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YUP'IK SEAL HUNTERS

Lessons in Subsistence on the Tundra
text and photography by Mac McCarthy

ARE YOU GOING TO make your ribs cry?"
Evon Azean asked me.

Looking first at the pile of seal bones on my tin dinner plate and then up at Evon's broad Yup'ik face, I replied, "Evon, I don't understand."

"Long ago a young hunter in a kayak was making his way downriver to the sea. After rounding a sharp bend he heard the sound of



someone crying. Beaching the kayak, he began searching the bank for the cries. He found a seal rib that a careless eater had thrown away with meat still on the bone. The hunter cleaned the rib with his teeth until it was like polished ivory. He then threw the bone into the river.”

“What was the significance of that?” I asked.

“At sea he encountered a large seal swimming toward his kayak, offering himself to be taken. The hunter slew the seal who had, in gratitude, returned from the rib bone.”

With his index finger, Evon then cleaned every drop of broth from his plate, making loud smacking noises in the process. Bringing a rib close to his mouth, he whispered in a barely audible voice, “Thank you for coming to us; please come again.” With his penetrating stare fixed on me—a stare that seemed to ask, “Can you understand hunger?”—he waited for my reaction.

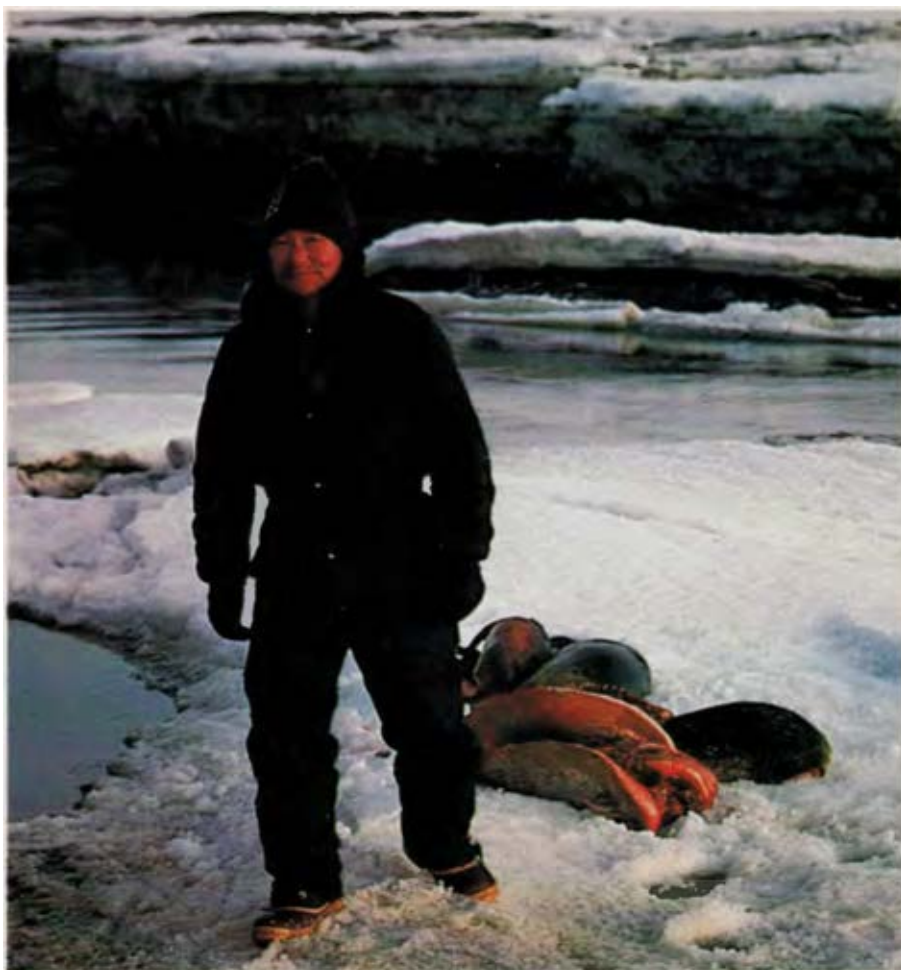
Evon Azean had just taught me the timeless lesson for survival on the tundra—harvest what the land provides, waste nothing from the harvest. Each pass of my finger over the plate brought new richness to the meal, which was the first fresh seal meat of the year. The events which led to that meal began the morning before when I met two young hunters named Tommy Mute and Charlie Active. They invited me to hunt seals with them in the Bering Sea, asking only that I share the thirty-six dollar gasoline cost. It was a rare opportunity for a *kass’aq* (white man) to peer into the Western Alaska Yup’ik culture, a society dependent on subsistence hunting and fishing for personal and cultural survival. Only a week earlier, on Nunivak Island, I lost a similar opportunity to hunt in the boat of Peter Smith, a Mekoryuk village elder. One of Peter’s sons politely explained that “there are many brothers and only three places in the boat.

This is the way we feed our families.”

The day began with a four-mile snowmobile trip from the village of Kongiganak to the frozen tidal mud flats where the hunters kept their boat. Sunlight diffused by a layer of heavy ground fog whited out the horizon. Under those conditions, direction and depth perception were dangerously misleading; only subtle changes in the contour of the tundra indicated the route. Amazed by Tommy’s confidence, I asked him how he was able to find his way through this featureless terrain.

“This is my land,” he shrugged.

Like an apparition, an aluminum skiff lashed to a sled appeared out of the haze. This was the boat storage where we provisioned the skiff with twenty gallons of gas, food, and clothing, and several firearms whose rust-pitted barrels told of heavy use in a salt environment. The sled was then towed to a stable ice shelf jutting out into the river.



Far left: Yup’ik hunters prepare to leave the ice shelf for a day of hunting seals. Outboard motors and aluminum boats have made the task easier, but finding food in the Arctic is still a formidable challenge. Left: Tired but pleased to be bringing his family some food, a hunter struggles up from the water. Above: Nunivak Island children line up behind one of their fathers’ boats.

In an unspoken ritual honed smooth by practice, Tommy and Charlie untied the lashings. Working as a team we pivoted the boat, bow toward the river. Muscles strained, veins protruded from temples, and the aluminum boat slid only six feet closer to the water. Grunting the rest of the way, we finally reached the edge of the ice, an achievement so routine it hardly merited notice by the hunters. As sweat ran down my spine, I listened to Tommy recall the changes already come to pass in his life.

“I remember when I was a boy, my grandfather would hunt seals from his kayak, sometimes gone for many days. Now we use this aluminum boat. It is lighter than the old wood boats my father once used; they did not slide as easy on the ice. He nailed metal strips to the bottom of his boat to make it slide better.”

Reflections on the past and the ingenuity of one’s forebears were common in this

tundra society. Most of the hunters I spoke with told vivid stories about their roots; some tales dated back hundreds of years. Yup’ik leader Oscar Kawagley explained his people’s strong relationship with their heritage. “Our views of time, space, and life are different from Western culture. We are always surrounded by our ancestors. Our traditions and our spirits are always around us.”

SEATED IN THE BOW, I watched the current push milky river water into a small bay. Glare obscured my vision much beyond that, but I was able to make out dozens of fingerlike channels formed by drifting ice floes. The fingers pointed in all directions. In the absence of landmarks I thought, “Which one leads to the sea?”

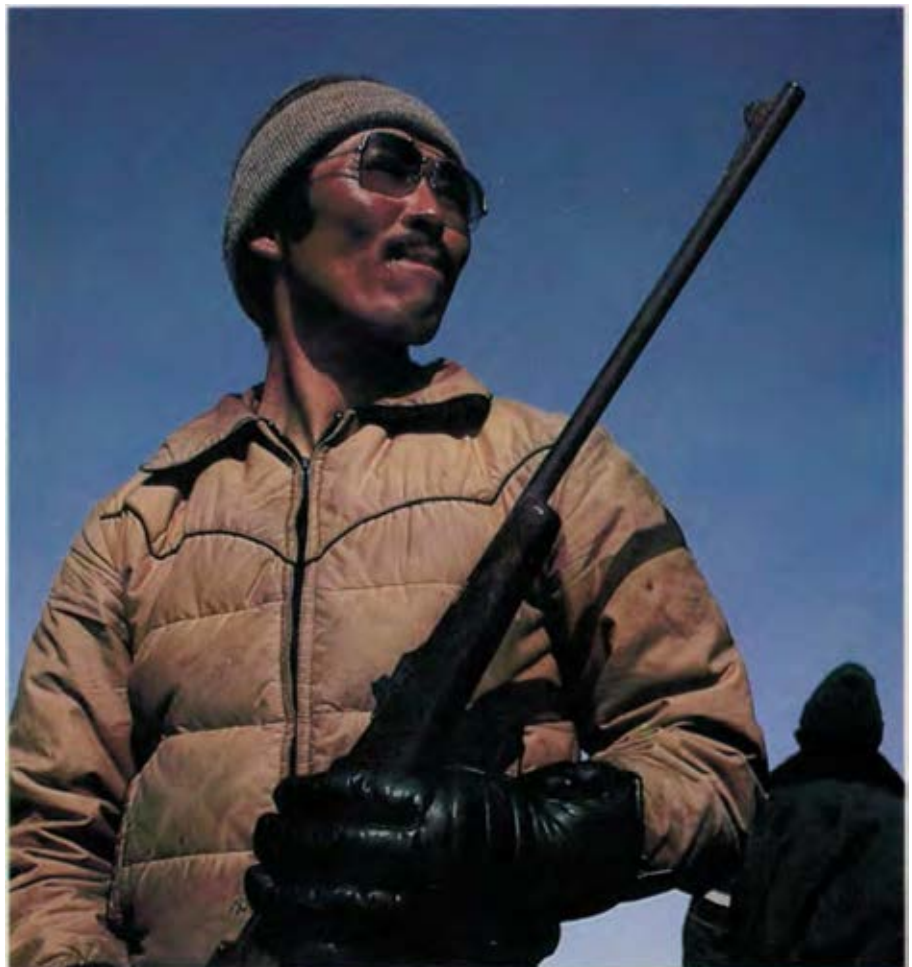
Tommy selected an ice-choked channel, weaving the boat around scattered chunks to avoid fouling the propeller. The route

proved to be false, and we doubled back. Suddenly, he put the tiller hard over and gunned the motor. Our tiny boat squeezed between two massive sheets of ice, accompanied by the gut-wrenching sound of crushing metal. Slight swells rolled across the surface, offering the only indication that we had arrived at the Bering Sea.

To my right and left stretched the coastal ice shelf, carved to a uniform pattern by the tides. Ahead lay the broken spring pack ice. Charlie moved to the bow of the skiff to load the rifles and shotguns. Not a word was spoken between us as each man searched through the fog for seals.

A female pintail duck strayed too near our boat. Before I knew it, Charlie traded his rifle for a shotgun and blasted two shells at it—both missed. I thought we were hunting only seals, not waterfowl too! The event shocked me, yet the significance of it was great. Subsistence means complete depen-

“We are always surrounded by our ancestors. Our traditions and our spirits are always around us.”



Right: Hunter Tommy Mute scans the water and floating ice for signs of a seal while Charlie Active mans their boat’s tiller. The two hunters traded stations after each kill. Far right: The Yup’ik hunters carry harpoons with heads still often made of ivory. The head detaches on impact, allowing the hunters to reel in their catch before it sinks.

dence on the land. All opportunities to claim food are taken. In spite of improved weapons, success is still not guaranteed.

As if by common instinct, Charlie and Tommy spotted a seal simultaneously. It appeared to be another piece of ice floating on the flat sea. With confidence, the hunters raced to within 100 feet of the mammal before Tommy cut the motor. Shouldering the rifle in one fluid motion, Charlie fired, more through intuition than aim. It was a clean, painless kill of a large ringed seal.

Both ringed and spotted seals float when killed. The larger bearded seal and the walrus sink almost the moment they expire. To prevent the loss of their catch, Yup'ik hunters carry a toggle-headed harpoon, still often made of ivory, to secure the body. As the chase boat approaches the catch, the lead hunter hurls the harpoon. Upon impact, the head frees itself from the shaft, allowing the hunter to retrieve the body with

a lanyard.

After the kill of the first seal, Tommy exchanged places with Charlie. We resumed the pattern of cruising the drifting floes, careful to remain within sight of the ice shelf. Another seal was spotted, and our boat sped off in its direction. Tommy fired two shots at it, neither of which brought down the seal. At sixty cents a shell, misses waste precious cash resources.

Two other seals were pursued without success. In the passion of the chase we strayed far from the security of the coastal shelf. Now we were lost on the featureless sea, our landmarks obscured by fog. To my reckoning, the sun remained in the same position regardless of the direction we turned.

"Better head back to the ice," said Tommy, "otherwise we get lost out here."

We began passing drifting ice, all of which looked identical. Perhaps we were headed

north or perhaps south, I could not tell. Both men kept scanning the area for familiar signs. Suddenly aware of our position, Tommy pointed behind us. Charlie brought the boat about and headed into a dense fog bank where his partner had directed. Some tense moments passed before the ice shelf reappeared. No one spoke of his apprehensions—the lapse in reckoning was a routine part of hunting.

Our boat had been at sea almost five hours now. In that time the hunters had taken one duck and one seal. Although the sun lifted our spirits, it offered little warmth at those latitudes. Sitting motionless as the skiff swiftly wove through the ice, we felt an aching chill grip our bones. We agreed to stop on the ice shelf for hot tea.

Using a Primus stove, Tommy melted snow for water. The men shared with me their meal of last summer's dried salmon, cold deep fried pancakes, and *akutaq*—a



Yup'ik staple made from shortening, salmonberries, and sugar. With a wide grin, Tommy produced a mason jar containing a cloudy liquid. Taking a long pull on it, he passed it to me saying, "One hundred proof." Following his example, I drank the evil looking beverage. It was seal oil and tasted similar to vegetable oil. "Keeps you warm," was the explanation the hunter offered me. And it is true, one must ingest a lot of calories in the Arctic just to maintain normal body temperature.

Howard Slwooko, Sr., a Ninivak Islander whose village I visited, told me of another use for seal oil. "It is a very important preservative for our 'put-away-for-winter' food. We use it also to dip dried meats into." Like most Yup'ik hunters, the Slwookos took great care to render enough seal oil to last the long winter months.

HUNTING IMPROVED dramatically after our meal. By six o'clock that evening, eight other seals and several birds had been taken. At one point, a flock of geese appeared on the horizon and flew over our boat. Tommy instinctively followed them with the shotgun only to set it down without firing.

"Emperor geese," he said softly. "We don't see them so much anymore. I only shoot them when there is nothing else for us to take."

Tommy and Charlie set a consistent pattern by trading places after each kill. Often the seals eluded the hunters. Sometimes the men claimed they could track a submerged seal by following certain aberrations on the surface of the water. Their technique worked remarkably well, as the seals always seemed to surface for breath right where the hunters had predicted.

It was after seven o'clock when we started for home with over five hundred pounds of seal meat. The tide had dropped twelve feet since the morning, making it difficult for our heavily laden boat to navigate the channel. Tommy lifted the motor to prevent the propeller from digging into the sand while Charlie and I often used the oars to force the skiff off a bar. What had taken twenty minutes to travel this morning now took an hour. With the tide out, once-floating chunks of ice revealed their enormity as they rested on the mud bottom.

At low tide, returning our skiff to the safety of the mud flats became back-breaking work. Without the water's support, the ice shelf had collapsed, creating a series of wide crevasses. Every item in the boat had to

be carried above the tidal zone before we could lift the craft from the river bank to the top of the shelf. A boat of weary elder hunters landed after ours, and we helped them lighten their boat. For safety, we waited for them before traveling across the thawing tundra to Kongiganak.

Tommy dropped me along the river near Evon Azean's house. Before departing, he gave me one of his seals for my help in the hunt. I climbed the riverbank to Evon's house, dragging the heavy seal behind me. Evon was outside splitting driftwood to heat water for that night's steam bath. He put down his axe and watched me struggle toward him. Laying the seal between us, I stepped back and said, "Could you use a seal for your family?"

Evon surveyed me in his silent, probing manner. My parka and snowpants were covered with blood. Frost had encrusted my mustache and beard, and tears were frozen against my windburnt face. During that moment of silence, I felt the pride that Yup'ik hunters must feel when they bring food home to their families. Wordsspoken earlier by Howard Slwooko now became more meaningful: "We eat about fifty-fifty kass'aq food and Eskimo food, but Eskimo food tastes better because we catch it ourselves."

"Sure," replied Evon as he picked up the carcass. That was the first word of English he had spoken to me since I arrived at his house three days before.

Mary Azean, Evon's wife, greeted me in her kitchen with a dinner of cold boiled eider duck and a stern scolding. "We were worried about you! We didn't know where you went; it is very dangerous out there at this time of year. But it was good for you to see how hard it is to bring food home from the sea." The hunting was only part of the work, Mary explained. Once the game was home, the women had to dress the meat and preserve it for the winter. Nodding her head, she said gravely, "It is a lot of work."


Mary told me of the seal parties, a traditional exchange of gifts among the village women after the first spring seals are taken. "We just go crazy, throwing things in the air, laughing and singing," she said. The parties are a way of celebrating the bounty of the land while reaffirming the spirit of sharing in the village.

Another party, equally as important to the culture, had taken place in the village this year. It was a sewing party to complete a Hooper Bay-style kayak constructed by the high school native arts class. For over a decade, wooden and aluminum boats have

been the vessels of the Yup'iks. Traditional kayak building had been forgotten by all but two elders. One of them, George Chaignakaka, offered to share his knowledge with the high school students. The kayak was finished in the spring, when the senior women of the village met to sew eight seal skins over the hand-split driftwood frames. Memories long dormant were rekindled to life during the gathering, and traditional Yup'ik skills were passed on to another generation.

After dinner, I joined the men for a bath in the Azeans' steamhouse. We lay on the steamhouse floor, biting a piece of wood, until the searing heat forced us outdoors. Sitting naked on the snow-covered Kongiganak River bank, I watched the brilliant colors of the Arctic sun disappear over the horizon. Reflecting on the hunt—a tradition that has continued uninterrupted for over 2,000 years—I became overwhelmed with a sense of community with the Yup'iks and the land that sustains them. An act I had once thought to be superfluous and brutal now seemed purposeful, almost reverent. No man can know better the richness of the land than he who depends on it for survival.

The following day I awoke to the sound of snowmobiles. Hunters were departing for the river delta. Yesterday's sun had been replaced by a gray, cheerless sky. Gusty winds drove fine rain drops against the windowpane. It would be a brutal, perhaps even hazardous day at sea. Thinking of the risks outside, I recalled when I asked Charlie Active if he ever wanted to live somewhere less demanding. He told me he had once moved from the village but returned. "I missed this too much," he replied cocking his head toward the drifting sea ice.

The Yup'ik lifestyle I experienced may soon be affected by proposed alternative land use patterns, introduced by less restrictive federal environmental policies. Community meetings are being held throughout the Arctic to discuss the impact of these changes on the subsistence way of life. Native sentiments that I encountered were largely in favor of "maintaining our ancestral lands in the quality of nature". The Yup'ik view was summed up for me by their environmental spokesman, David Friday: "For now, the best use of the land is subsistence." 

Mac McCarthy is a professional photographer based in Seattle. He works extensively in remote locations and has a particular interest in the Inuit culture.