

Georg Henriksen

Hunters in the Barrens

The Naskapi on the Edge of the White Man's World



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Foreword

The singular adaptation of the Naskapi Indians in the Labrador Barrens had for long attracted the attention of anthropologists and yet no ethnography based on extensive field work existed. Mr. Henriksen's field work between 1966 and 1968 was done in the 'eleventh hour' of the traditional Naskapi culture: families still ventured to the Barrens during the winters, but the modernity of the Western world had at last, and decisively, reached them at their coastal settlement in Davis Inlet. His book, then, should have value both as a contribution to ethnography and as a legacy for future generations of Naskapi who are born on the 'western' side of the Rubicon.

Now a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Bergen, Mr. Henriksen came to the Institute for this research project from his native Norway where much of the first draft of the manuscript was also written.

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St. John's
June, 1973

Robert Paine
Director of Sociological Research
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Preface

This study is the result of two separate visits, one while I was a research fellow with the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University, and the other while I was a research associate in the ISER project *Identity and Modernity in the East Arctic* sponsored by the Izaak Walton Killam Awards. The material was collected in the periods June 1966 to June 1967, and December 1967 to June 1968, respectively.

Of the many persons drawn into this study, my warmest thanks go first and foremost to the Naskapi in Davis Inlet who accepted my intrusion into their society. Special thanks are due to Thomas and Alice Noa who, from the beginning, received me into their tent, and eased the period of accommodation both for me and the Naskapi. Special thanks are also due to Sam and Shibish Napeo who came to be my best friends while I was a member of their household in the Barren Grounds. It was Napeo who taught me how to become a Naskapi man, so that I could participate as a hunter in their ritual of *mokoshan*.

I am also grateful to the missionary and the storekeeper and his wife in Davis Inlet. I am painfully aware of the fact that this study does not do justice to the work of these two men in Davis Inlet. Alone, the missionary stood up on behalf of the Naskapi and protected their rights to their land and their rights to remain in Davis Inlet as long as they chose. In these and many other matters concerning Davis Inlet, we are in full agreement.

I wish to thank all those who have given me valuable suggestions at various stages of my work with the material; in particular, to Professors Robert Paine, Fredrik Barth, and Jean Briggs who read various versions of the manuscript and gave me detailed criticism. I also wish to thank Cato Wadel, Jan-Petter Blom, and Otto Blehr for the stimulating and encouraging discussions I have had with them. Thanks also to Professors Edward Rogers, David Alexander, and George Park who read the manuscript on my request. Finally, I wish to thank Sonia Kuryliw Paine for her editorial work and the secretaries at Memorial University and the University of Bergen for typing the various versions of the manuscript.

February, 1973
Bergen, Norway.

Georg Henriksen

Introduction

The Naskapi live in two different worlds: in the winter, they roam the interior of Labrador, hunting caribou; in the summer, they live in or around the village of Davis Inlet on the coast of Labrador. In this book, one of the themes I explore is the contrast in the social life between these two worlds. One may say that the Naskapi alternate between two economic spheres: the subsistence sphere of caribou hunting in the winter, and the money sphere of cod fishing in the summer. However, their lives are altered not only in economic terms, but also ecologically, socially, and ideologically, so that one may say that the Naskapi alternate between two life spheres. 25p

In Sango Bay, approximately ten miles from Davis Inlet, lives an isolated settler family that exploits the same environment as the Naskapi. Yet, the only son is able to earn \$6,000 a year, while a Naskapi seldom makes more than \$1,500. This great difference in income is readily, though superficially explained if we look at the yearly round of activities of the settler and the Naskapi. However, the question remains: why do the Naskapi not exploit the environment in the same manner as the settler does? While the settler lives in his house by the sea year-round earning money by fishing and sealing, the Naskapi leave the coast in the fall to go hunting caribou in the Barren Grounds throughout the winter. Their life here earns them little or no cash, is very strenuous and implies a certain risk through sickness and starvation. Why do they prefer it to the safe and comfortable life on the coast where they could earn more cash and buy more material goods, both of which they value, or simply live off relief?

From the preceding remarks, it can be seen that the two worlds offer very different opportunities for the Naskapi, and I shall try to analyse some of the crucial values which they share and pursue in the two situations. It is not a question of the Naskapi having two different sets of values, one belonging to the coastal world, and another to the Barren Ground world. Rather, as I shall demonstrate, the Naskapi hold the same values in both worlds, but the opportunities to maximize these values differ in the two worlds. As a consequence of this fact, the quality of life differs radically, as does the relative richness of meaning which the two worlds represent to the Naskapi.

I shall argue that the harsh environment of the interior provides a setting for joint activities through which shared values are consummated. The focal

point for these activities and the one foremost in the minds of the Naskapi is the caribou. The Naskapi pursue herds of caribou as they feed widely scattered on the semi-barren plateau in the interior of Labrador. In tents made out of flimsy cotton duck, the hunters and their families subsist on caribou throughout the arctic winter. The caribou, the caribou hunt, and the sharing of its produce lie at the heart of Naskapi culture. The sacred marrow from the long bones of the caribou is eaten raw by all the hunters in a ritual context where crucial cultural values are communicated and confirmed. Inside one tent, they sit in a circle for a whole day, partaking in this communal meal through which their relationship to the natural and supernatural worlds is expressed. Also communicated in the ritual are some of the dominant characteristics of their social life, notably that of the fundamental interdependence of one Naskapi upon the other, and the importance of sharing the fruits of the hunt. The environment of the Barren Ground world makes them dependent upon one another.

Yet, simultaneously with this interdependence, I shall argue that individual autonomy is also a central value for the Naskapi. Their adaptation as hunters makes it possible for them to attain an exceptionally high degree of autonomy. Thus, the Naskapi are confronted with a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand, the harsh environment forces dependence upon each other, while on the other, they wish to maximize their autonomy and personal individuality.

In the course of my analysis, I shall discuss another basic dilemma in the Naskapi culture: that of sharing versus having. Sharing, especially that of caribou meat, is fundamental to the social system of the Naskapi. It is with the knowledge that successful hunters will share their kill with the others, that most of the Naskapi are able to travel into the Barren Grounds with their families. Also, through sharing a hunter can gain a following and prestige. But, at the same time, the individual Naskapi also values having and keeping for himself. Hence, sharing is encumbered with many sanctions; keeping anything that should be shared makes one a target for social contempt.

We shall see that the Naskapi manage to cope with these dilemmas in the Barren Ground world, but they become more acute in the coastal world, and have different behavioural consequences. This is so because of the different opportunities presented in the coastal and interior worlds. On the coast, new and non-traditional transformations of economic goods are possible and desirable, whereas crucial traditional values and goals are difficult or impossible to realize in this ecological setting. While the core of their culture belongs to the Barren Grounds, the Naskapi, nevertheless, value the safety and comfort of living on the coast, in touch with the white man's world. However, problems exist because they have not adapted efficiently to the market economy.

On the coast, it is possible to exercise autonomy to an extent never attainable in the interior. At the same time, it is also possible to maximize the value of having, and neglect the traditional rules of sharing. Thus, the two dilemmas in the value system of the Naskapi come to a head on the coast, and this leads to open interpersonal conflicts. I shall argue that the perpetual quarrelling and heavy drinking, so characteristic of social life on the coast, is due largely to the discrepancy between Naskapi values and goals and the opportunities they have for their realization in the two different settings. The disruptive effects on social life on the coast are caused by the lack of opportunities to act out traditional role behaviour with respect to being a hunter, a leader, and husband. The new opportunities and constraints regarding the allocation of economic goods necessitate making choices which are inconsistent with traditional ideas concerning the circulation of goods.

Although one may say that the Naskapi have become acculturated in the sense that they have adopted, and have grown dependent upon goods from the industrial world outside, the superficiality of their effects on Naskapi culture should emerge throughout this book. The Naskapi are still hunters at heart.

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Part I: The Setting

The Naskapi and their Environment

1

The hunting grounds of the Naskapi lie roughly within a semi-ellipse, reckoning 150 miles west and 50 miles north and south of Davis Inlet. It is the interior western part of this area where the Naskapi hunt for caribou which provides the setting for the most crucial aspects of Naskapi social life and culture. Their environment consists mainly of barren mountains and rolling plains broken up by numerous lakes and rivers. Throughout this exposed landscape, widely scattered patches of conifers are found in protected riverbeds and on a few sheltered hillsides. Here the Naskapi erect their tents, while the daily hunting activities take place in the surrounding wind-swept Barren Grounds. When on the move, the Naskapi travel swiftly from one stand of forest to the next, as they are dependent upon trees for the construction of their tents and wood for their stoves.

The Naskapi spend the best part of the winter, from October/December to March/April, in this part of Labrador. While the summers are often warmer in the interior than on the coast, the winters are always colder with temperatures dropping to -40°C and -50°C . The air is very dry, so that the climate can be characterized as arctic (Tanner, 1944:329). Ice begins to form on the lakes by the middle of September, and all smaller lakes are iced over by the beginning of October. By November/December, the rivers are frozen and safe for travel by dog-sled. The snow lies relatively deep in the woods and on the rivers, making travelling back and forth from the interior a strenuous task. But on the Barren Grounds, the snow is blown away so that usually one can walk without snowshoes. Lichen often lies exposed, making it easy for the caribou to feed.

Today the caribou hunt takes place mainly in the winter when the caribou are found feeding on the Barren Grounds. However, under special circumstances, it may happen that big herds migrate to the coast and even venture out to the islands. This occurred in the winter of 1965/66 presumably because mild weather and subsequent frost caused a layer of ice to form over the lichen, forcing the caribou out of the interior. The Naskapi reckon that certain parts of their hunting grounds always contain "plenty

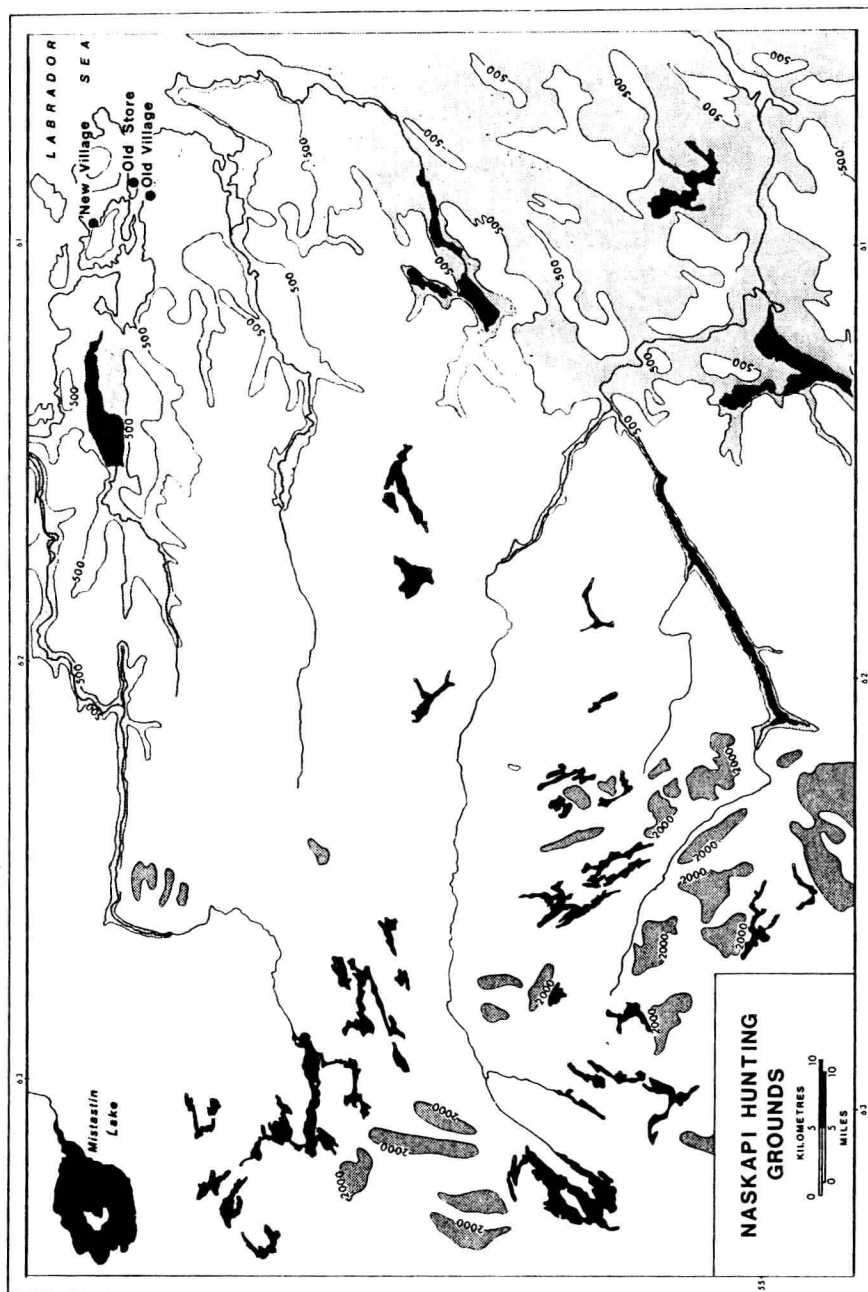
interior. Wolves abound also, but they are difficult and time-consuming to hunt or trap, so that the Naskapi get only a few each year. Arctic fox (white and blue) and red fox (cross between black and brown) are numerous, but are not hunted or trapped systematically. Otter and lynx are hunted in the woods if the opportunity arises and a few are caught each year. All the above animals are valued for their fur and meat. Mink and weasel are trapped for their fur only, but are eaten in times of scarcity when the Naskapi will also hunt hares and squirrels. The Naskapi say that they would never eat mice and lemming.

A frequent addition to the diet is the rock-ptarmigan. This bird is abundant everywhere in the hunting grounds of the Naskapi. Also important is the spruce partridge which is shot year-round although it is found only in the woods. Another welcome addition to the diet is red char which is caught now and then through the ice on the lakes.

Sometime during March or April, the Naskapi start their trek towards Davis Inlet. As they move eastward, the rolling barren plains become more mountainous so that they must follow the rivers which cut through coniferous forests and which eventually drain into the sea. The forest becomes more dense in the river valleys approximately thirty miles from the coast.

Finally, the Naskapi reach salt water in one of the numerous bays that indent the coastline at a stretch of ten to twenty miles from the sea. Along with the bays, hundreds of islands fringe this coastal part of the hunting grounds (see Map 2). The outer islands lie barren and exposed to the Atlantic Ocean, but nearer the mainland, they become heavily wooded and separated from each other and from the mainland by narrow sounds, rattles, and bays. The Naskapi feel more at ease among the inner islands and in the bays, the outer islands being quite hazardous for travellers in both summer and winter. In summer, the boats must be piloted between low skerries and sunken rocks, while in winter, the hunter must avoid areas where strong tidal currents prevent the water from freezing to form a safe layer of ice. Another danger exists in moving ice which can leave the hunter and his dog team on an isolated ice floe. Moving ice can also trap a small boat in late spring and early summer, especially in narrow sounds where it can quickly jam as it moves back and forth with the tidal current.

Although the sea ice starts to break up sometime in May, it is usually not gone before the beginning of July. By then it is summer on land, with temperatures of +30°C not being uncommon in Davis Inlet. However, snowfall can occur in July, caused by easterly winds that sweep in from the Atlantic and the Labrador Current, bringing cold weather with fog and rain to the coast. During August, the weather becomes rapidly colder with ice beginning to form on the lakes in September. In the middle of December, the sea starts to freeze up and becomes safe for travel except through rattles where strong tidal currents prevent ice from forming. The sea freezes



Map 2. Naskapi Hunting Grounds

way out from the shore, and the sparsely populated coast lies white, silent, and desolate under the northern lights.

When the Naskapi reach the coast and Davis Inlet in March/April, the weather can be warm and the seals are found basking on the ice in the sun. Throughout their stay on the coast, the Naskapi hunt for seals, the most common in the area being the harp seal and the jar seal; occasionally a square flipper is shot. The seal meat (and fat) is the most popular dog food, and although the Naskapi also eat it, they prefer other kinds of meat. The sealskin is used for boots, moccasins, and sled-lashes; only seldom is it sold to the store.

The Naskapi spend most of their time in the community, although most of them occasionally set up camps where they can utilize resources not found in the immediate surroundings of Davis Inlet. For example, in the spring they move into the bays to fish brook and lake trout through the ice on the lakes. They also hunt for black bear when it comes out of hibernation. At the end of May, the Canada goose arrives and large flocks can be found in open rattles in the bays. Later, they take to their nesting areas in the marshes close to the coast. In addition to the rock ptarmigan and the spruce partridge, the Naskapi also hunt black duck, eider duck, the loon, and the sea pigeon.

In July, cod fish reach the Labrador coast in large numbers, and constitute the main source of cash income for the Naskapi. Also abundant is the arctic char and less so, the atlantic salmon. Rock cod is important as a food resource. A small fish, the caplin, appears in great numbers for a short period in summer, spawning on sandy shores where it then dies. A few Naskapi collect it for dog food. Some of the older men used to dry the caplin and bring it into the interior as dog food, but nobody does so today.

Below is a chart (see p. 6) showing the seasonal exploitation of the various renewable resources upon which the Naskapi base their existence. In 1968, there were 145 Naskapi exploiting these various resources within a territory measuring roughly 15,000 square miles. In 1965, 45.7 of the population were fifteen years or younger (see Figure 1). In 1968, there were 33 Naskapi households in Davis Inlet of which 2 did not travel into the Barren Grounds as the heads of these households were no longer active hunters. Among the 31 hunters, 2 were young men in their late teens who had not yet established their own households and therefore did little hunting.

Thus, the Naskapi are a small group of people who hunt in a vast tract of land with almost no competition from outside groups. The boundaries of their hunting territory are determined by the distance they wish and are able to travel. It is essential to realize that there are no families or other groups of people having rights to any of this territory or its resources. Every Naskapi is free to roam where he likes and exploit the resources of

TABLE 1

Seasonal Exploitation of the Renewable Resources of the Naskapi

SEASON:	Autumn	Winter	Spring	Summer
PLACE OF CAMP:	In the bays	Barren Lands	Davis Inlet/ In the bays	Davis Inlet
RESOURCES EXPLOITED:				
	sporad/ intens.	intens.	sporad/ intens.	sporad.
caribou	many	plenty	few	few
wolf	sporad. few	sporad. few	sporad. few	sporad. few
	sporad.	sporad/ intens.	sporad.	sporad.
fox	few	many	few	few
mink/ otter/ lynx	all sporad. few	all sporad. few	all sporad. few	all sporad. few
	intens.	sporad/ intens.	sporad/ intens.	sporad.
porcupine	many	few	few	few
	sporad.		sporad/ intens.	sporad.
bear	few	none	few	few
	intens. plenty		intens. plenty	sporad. many
seal		none		
Arctic char/ salmon/ cod/ rock-cod red char	Arc. char intens.	red char sporad.	Arc. char/ rock-cod intens.	cod/ Arc. char/ salmon intens. plenty
	plenty	few	plenty	
geese/ ducks ptarmigan	ptarmigan intens.	ptarmigan intens/ sporad.	all intens.	ducks/ geese sporad.
	plenty	plenty	plenty	many

Hunted intensively: intens.

Hunted sporadically: sporad.

Number of specimens obtained: plenty, many, few.

the land. Indeed, it would seem difficult to have any kind of family hunting territory system in a society where mobility is essential for exploiting migrating caribou herds.

Speck and Eiseley (1939, 1942), and Leacock (1954) recognize that this ecological adaptation militates against the possibility of any system of

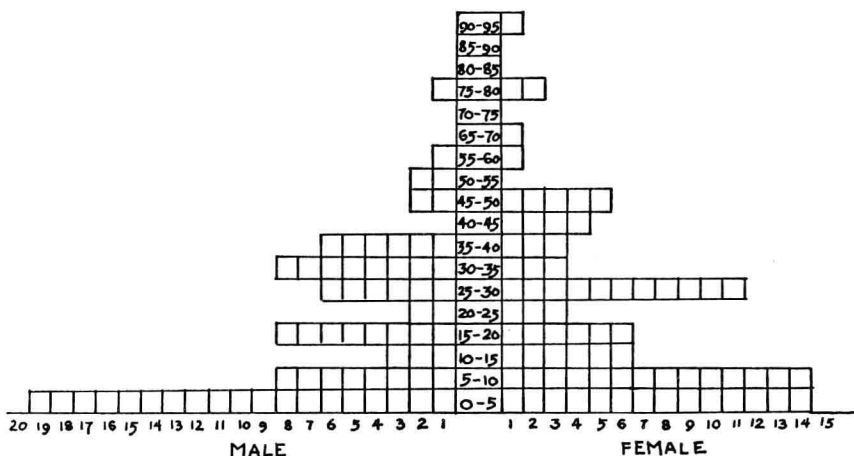


Figure 1. Population Pyramid, 1965 (Total Population: 140)

family hunting territories. However, while Speck thinks that the hunting of more stationary game in the woods accounted for a Pre-Columbian family hunting territory system among the northern Algonkian, Leacock argues that the Woodland Indians practised communal nomadism and had no family hunting territory system before the onset of the fur trade. She argues convincingly that with the availability of a stable food supply provided by the local store, it became possible for individual families to occupy a certain territory without risking starvation, even if traditional subsistence game failed to appear on their territory. Furthermore, with the production of fur for trade, “the individual’s most important ties, economically speaking, were transferred from *within* the band to without, and his objective relation to other band members changed from the cooperative to the competitive” (Leacock, 1954:7). Later, Knight added that “the replacement of caribou by moose and of muskets by rifles seems to have made larger hunting units and extensive separate hunts non-advantageous. It seems to have improved the opportunities for and returns from trapping – quite apart from any hypothetical acculturative shift to ‘individualized,’ barter economy” (1965:30).

In former times, the Naskapi hunted caribou without rifles and were dependent upon the cooperation of many people to ambush the animals, a hunting technique making any development of family hunting territories difficult. However, even after the Naskapi acquired high-powered repeating rifles, and to a significant extent abandoned the ambush technique, they still did not form a territory system. The reasons for this are found both in certain restrictions imposed by the habits of the caribou, and in the social system of the Naskapi.