

## **Misconceptions about the Arctic – Part One**

Some things said or written about the Inuit/Arctic/North are not always true. Most documents, stories, workbooks, informational packages, and historical facts about Inuit are usually written by people passing through who may have been exposed briefly and became “experts” from that experience. Some became experts after an hour visit to a community. This happens all over Nunavut, the North/Arctic and the world. I want to clear some of these misconceptions given by past visitors and from written material, and clear the good name of the Inuit. These are some of the things that have been exaggerated about Inuit, the north, language and culture...

### **Inuit live in snow houses**

It is often believed that Inuit still live in snow houses ( igloo/iglu ). This is not the case any more. All people in the North live in modern houses like the South. Most houses are quite small compared to houses down south because of the cost to maintain them. Most houses are three bedroom dwellings; only a few have four or five bedrooms. Inuit still use iglus for overnight camping but do not live in them year around.

#### **Some beliefs about Inuit regarding snow houses that are not true...**

- All Inuit live in snow houses. ( Not any more. However, snow houses are still used by hunters mostly on overnight hunting trips and as a tourism attraction).
- Snow houses are a few stories high (That would be almost impossible because the structure would not be able to support the extra weight above the ground level. Each snow block weighs around 20 pounds. A snow house may have approximately 40 blocks, so figure out the math ).
- Snow houses have freezers ( Snow houses are already cold).
- Refrigerators are kept in the snow house to keep food from freezing.
- Snow houses have elevators. ( Elevators are not necessary with one floor).
- Snow houses are lived in all year long ( We have spring and summer with very little or no snow at all ).
- Snow houses are portable and can be packed up to erect elsewhere (Old snow is not re-useable for building other structures ).
- There are 20 snow words. ( There’s more, depending on your location ).
- Any snow is good for building snow houses. ( Only the right type of snow is used for building snow houses. The snow texture has to be just right, not too hard nor too soft ).

### **Wife swapping happens in the north**

It is a belief that Inuit regularly swap wives. This writer is not aware of this today. However, years and years ago, it is said that a man would lend his wife to a hunter to sew for him while out hunting for an extended time. In the Arctic where the harshest, coldest weather in the world may exist, most men cannot sew and need a woman to sew for them, otherwise they could freeze. I’m quite confident that sex was also involved in the “companion” arrangement. There were very strict rules if this alternative were to be considered. Consent had to come from all that were involved and all had to be ready for the consequences. On these conditions, wife lending was accepted. (I wonder if Sharon Stone can sew. Demi Moore?)

### **Inuit live in isolation**

People often think that Inuit live in complete isolation. That is not the case. We have access to the internet, telephone, fax and other equipment that others use worldwide. We have frequent flights in and out of Mittimatalik ( Pond Inlet ) that connects to the south. If a person left Pond Inlet in the morning, she/he could be in Ottawa that same evening. All communities in the north do not have roads leading to the next community, but are accessible by snowmobile or boat, but mostly by airplane.

Isolation and loneliness can kill. I believe that people isolate themselves by not connecting with the people, the community and what it has to offer. Too much isolation is not healthy, physically and mentally. There have been cases in the north where professionals have become suicidal due to “isolation”.

### **Inuit are uneducated**

It is a belief that people in the arctic are still nomadic. In fact, Inuit in the Eastern Arctic have had formal education since the 1950s. Inuit always had education but not formally as they do today. Traditionally, Inuit learned hunting skills, land skills, animal behavior, butchering, storage, weather patterns, sewing, etc. from their parents or grandparents mostly through imitation, trial and error, and through oral language.

My father’s generation learned about heavy equipment without knowing any English at all and were able to repair, maintain, and operate them efficiently for their employers. Diesel operated vehicles were more difficult to start than gasoline fueled engines, and at -50°C, it was even more difficult. Inuit had excellent small muscle coordination (still do) that came in very handy for fixing things. As long as there were moving parts, Inuit could figure out how an engine works.

Another matter worth mentioning is how Inuit used accounting to assist traders by keeping records ( all in Inuktitut ) of all purchases/trades etc. which helped with inventory and accountability. Unheated warehouses were too cold for some traders so their Inuit staff would do the “cold” work while the trader worked in a heated dwelling. I know only a few people personally that worked as accountants. The late Mark Evaluardjuk of Igloolik was well known for his trading/accounting abilities. His accounting know-how helped him run his own business and now it has been passed down to his son. Mark started a successful business that is still running well. Mark never went to a formal school.

### **Nunavut has only one writing system.**

Inuit have had a syllabic writing system (adapted from the Cree) since the late 1800’s when the bible was introduced. When the writing system was introduced, Inuit quickly learned to read and write it and to teach others. Even small children learned the syllabic system. The main purpose of teaching the writing system was simply so Inuit could read the bible and get converted to Christianity. Another writing system was added in the late 1900s when Roman orthography was developed alongside syllabics. Most of Nunavut has the two main writing systems. Qikirmiut (Kitikmeot) is the only region in Nunavut that uses only Roman Orthography with a slight variation from the others.

### **Inuit can speak only one language.**

It is a misconception to believe that most Inuit only speak Inuktitut.

Today, many people in the north are bilingual, speaking both English and Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun. French is also spoken especially in the larger centres like Iqaluit. Nunavut aims to have fully bilingual students by the year 2020. It is also the Nunavut Government's mandate to have 85% Inuktitut in the workplace by 2020. **Language Act** of Nunavut is in place as well as **Language Protection Act** to safeguard the Inuktitut language. We are starting to see a higher number of students finishing high school. We now see university graduates today.

### **Square biscuits were invented by the Inuit**

Many people believe that pilot biscuits originated in the North with the Inuit. Actually, these biscuits come from Newfoundland! Square and round biscuits are popular for hunting and camping since they are delicious and easy to digest. Most of these biscuits can be easily eaten without causing stomach discomfort or heartburn.

### **All Inuit have black hair**

Believing that all Inuit are black haired is incorrect.

Yes, most Inuit have black hair! However, the black hair tends to get gray or white when people get older! When you look at hair through a microscope, you'll see that it's actually dark brown. Since the introduction of hair dye, you will see people with different colored hair. I have a purple haired grandson!

### **Flowers do not grow in the north**

Many people believe that there are no flowers in the arctic. Actually, we have a great variety of beautiful flowers. Unfortunately, however, they have a short life. Flowers grow very rapidly at first then die quickly. Many of these flowers will grow horizontally compared to the flowers down South that grow upward. Some plants are known to keep growing in the winter under frost and snow. **Common Plants of Nunavut** is a good resource.

### **Outsiders are not welcome**

Like any other person arriving in a new community, visitors to the arctic often believe that they may not be welcomed-wrong! We love visitors and welcome all civil servants! We appreciate all the assistance we receive from people from the south! Until such a time when we can manage our own affairs, we will continue to need help from the outside. Yes, visitors are welcomed! Inuit love being welcomed and love to return the favor. It is only when the outsider has an attitude of "Old British" where it was thought that the "British" were above all living things on earth, that we sometimes see resistance or objections.

It is vital that outsiders understand the "Inuit Societal Values" so that they put their knowledge to constructive use. An excellent example would be when a supervisor disciplines his/her staff by giving them leave without pay. This just might be the "Free time" that the employee has been looking for to go seal hunting. Does the leave without pay serve the intended purpose?

### **Next month- Misconceptions about the Arctic – Part Two**

Optical Illusion, Rubbing noses, Inuit do not take good care of their children, Wildlife is far away, Making faces, 24 hours of darkness, Use of Alcohol

## **Misconceptions about the Arctic – Part Two**

### **Optical illusions are common in the north**

Your eyes may play tricks on you when it comes to distances due to the nature of the land. A mountain 20 miles away may seem like it is only a couple of miles away. Bylot Island, across from Pond Inlet (approximately 17 miles away), seems so close sometimes that it looks like a short walking distance. I know of a few people who have been left behind by a flight when they tried to take a quick walk across. From Pond Inlet beach, buildings may appear further away than the mountains.

### **Inuit kiss by rubbing noses**

Yes, Inuit do, but not as they are portrayed in the movies. Inuit have always shown affection by touching the nose to the cheek, or nose area. A short sniff is what it really is. Sniffing is a natural thing that most animals do to show affection and also to determine if it is their off-spring or not. It's always great to smell infants! Mamaq!

### **Inuit do not take good care of their children**

It is believed that Inuit do not look after their children. Children are often seen 3:00 in the morning, playing by themselves. Most people take great care of their children, some do not. Actually, Inuit have been one of the greatest caretakers in the coldest climate the world has to offer, otherwise Inuit would not exist today! Elders cared so much for the young that some would sacrifice themselves (in some regions) so the younger ones could live on. Some people may call it suicide but we know it as "survival". This is difficult for some people to understand. I don't expect all people to understand, but I expect them to know.

### **Wildlife is far away**

It is believed that wildlife is in the wild. Actually, there is presence of animals in every community in the north. Polar bears are unwelcomed, frequent visitors (unless it's polar bear hunting season-of course!). People see narwhal passing through. Foxes are seen quite regularly. Seals visibly bask near some communities. There is an abundance of birds in the spring and the summer. Caribou may eat right outside your house. A rabbit may have a den under your house. Weasels and lemmings are scary for some folks regardless where they may be. Ravens mess with your garbage. Stray dogs may steal the "meat" from your porch. The worst kinds of creatures that steal are two legged ones!

### **Inuit are always making Faces**

Inuit are often misunderstood in this department. Inuit communicate silently due to the fact that as hunters they have to be very quiet or in need of absolute silence in order to get certain animals. Waiting at a seal hole is an excellent example. A hunter may stand and wait at a seal hole for a long time without making any type of noise. If he moves or makes a sound, the seal will not surface. No seal-no meal!

A "frowning" or "scrunching" (naqsik-) of the nose normally indicates that the reply or a comment is negative. Raising the eyebrows ( angiq-) indicates "yes". Both of the above

are expressed as they are displayed. ( See **“Yes or No”** March 2010 article, **Elijah Tigullaraq** ).

### **The north has 24 hours of darkness**

It is often believed that there is absolute darkness in the arctic in the winter. That is not entirely true. It does get dark but not completely. The sun disappears in November and returns early February ( Pond Inlet ). People are still able to attend to their chores. ( See **24 hours of Sunlight** May 2008, **Elijah Tigullaraq** ).

### **There is a problem with alcohol**

Alcohol is a problem in the North like anywhere in the world. It's especially bad with the Inuit. Too rapid an introduction of alcohol in the past has contributed to problems today. When alcohol was introduced in the north, people were not educated about it. Instead, many Inuit were often told to “down” their drinks and so thought that it was the way to drink.

Inuit may have poor metabolism when it comes to alcohol due to their diet. Many Inuit seem to be allergic to certain grains that make up the alcohol. Some Inuit develop a rash or the face may become red just after one drink. Actually, too much of anything will make you sick (too much chocolate, for example). Yes, alcohol is a big problem in the north!

Approximately 95% to 99% ( according to Sergeant Stephen Thorne, Pond Inlet RCMP detachment ) of the crimes committed in the North are alcohol related. Minus the alcohol, Inuit are one of the nicest people around! Alcohol education is probably the key to social problems and drinking. A cold one would be great right about now!

An excellent book to read on Inuit/arctic misconceptions is **White Lies About The Inuit**  
By John L. Steckley

Hopefully, I have cleared some of the misconceptions about the Arctic/North and about Inuit.

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