
In winter, they would congregate in temporary villages which co-operated in seal and polar bear hunting, and in which meat was shared widely. In summer, the village would separate into groups of two or three households which travelled widely in search of fish, birds, caribou, and seals, to reform into larger units in autumn to intercept migrating schools of fish and herds of caribou.

The spiritual life of pre-contact Inuit was strongly animistic and individual. Angaguk were the human focus of much of this animistic power, but each individual had intense connections to the Inuit spiritual world, as is shown by their personal amulets and decorated tools.

Of all the human races and cultures, the Inuit were, and still are, the quintessential hunters. Many hunting and gathering societies throughout the world have been described by anthropologists, but in most, hunting was only a part of a larger round of activity that included gathering, herding, and horticulture. None of these groups relied so exclusively on hunting as did the Inuit. None obtained so great a proportion of its daily needs – food, clothing, shelter and heat – from fish and wildlife as did the Inuit. Few of these other foraging societies maintained their economy and society with so little external modification, and so recently in time, as did the Inuit.

European explorers

Inuit were encountered by the earliest European explorers of what is now Canada, but sustained contact between the two peoples did not begin until the early nineteenth century. The attraction of the Canadian Arctic to European (almost exclusively British) expeditions was two-fold: the Northwest Passage and the whale fishery. The search for the passage was spearheaded by the British Navy, beginning in earnest shortly after the Napoleonic wars, and culminating in the search for the Franklin expedition after 1845. The final discovery of the passage in 1851, however, led only to the conclusion that the route was of no commercial viability, and thus to a loss of interest in further exploration.

British whaling vessels shifted their efforts from the waters around Greenland to those off Baffin Island in the 1820s. New England vessels began whaling in Hudson Bay in the 1860s, and the San Francisco whaling fleet moved east from Alaskan waters into the Beaufort Sea in the 1890s. Until the fishery ended in 1906, owing to the collapse of baleen prices, dozens of vessels with hundreds of men wintered each year in the Arctic, and operated summer shore stations there.

The fur trade, chiefly for Arctic fox, arose shortly after the decline of the whale fishery, and was initiated both by former whaling captains who had traded incidentally with the Inuit, and by the Hudson's Bay Company. During the 1920s and 1930s, hundreds of fur trade posts