

Muskox and Man in the Subarctic: An Archaeological View

This note concerns the recent paper by Ernest S. Burch, Jr. in *Arctic*.

Dr. Burch has drawn attention to the significance of muskoxen in the lives of the historic Chipewyan and Caribou Inuit. He has at the same time also observed that archaeologists do not consider these animals to have been of importance to the economies of the same peoples in prehistoric times. While admitting the primacy of caribou to both peoples, he infers that the archaeological view is a biased one, a consequence of most excavations in the barren lands having been carried out at caribou water crossings where (he says) muskox remains are not to be found. On the latter point, I would simply remark that my excavations have revealed several muskox horns and probably hair in radio-carbon-dated Chipewyan levels at water crossings, in the midst of hundreds of caribou bones. Burch however errs in suggesting that archaeologists working in the barren lands direct their attention in the main to water crossings; they in fact spend a major proportion of their time doing surveys *away from* the crossings. There they find countless caribou racks (uncast or paired antlers) and bones, but rarely remains of muskoxen. Since some surface finds must be prehistoric, why is there not more evidence of muskoxen?

The relative absence of muskox remains may be due to:

(a) the animals not in general having been

of great importance for the subsistence of the prehistoric peoples of the barren lands. This may be the consequence both of their traditional preference for caribou meat (as Burch has stated) and of the fact that they were not exterminated after hunting losses in spite of their low rate of reproduction.

- (b) the numerical preponderance of caribou, the ease with which they may be killed while crossing bodies of water, and their utility other than as a source of fresh, or dried and smoked, meat (e.g., antlers and bones for tool making; skins for clothing, tents and rope).
- (c) the preference of muskoxen for wintering in the barren lands in small, isolated herds, at the same time as the prehistoric human inhabitants probably sheltered in the forest or at the forest-tundra ecotone, from where they pursued the migrating caribou.

Dr. Burch's article is valuable in that it serves to shed new light on the importance of muskoxen to the historic inhabitants of the barren lands, as its title implies. At the same time, however, the primacy of caribou to the prehistoric peoples is rightly stressed. I would say in conclusion that, while barrenland archaeologists rightfully regard the caribou as the staff of life to the prehistoric indigenes, they do not disregard the muskox; they merely seek to accord it a correct relative importance.

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