

Hunting Caribou, Managing Caribou

David Neufeld

Yukon & western Arctic Historian, Parks Canada

Whitehorse (Yukon, Canada)

dave.neufeld@pc.gc.ca

Background and Acknowledgements

This paper describes a project developed to explore the conversation between Indigenous peoples and the modern Canadian state about the future of the animals of the Porcupine Caribou Herd in northwestern Canada. By examining the relationships between modern science and Indigenous traditional knowledge, the two knowledge sets underlying the co-management process, exercised at the meetings of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board the paper highlights the culturally entrenched beliefs that make “common ground” elusive so far.

The paper relies heavily upon the generously shared knowledge of many people. Jonathon King and Birgit Paukzstat of the British Museum, London continue to be helpful in the use of the artefacts from the museum’s collections. Don Russell, Rick Farnell, Dorothy Cooley, Barney Smith and Jamie McClelland, caribou biologists in the Yukon Territory and artist/wilderness guide, Joyce Majeski, all shared time, expertise and personal experiences so that I could learn more about these amazing animals. Finally, the Elders and members of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (Old Crow, Yukon), Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in (Dawson, Yukon) and Inuvialuit Regional Corporation communities of the Mackenzie River delta provided invaluable insights and wisdom about their way of life and their continuing interest in getting the newcomers to smarten up.



Vuntut National Park of Canada protects a portion of the range of the Porcupine Caribou Herd.

Introduction

History as a linear narrative of human progress through time is a western conceit borne of the Enlightenment. The assumption of a shared universal reason and a common humanity has focussed western modern politics on the emancipation of the individual and the control of nature as the pathway to a human created Eden. This organization of meaning making has not only shaped Modern conceptions of governance (nation state), justice (individual responsibility) and knowledge (material science), it was also the lens through which other cultures were, and largely continue to be, viewed by Europeans as their nations expanded their control around the world. The resulting legacy of cultural misunderstandings continues to shape relations between the modern state and “Others” living within its boundaries.

The negotiation and settlement of indigenous/state agreements in Canada’s North over the last 40 years has included the creation of co-management regimes where two cultures, two ways of knowing the world, meet and attempt to define and shape a future. The structures of these comanagement regimes are largely framed by the modern state. Their objectives are set by the state, they operate almost exclusively in English and rely heavily upon western science, especially conservation biology, for decisionmaking. There is however, respect for and interest in Indigenous traditional knowledge due to the limited depth of science knowledge in and about the North. Traditional knowledge is seen as a valuable data base that may provide new insights into the northern world. There is also a sincere respect for the individuals who live in the north and their experience and

knowledge. Nevertheless there are recognized challenges in how this knowledge can be incorporated into science and the co-management process.

Currently many northern indigenous communities also have difficulties with co-management regimes. Indigenous resource use and management practices were rarely recognized through the colonization process of the past century and have been largely ignored by the state and its contemporary co-management regimes. Consequently, these processes are largely seen by Indigenous peoples as a meeting ground of resource use practices, rather than as a solution to management questions.



The Porcupine Caribou Management Board (PCMB) is an example of one of these co-management processes. Created in 1986 to ensure the future health of the transboundary (Yukon-Alaska) caribou herd the Board is a community-based organization to provide a platform for community voices in the regulatory and management process. The activities of the Board focus on two targets:

Habitat protection – The Board seeks to shape, limit or prevent developments that may threaten the herd’s health. The most prominent current example is advocacy on the 10- 02 lands in NE Alaska where industry and significant elements of the United States government wish to drill for oil. This role is largely supported by communities as another lever, amongst many others they have created , to control land uses in their traditional territories.

Herd management – The Board recommends actions and management regulations to ensure the herd remains a viable biological entity in the region. This objective however is more controversial. Some western Arctic community people refer to the PCMB as the “biologists’ board.” This reflects their concern that they do not listen, or do not understand, the community voices. They note occasions when their traditional knowledge is either ignored or used simply as anecdotal evidence in support of an already determined scientific finding. There is a concern that their knowledge is being referenced only to gain its authority without full understanding of its intent. This loss of control of the knowledge and the subsequent misuse or misunderstanding of its purpose is a deep seated concern in the communities’ view about how futures are built.

The Issue

An example from the Ivvavik National Park oral history project illustrates the implications of this transfer of authority and the concerns of the Inuvialuit specifically in this regards. The oral history project, running through the early 1990s, was designed to establish a working relationship between Parks Canada and the Inuvialuit community and to obtain access to Inuvialuit traditional knowledge to enhance the capacity and sensitivity of the management of the national park. To this end interviews with some 60 Inuvialuit Elders were undertaken, translated and indexed. The resulting transcripts, seen as a data base, were to be reviewed with a view to entering the distilled “traditional knowledge” into the national park’s geographical information system (GIS) – the computerized data system available to park staff as the primary park information management tool.

In the development of a distillation process I examined a sample topic, fish, to determine the feasibility and utility of this approach. A review of the scientific data available on the park’s fish revealed some two dozen species organized as life histories for each species, noting their habitat and factors affecting the their numbers. The purpose of this scientific knowledge was to manage the “threats” to the perceived healthy population range of each species.

In the more detailed review of the interviews it was clear that Inuvialuit Elders knew lots about fish. There were Inuvialuktun names for the full range of species identified by science, places and seasons to catch fish, and perhaps most interestingly, there appeared to be a quite different taxonomic system of fish. Rather than comparing and contrasting fish species, the Inuvialuit Elders highlighted relationships with other plants and animals that shared similar cycles of seasonal abundance, thus stressing alternative sources of sustenance when fish numbers were low. Obviously management/manipulation of the environment for the maintenance of populations was not the point. So what were the purposes that Elders were emphasizing in their discussion of fish?

Lily Lipscombe, raised by her grandparents on the Yukon North Slope, described two species of char. In her interview she noted both *Iqalukpik* (arctic char), eaten by Tariqmiut (sea people), and *Iqaluakpak* (land locked char), eaten by Nunamiut (land people). However, the conversation was not about the fish, it was about her grandparents, one of who was Tariurmiut while the other was Nunamiut, that is it was about the ethnic separation between them as evidenced by their preference for different kinds of food. Lily noted that in spite of this difference her grandparents not only sustained a lifelong loving relationship they also created a stable and love-filled place for Lily’s upbringing. The purpose of this “fish story” had nothing to do with fish and everything to do with highlighting an exemplar for Inuvialuit society, a lesson in tolerance. What would be the cultural outcome of adding culturally-stripped data from Lily’s traditional knowledge? How would this materially improve the Parks Canada’s stewardship of the land and resources of the national park?

Discussion

Tim Ingold, in his *The Perception of the Environment*, suggests misunderstandings such as these arise from differences between the “genealogical” and “relational” world views of settler and hunter cultures. On the knowledge from the farmer/settler (genealogical) he notes, *The very idea that originality can be passed ... along chains of genealogical connection, seems to imply that it is a property of persons that can be transmitted... independently of their habitation of the land.* (p.132). Life then is making the most of this inheritance, the development of potential by mastering the world. On knowledge from the hunter/gatherer he adds, *[In the] relational approach ... both cultural knowledge and bodily substance are seen to undergo continuous generation in the context of an ongoing engagement with the land and with the beings – human and non-human – that dwell therein.* (p.133) Life for hunters is characterized as one growing out of relationships developed by and participated in by the person with the world around them.

Applying Ingold’s suggestion to the situation of the PCMB we might contrast the western science and the western Arctic traditional knowledge perspectives on the Porcupine caribou as follows:

Science defines the animals as a herd moving within a prescribed migration area and having a specific calving location and date. The research focus on this herd revolves around route finding, that is, identifying those factors of weather, seasonal change, food supplies, etc. driving the mass movement of herd through space. The herd is an object of management and the human purpose, perhaps even regarded as a God given responsibility, is the maintenance of animal numbers.

In contrast, Indigenous traditional knowledge appears to recognize the herd as a collective of animals that give themselves to the hunters, that is, there is an attribution of agency to individual caribou. This agency also presumes a social structure in the herd, there are leaders who know where the herd needs to go and carefully select the best way to get there. Thus hunters are not interested in route finding but are vitally interested in path finding, how an individual caribou decides which way to go. Finally the annual return of the herd is seen as the predictable arrival of visiting neighbours who bring sustenance. It is a relationship of equals.

Artefact discussion

While Indigenous members of co-management boards and the communities they represent do their best to present their cultural interests, the nature of the cross-cultural conversation in co-management limits understanding. If the Indigenous approach is shaped by relationships between human and non-human peoples, these relationships are understood as intangible connections between spiritual endowed entities. Science, rooted

in the material world of Reason, is unable to understand that such relationships could even exist. Thus when attempting to incorporate Indigenous traditional knowledge these spiritual elements are effectively invisible and cannot be made a part of comanagement. In order to address this difficulty it is necessary to attempt to change the form of conversation to highlight this difference.

In 1825-26 a Royal Navy exploration program, the Beechey-Belcher Expedition, travelled along the north slope of what would become Alaska and the Yukon, a region previously unknown to Europeans. The expedition stopped at a number of camps along the coast and visited with the Indigenous peoples attempting to learn what they could of the land they were entering. During these stops they traded for items that served as markers of their journey.



Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in youth at the annual "First Hunt" ceremony, fall, 2003.

Among the items collected were drill bows, tools used for drilling holes in bone or wood, all marked with remarkable drawings. The voyage journal records their fascination with these items. *On the outside of [these] instruments there were etched a variety of figures of men, beasts and birds &c. with a truth and character which showed the art to be common among them. The reindeer [caribou] were generally in herds: in one picture they were pursued by a man in a stooping posture in snowshoes; in another he had approached*

nearer to his game and was in the act of drawing his bow... and thus by comparing one with another a little history was obtained which gave us a better insight into their habits than could be elicited from any signs or intimations. (BEECHEY 1831, Vol 1: 251) These items were subsequently acquired by the British Museum.

Copies of the drawings related to caribou hunting from some 35 of these items were obtained from the museum and shared with caribou biologists. The biologists reviewed these drawings and admired the detail and accuracy of the drawings of caribou. Despite that fact that most of the figures on the items were only six mm. high, the biologists were able to determine the health of the animals and the condition of their coat as well as specific behaviours such as startle jumps and avoiding warble flies. They were also able to identify the season, mix of genders in the herd shown and thus the time of year and the likely geographical location of the herd. The biologists recognized the drawings as authoritative and correct, that is they were understood as scientific documents.

An analysis of two items offers the possibility of perhaps finding a way to real co-management. The drawing of the first item, below, shows a broad landscape with a river crossing hunt of caribou taking place. I suspect that this was not the artist's intention however. The landscape and events of a hunt would be well known to the viewers or users of the drill, they were participants in the hunt after all. So what might be the purpose of the drawing? The artist was, like Lily Lipscombe,



much more likely trying to highlight the purposes in life, the important relationships in the world. Through the drawing are caribou, agitated, browsing, young and old, alive and dead, one already transformed into a hide at a late summer camp with lodge and several people. On the left, exhausted after chasing caribou towards the river crossing, but not too much so, a couple make love. In the middle, the figures of both caribou and hunter grow in size and impact, this is the point of contact between human and non-human people, a place where life is given and life is renewed. I suggest that the artist was emphasizing the important relationships in his or her world;

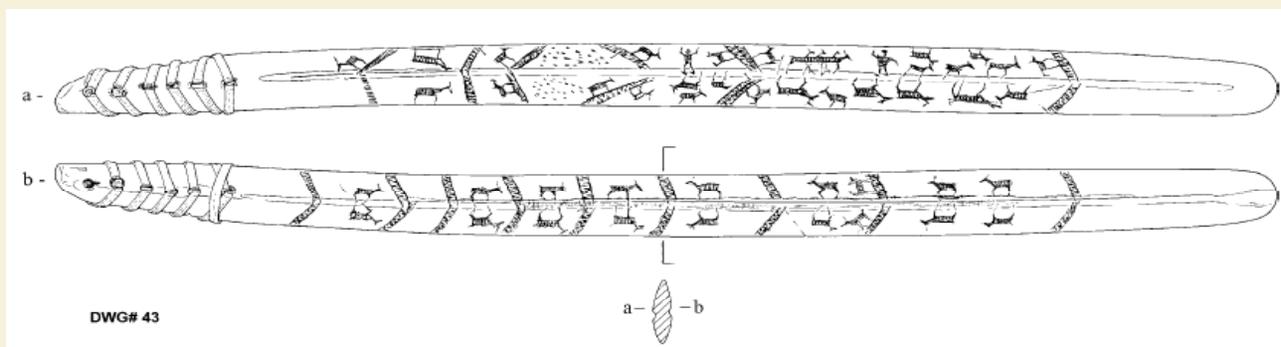
- * love and procreation,
- * stability and order of a good camp life (like Lily Lipscombe's grandparents) and
- * continuing respectful contact between human and non-human peoples.

A second item, a snow knife (next page), appears to illustrate another form of caribou hunting – the caribou fence. Caribou fences, common in almost every northern circumpolar country, were an effective form of capturing large numbers of caribou. They are large constructions, the fence on Thomas Creek in Vuntut National Park includes a corral and remains of outlying guide fences stretching some 15 kilometres across the valley. Frederick Whympfer, an artist travelling with the Trans-Siberian Telegraph Company in the mid-1860s, apparently visited a caribou fence near Fort Yukon Alaska, and made an illustration (upper left). The piece cleverly compresses the full range of activities associated with a hunt, usually spread over many kilometres, into a single drawing showing corral, snares, chasers, guide fences and hunters with recently acquired guns.



River crossing bow drill. Reg # 6745, PRN: ENA 2701, Eskimo 1870 (file 19530).
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

The snow knife appears to show a caribou fence hunt. Two men with arms waving chase caribou towards the entry, marked with hoof prints between facing chevrons. Drawing from the imagery on both sides of the snow knife I prepared what I considered the artist's objective, a birdseye view of the fence in operation. However, like the drill bow I had to admit that this was an unlikely purpose, it was simply my modern understanding of the material components of the hunt. Upon reflecting on the stories I had heard from Gwitchin and Inuvialuit hunters and Elders I realized that to see the sides of running animals the viewer had to be among the animals, not above them. Further thought suggested that the images were not a still image of a fence and caribou, rather it was a film of caribou running, a film through the eyes of a caribou running into the fence.



Caribou fence snow knife. Reg # 1949, AM22.19-1020 (file 19510).
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Ted Chamberlin (*If this is your land, where are your stories?: 178-179*) tells a story of a Blackfoot quirt, a riding crop. Decorated with drawings of coloured horses and men, the quirt carried a story, “celebrating the virtues of thievery and trickery and the value of horses.” A Blackfoot Elder agreed on the details of the story, but “he said it was the record of a *dream*, not a set of real events... it was the dream that brought these remarkable achievements – the raids and horse thefts – to reality... The text was a ceremony of belief, the elder said, not a chronicle of events, and the reading of it was a crucial part of its power, then and now. It was a charm.” Thus while it looks like a film, a chronicle of events, perhaps the knife shows a dream, “a ceremony of belief.” Perhaps the artist is writing his dream and sending it to a specific caribou so it knows how to give itself to the hunter. He is extending a relationship to build a future.

It seems clear these artefacts do not show caribou hunting, rather they emphasize the significance of the relationships between humans and non-humans in the continuous generation of life. Here are concrete expressions of the “unfathomable gestalt” (Don Russell, pers. comm., Fe/07) that the biologists’ experience in their work with Indigenous peoples at the caribou management board.

Conclusion

Co-management processes in northern Canada are designed by the modern state to address its perception of the world – progress in human control over nature. They are rigid structures established to facilitate decision-making on management practices to reach clearly-stated objectives. They create places designed for the presentation of positions, not the discussion of principles, that is, they are not effective places for the discussion of cultural difference.

Science, understood as a generalized, universal knowledge system, is privileged in decision-making. There is an assumption about the capacity of science to absorb or integrate local knowledge of the material world on the principle that more information makes better science. This focus on the material aspects of the world reflects the genealogical world view of human generation, the enhanced control of nature through an understanding of its workings and its manipulation to serve human interests. Indigenous Peoples’ traditional knowledge in contrast is shaped by an understanding that human life is generated, not by control of nature enhanced over time, but through close and continuing engagement in networks of peer relationships with all elements of the world.

How these cultural perspectives meet is not a question about the commensurability of knowledge sets, rather it is recognition that different world views are present at the table. Co-management processes ‘tolerate’ this cultural difference. But in decision-making, both in how and what is being decided, the processes largely ignore the difference, effectively pretending that they do not exist, through the practise of incorporating not the

knowledge set which remain unrecognized but locally collected, culturally stripped information into the generalized, universal perspective of Modernism.

Perhaps the recognized authority of local voices and their material cultural heritage can be better understood as a parallel knowledge system with a different way of knowing the world. Perhaps, by denying the idea of a single human culture and its assumed universal knowledge set we might foster the growth of a pluralistic understanding of knowledges, an ecology of knowledges, allowing us with our different cultures to live together in a state of informed respect where changes build upon continuity and occur only with consent. (Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Abyssal Thinking*, lecture, Dem Con 2006, December, Univ. of Victoria and J. Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*: xx.)

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