

The Inuit

History

Much has been written about the Inuit peoples of the Arctic, some of it factual, much of it fanciful. Although their number is small among 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 climate of Canada's North.

Canada is home to a quarter of the world's population of Inuit (formerly called "Eskimos"). Today, most live in some 40 small and remote communities along the northern shores of Canada's mainland and in the arctic islands that span 4000 km and five time zones.

Modern technology has made life easier for the Inuit ("the people", in the Inuktitut language), 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 The traditional dog team has largely been replaced by snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, cars and trucks. The harpoon has been replaced by the rifle. And the iglu, that legendary dome-shaped snow shelter, has been replaced by houses with central heating, electricity, appliances and plumbing and is now only used out on the land when hunting.

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 industrialized society, while maintaining and preserving their traditional social and cultural roots.

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.

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 built on this activity, with the family as the basic unit. Because hunting was essentially a co-operative 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 19th-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.

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 line across Canada's North were built. Government services, mining exploration and development increased and, more recently, discoveries of large oil and gas reserves have brought thousands of southerners into the North.

It was during this latter period that the Canadian government recognized the need to provide health, education and other social services to the Inuit. This led to a greatly increased government presence and presaged the move of the Inuit to a smaller number of larger, more stable communities with schools, churches, government offices and stores.

The Inuit Today

Hunting and fishing still provide most Inuit with fresh protein. Some sealing and trapping activities continue, but anti-sealing and anti-trapping crusades have diminished the value of these once-lucrative industries. Fur harvesting, however, remains part of Inuit culture, and hunting provides most of the food supply and supplements many incomes.

The Inuit's economic base is much more diversified today than in past years. Internationally renowned Inuit carvings and prints are in great demand. Generally sold through Inuit