Inuit and is both community based and community controlled. It is recognized and suggested

by the Inuit that such control (an indigenous management system from the Labrador Inuit past), would invite greater Inuit participant ion. This indigenous management system, the "Village Elders", made rules pertaining to hunting methods, areas, sharing of game, and regulations aimed at maintaining a balance between hunting and the availability of wildlife on which the Inuit depended for their survival. (1)

The collective understanding which the Inuit shared with respect to the unofficial regulating of their hunting territories and basic wildlife management, remains a curious but undeniably real carry-over to the modern era of snowmobiles and high-powered rifles. The local control over the commercial hunt is an important principle which must be maintained if the hunt is to succeed.

Equally attractive as a success variable for the commercial caribou hunt in Labrador, is its resemblance to the subsistence hunt which the Inuit have pursued as an intergral component in their seasonal cycle. The Labrador Inuit saw that a hunt which involved going to the country on snowmobile, retrieving the caribou and eviscerating the animals in the country, as is done in the subsistence hunt, and then bringing the animals to the community for removal of the hide and processing of the meat for shipment to market was entirely in keeping with their traditional

resource use practices. This in effect legitimizes the commercial hunt. Without such sanction, the commercial hunt would by necessity be intrusive, as the Inuit would be reluctant to participate in the venture if it were imposed from the outside and not in harmony with the pattern of resource exploitation familiar to them.

The third component on the success scale of the commercial caribou hunt in Labrador is the availability of cash income which had been denied the Labrador Inuit through their traditional pursuits since the disappearance of the market for seal pelts. Now that there is no longer a market for seal pelts, an important source of income for the Inuit has been lost. The fragile economy of the Inuit is under most pressure during the period May through mid-July. The unemployment insurance benefits for the majority of the fishermen/hunters is terminated on May 1 of each year and these individuals often do not realize any cash income until they can sell their first fish. Depending on the vagaries of the Labrador ice conditions, this sometimes does not occur until late July or early August.

Before the commercial caribou hunt, Inuit harvested seals during this season and were able to bring in a critical income which helped feed their families and finance fuel and gear needed for the next economic pursuit, the summer fishery. The importance of

the fishery cannot be underestimated, as it is through this economic activity that the Inuit earn real income which is used for all manner of spending, but most importantly, to purchase capital equipment such as snowmobiles and boats, without which they could not pursue their resource harvest activities. It further allows the fishermen/hunters to qualify for unemployment insurance, an income which they use to purchase staples through the winter and to pay for fuel and ammunition necessary to continue ,the all important and various subsistence activities undertaken during this part of the seasonal cycle.

The other feature of the Labrador Commercial Caribou Hunt is the profound effect which the hunt is having on social life in the community. A wide range of social connections to the commercial hunt, such as leadership development, useful employment, and community cohesion and well being are positive implications which are shown to be directly related to the commercial hunt.

The predictable social outcomes like training, reduced dependency on welfare, community wealth and solidarity are rewards which have already increased and affected a regrowth of a sense of worth and pride in accomplishment within the community.

4.0 IMPACT OF COMMERCIAL VENTURES ON THE SUBSISTENCE HARVEST

In the preliminary planning stages for the Labrador Commercial Hunt the Inuit made it clear that they did not want to see the Commercial hunt take precedence over nor endanger the subsistence hunt. Early on in the planning LIA secured a promise from the Province that should there be a need to restrict harvesting the priority would be protection of first the subsistence hunt, then the commercial hunt and finally the sports hunt. Early indications are that not only is the commercial hunt not interfering with the subsistence hunt, it is complementing it in a surprisingly positive manner.

There is a suggestion that the number of caribou taken through the subsistence hunt in the community is down substantially over the numbers taken during the previous year. This is attributable in part to the fact that any meat which is below grade A is not accepted for shipment to outside markets and is instead distributed throughout the community. This excess meat, which can be considered of A-minus quality, is good meat which, when made available within the community, dramatically affects the need filled by the subsistence hunt.

The positive impacts do not end there, however. The commercial hunt revives an unfilled socio-economic vacuum, combining hunting

with jobs. This vacuum, alluded to earlier, was left by the disappearance of the market for seal pelts.

Inuit hunters used to stalk seals on the ice, considered the ultimate test in hunting skill, and at the same time produce seal skins which they could sell and earn needed income. While the hunting for caribou did provide the Labrador Inuit with meat vital to sustenance, only one half of the economic need was met. Now the commercial hunt allows for a blend of hunting and income which is the ideal socio-economic niche for Inuit.

LIDC is actively pursuing development of other cottage industries utilizing the guaranteed supply of byproducts from the commercial hunt, which would provide further employment prospects for Inuit in Labrador.

CONCLUSION

The past indifference to the needs of the people of northern Labrador exhibited by governments and anti-harvest groups alike, must cease. Labrador Inuit must be given the opportunity to harvest their natural resources in a way which is compatible with their cultural and traditional activities and the principle of conservation so as to provide a reasonable livelihood for their families. This fact is now being recognized by both levels of

government in their support of a commercial caribou venture by the Labrador Inuit Development Corporation -- of which the sole beneficiaries are the Labrador Inuit.

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