

# THE INUIT

**M**uch has been written about the Inuit peoples of the Arctic, some of it factual, much of it fanciful.

Although they represent the tiniest fraction of the world's five billion people, they are famous far beyond their homeland.

Perhaps this recognition stems from the uniqueness of their traditional lifestyle and culture. Or perhaps it comes from others' fascination with the Inuit's ability to survive and thrive in the harsh and demanding climate of Canada's North.

Canada is home to a quarter of the world's Inuit population. Today, most live in some 40 often small and remote communities along the northern shores of Canada's mainland and in the Arctic islands which span 4 000 km and five time zones.

Modern technology has made life easier for the Inuit — facilitating transportation and communications, and improving health care and protection against the harsh climate. The traditional dog team has largely been replaced by snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, cars and trucks. The harpoon has been superseded by the rifle. And the *iglu*, that legendary dome-shaped snow house, has been replaced by buildings with central heating, electricity, appliances and plumbing and is now used only by the hunter out on the land overnight.

But modern life has also brought new problems with it. In common with many aboriginal peoples, Canada's Inuit must grapple with the challenge of adapting to life in an advanced industrial society while maintaining and preserving their traditional social and cultural roots.

## History

The exact origins of the Canadian Inuit are unknown. It is generally believed, however, that their ancestors came to North America from Asia, crossing a land bridge formed between the two continents during the last ice age.



Secretary of State

These ancestors were inland hunters, but as they moved east across the North, they adapted to coastal conditions and began to hunt seal and walrus. The culture that can properly be described as Inuit is considered to have sprung from this adaptation to marine hunting and the use of the kayak.

Hunting remains central to Inuit life. Indeed, their society was ordered around this activity, with the family as the basic unit. Because hunting was essentially a co-operative group venture, several households would form into a group to hunt. Until well into this century, there were some 700 such groups of Inuit scattered across the North.

The Inuit adapted their lifestyle to the conditions they found. On Hudson Bay's western shores, where game was plentiful, the Caribou Inuit were inland hunters who never went to sea. In other areas, marine mammals and fish were the main diet. The food supply, although limited in variety and

often difficult to obtain, was balanced nutritionally.

## Contact with the Outside

For many centuries, the Canadian Inuit lived in nearly total isolation. Despite some brief and limited contact with early explorers, it was not until the advent of the nineteenth-century whaling fleets that the Inuit had any lasting and significant dealings with Europeans.

The growing importance of the fur trade also brought the Inuit into further contact with the outside. Because furs were always a vital part of the Inuit lifestyle, trapping soon became as important an activity as hunting. Although the fur trade subsequently dwindled, hunting and trapping have remained a major source of food and income for many Inuit families.

## A Period of Transition

Interaction between the Inuit and other Canadians accelerated rapidly during and following World War II. Airfields, weather stations and a radar