

## Everyone goes fishing: Understanding procurement for men, women and children in an arctic community

## On va tous à la pêche: Un mode d'acquisition pour hommes, femmes et enfants d'une communauté arctique

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article présente une nouvelle perspective concernant un mode d'acquisition inuit en relation avec les rôles des sexes. Un examen approfondi des tournois de pêche dans l'Arctique canadien permet de souligner l'importance de cet aspect de la vie inuit. Jusqu'ici, de nombreuses études ethnographiques et recherches sur l'utilisation du territoire ont mis l'emphase sur la chasse. Le tournoi de pêche est un nouvel exemple d'acquisition. Il s'agit d'une activité à laquelle participent femmes, hommes, enfants et aînés. Le rôle de la femme dans l'Arctique a souvent été considéré sous l'angle de la division du travail ou bien sous celui de sa complémentarité au rôle de l'homme. Le tournoi de pêche est une occasion où les activités acquisitionnelles ne sont pas forcément organisées selon le sexe des individus et par conséquent cet aspect nous aide à comprendre de façon plus large les rôles des sexes. Le tournoi de pêche permet également de voir d'un point de vue ethnographique «la compétence» comme savoir traditionnel, éclairant la façon dont les Inuit, et par extension tous les chasseurs-cueilleurs, perçoivent le monde qui les entoure.

# Everyone goes fishing: Understanding procurement for men, women and children in an arctic community

Kerrie Ann Shannon\*

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Cet article présente une nouvelle perspective concernant un mode d'acquisition inuit en relation avec les rôles des sexes. Un examen approfondi des tournois de pêche dans l'Arctique canadien permet de souligner l'importance de cet aspect de la vie inuit. Jusqu'ici, de nombreuses études ethnographiques et recherches sur l'utilisation du territoire ont mis l'emphase sur la chasse. Le tournoi de pêche est un nouvel exemple d'acquisition. Il s'agit d'une activité à laquelle participent femmes, hommes, enfants et aînés. Le rôle de la femme dans l'Arctique a souvent été considéré sous l'angle de la division du travail ou bien sous celui de sa complémentarité au rôle de l'homme. Le tournoi de pêche est une occasion où les activités acquisitionnelles ne sont pas forcément organisées selon le sexe des individus et par conséquent cet aspect nous aide à comprendre de façon plus large les rôles des sexes. Le tournoi de pêche permet également de voir d'un point de vue ethnographique «la compétence» comme savoir traditionnel, éclairant la façon dont les Inuit, et par extension tous les chasseurs-cueilleurs, perçoivent le monde qui les entoure.

**Abstract:** Everyone goes fishing: Understanding procurement for men, women and children in an arctic community

This paper provides insight into Inuit procurement and gender roles. Through a focus on fishing derbies in the Canadian Arctic, this significant aspect of Inuit life is recognized. Many ethnographies and land use studies have previously concentrated on hunting. The fishing derby provides an alternative ethnographic example of procurement. It is an activity in which women, men, children, and elders participate. Women's roles in the Arctic have often been discussed in terms of gender division of labour or in terms of their complementarity to men's roles. The fishing derby demonstrates occasions when procurement activities are not necessarily divided along gender lines and thereby reveals a broader understanding of gender roles. The fishing derby is also an ethnographic example of skill as traditional knowledge and may inform how Inuit, and hunter-gatherers more generally, relate to the world around them.

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## Introduction

While hunter-gatherers' perception or engagement with their environment has often been derived from an understanding of hunting, without a broader examination of procurement, there remains a gender bias in the literature. By affording a broader understanding of procurement, women's involvement can be considered. As Nuttall (1998a: 25) notes, research which focuses on women's activities is limited and "few researchers anywhere in the Arctic have documented in detail the daily routines of women and the vital contributions they make to the social and economic vitality of their communities [...]." I suggest in this paper that it is important to examine procurement beyond a gendered division of hunting and gathering in the Canadian Arctic.

Fishing is an area that provides opportunities to examine women's participation in procurement. This does not mean, however, that I will concentrate solely on women's activities. I think that we must instead examine whole families' engagement in procurement, as fishing is an activity in which everyone participates. By studying instances when participation is not necessarily divided by gender, we may gain a clearer understanding of gender roles. In this paper, I will specifically focus on fishing and fishing derbies as one aspect that has been under-represented in Canadian arctic ethnography.<sup>1</sup>

## Background and methods

Fieldwork was conducted on Southampton Island in the predominantly Inuit community of Coral Harbour (1999/2000). Coral Harbour is situated on the southern coast of Southampton Island, Nunavut, Canada. As the island's only community, Coral Harbour is located at 83 degrees longitude and 64 degrees latitude, well above the tree line and has an Arctic climate (Figure 1). The "Community List," updated in September 1999, numbers 737 people. The permanent settlement of Coral Harbour established in the 1950s and 1960s brought together Avilingmiut and Uqqumiut that had been living in dispersed camps on Southampton Island. These two groups of Inuit were brought to the island through their interaction with whalers and the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>2</sup> I use the term community, for Coral Harbour, to refer to a broader area beyond the geographical confines of the town. The residents of Coral Harbour travel in order to hunt, fish, or live for short periods of time in other locations, and they procure resources from most of the island. The notion of "community," therefore, not only refers to the hamlet (or town) but also incorporates all other parts of Southampton Island where such activities take place. Despite divisions by place of origin or kinship, the majority of community residents participated in the fishing derby.

I will briefly discuss my research methods, as I am in agreement with Emerson *et al.* (1995: 11) that "*what* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how*

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart (2005) also argues that fishing has been under-reported in Canadian arctic ethnography, because of the major emphasis on hunting.

<sup>2</sup> The indigenous population of the Sadlermiut are thought to have died out around 1902.

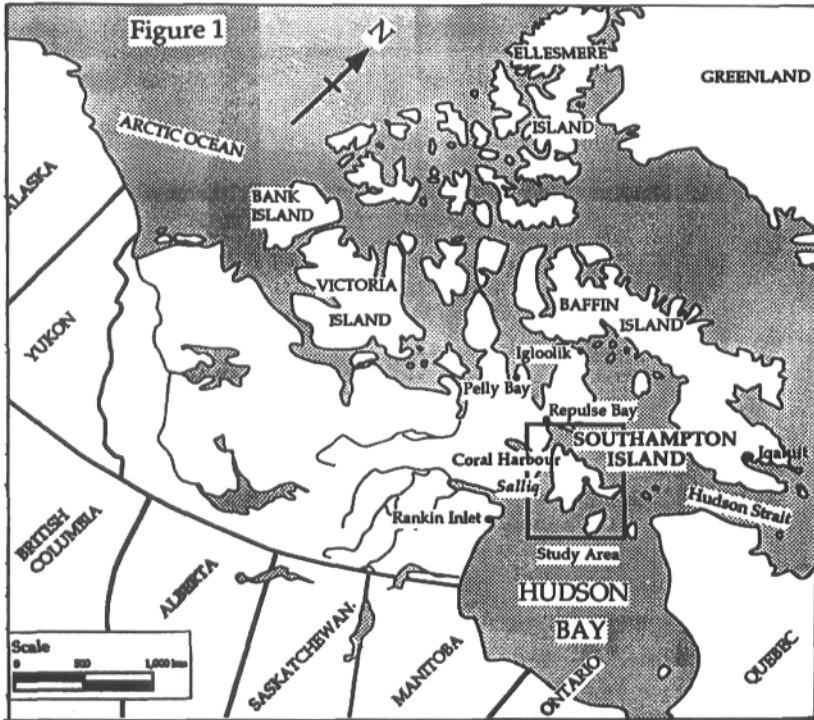


Figure 1. Map of arctic Canada.

she finds it out.” Research was conducted employing participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews. The *participation* aspect also involved apprenticeship learning, as I did not initially have the necessary skills to participate. I found it necessary first to spend time *doing* before asking more direct questions. To initiate my research, a “radio call-in show” was very useful (Shannon 2004). It also proved influential in continuing the research process and created an interview list, as well as a format for informal interviews. This combination of methodological approaches and strategies allowed me to collect a wide range of information initially and then, later, to seek answers to more specific questions.

## Hunting-gathering and procurement

Gender division of labour is commonly examined within the hunter-gatherer literature. Although the conclusions of the 1966 Man the Hunter conference suggested gathering was considered more important than hunting, the Arctic has remained an exception (Lee and DeVore 1968). The focus in the Arctic has remained on hunting.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of this focus, other activities of procurement have tended to be less thoroughly addressed. Some land-use studies and ethnographies do include procurement activities apart from hunting (Department of Education, Culture and Employment 1996; Freeman 2000; Ikuutaq 1984; McDonald *et al.* 1997; Riewe 1992; Usher 1975); however, this area of inquiry needs further embellishment. I suggest that instead of focusing on hunting or gathering, a broader range of procurement methods needs to be examined.

I use the word “procurement,” as modeled on Bird-David’s (1992b) use of the term for it does not specify a method of how a resource is obtained nor stipulate the procured resource.<sup>4</sup> Bird-David (1992b: 40) argues that *procurement* is “accurate enough for describing modern hunter-gatherers who apply care, sophistication and knowledge to their resource-getting activities.” Thereby procurement may refer to any method of obtaining subsistence including purchased material goods. In this paper, however, I focus on fishing. Furthermore the word “procurement” does not have the same implication with respect to gendered division of labour that the words “hunting” and “gathering” could have.

If the Arctic has been viewed as an exception to the prevalent model of the division of labour, how then have women’s roles been discussed? Some accounts have evaluated women’s work in terms of how they contribute to hunting (Bodenhorn 1990; Brumbach and Jarvenpa 1997; Fienup-Riordan 1990a, 1990b; Sharp 1981). Bodenhorn (1990) explores women’s contributions to subsistence economies through their hunting-related activities. The Inupiat conception of hunting consists not just of catching the animal but also incorporates many additional activities performed by men

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<sup>3</sup> Hunting has been a dominant focus of much Arctic ethnography and many land-use studies (*e.g.*, Balikci 1970; Birket-Smith 1936, 1945; Brody 1987, 2000; Caulfield 1997; Dahl 2000; Damas 1984; Freeman 1976; Freuchen 1961; Graburn 1969; Gubser 1965; Nelson 1969; Nuttall 1992; Rasmussen 1908, 1929).

<sup>4</sup> The word “procurement” reflects well the Inuit use of various phrases to describe people’s involvement in subsistence activities. For example, people may be “on the land,” or “camping.”

as well as women (*ibid.*). This definition of hunting is valuable, for it illustrates that the division of labour by gender does not necessarily mean that women lack involvement in hunting.<sup>5</sup>

Others have emphasised the complementarity of men's and women's activities (Balikci 1970; Briggs 1974; Gubser 1965; Guemple 1986). By highlighting the value of these complementary roles, Briggs (1974), also makes a contribution to anthropological gendered studies by providing empirical evidence that runs counter to Ortner's (1974) argument regarding the universal subordination of women. Balikci also refers to the complementary division of labour between men and women in his account of the Netsilik Eskimo. He describes the skills of women in sewing skins for tents, boots, and clothing, and comments: "Clearly the wife's work was as essential to the well-being and survival of the family as was the husband's" (Balikci 1970: 104). Similarly, Guemple (1986) discusses the complimentary nature of households where work is not primarily understood in terms of the competence or skills of men or women but is, instead, seen as being performed for each other. A potential problem with Guemple's model is that he fails to specifically address the variable nature of gender roles. Condon and Stern (1993) express this concern and discuss the recent changes that have influenced understandings of gender identity in Holman (Northwest Territories).

Although there were aspects of daily life in Coral Harbour that readily matched the model of a gendered and complementary division of labour, there were other procurement activities that were not divided along gender lines. The model of men hunting and women gathering, or of women being active in complementary roles did not always apply. For a range of procurement activities, gender may influence an individual's task, but may not necessarily be a determinant of participation in the activity. For instance, in preparation for fishing, men may make the fishing handles and women may bake bannock bread to take as a snack but the activity of fishing is not considered "men's" or "women's" work.<sup>6</sup> I am not dismissing the complementary nature of men's and women's activities. Instead I would like to highlight occasions when it does not apply. By extending attention to activities that cannot be clearly divided along gender lines, we can gain a fuller understanding of the roles of both men and women.

### **The fishing derby**

Although not the specific focus, numerous ethnographic accounts have mentioned fishing in many parts of the Arctic. Ethnographic accounts such as Boas (1964 [1888]) call attention to fishing as an aspect of documenting the traditional culture among the Baffin Island Inuit, while more recent accounts incorporate fishing as part of a mixed economy, such as Dahl's (2000) depiction of a Greenlandic community, or discuss fishing as part of contemporary life in the Canadian Arctic (Dorais 1997). Fishing, of

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper, however, I use the term "hunting" in a narrow sense referring to the pursuit of large game (such as caribou, walrus, seal, wolves, and polar bears)—an activity predominantly performed by men.

<sup>6</sup> Another similar example would be egg collecting; men may drive the snowmobile and women help children in and out of the sled, but the activity of egg collecting is not necessarily considered "men's" or "women's" work.

course, has varying importance in different locations but is mentioned as a subsistence activity across the Arctic (e.g., Balikci 1970; Barker and Barker 1993; Briggs 1970; Brody 1987; Burch 1988; Graburn 1969; Gubser 1965; Hensel 1996; Honigmann and Honigmann 1965; Mauss 1979 [1906]; Nuttall 1998b; Riches 1982; Wenzel 1991).

Fishing contests and derbies are significant ways in which people utilize the land and interact with each other. Fishing by methods such as jigging or setting nets has been important to the economy and social life in many parts of the Arctic. In the absence of further field research, it is difficult to know whether similar contests take place throughout the Arctic, without receiving specific mention, or if they are indeed unique to the Keewatin and Baffin regions of Nunavut.<sup>7</sup>

Fishing and fishing derbies are important activities in the spring and summer, as they become the focus of town life, dominating discussions and occupying people's time with the preparations. The large derby becomes a focal event for the community, yet individuals continue to fish and smaller derbies and spontaneous contests take place throughout the spring and summer. Children eagerly count down the days and adults actively prepare for the fishing derby. Indeed, fishing is one activity in which most community residents participate. Through my own participation in two successive annual fishing derbies, as well as participation in several other smaller fishing contests, I provide a detailed ethnographic account elsewhere (Shannon 2004) and a summary here.

Planning for the derby can begin a month or more in advance. Relatives visit one another while working on projects; women are active in sewing new wind-pants or mittens, while men are busily working on snowmobiles and sleds. During the spring, conversations easily turned to questions about the preparations for the upcoming derby or simply expressed genuine excitement and anticipation for the event. Organizational planning for the derby, managed by a volunteer committee, includes fundraisers such as a "penny sale."<sup>8</sup> Drawing mainly from local contributions, the prizes are secured for the derby. Prizes range from \$5,000 (Canadian), a round trip plane ticket to a southern Canadian destination (worth approximately \$1,500), to smaller cash sums. The length of the largest fish most often determines the winners. However, minor prizes may be given for categories such as the smallest fish.<sup>9</sup>

Rules of a fishing derby clearly specify times and fishing methods, for example fishing with nets is not allowed. Locations for fishing, however, are not defined. For the large fishing derby, the majority of community residents travel to the north end of Southampton Island. By living with a family, I began to understand the eagerness for travelling to the fishing derby. However, I misunderstood their expression that they

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<sup>7</sup> Inuit are often involved in procurement activities through games and contests. Some of these contests as community-wide events may have a relatively recent history, and have become increasingly popular with the establishment of permanent settlements. Competition and games, however, are not a contemporary phenomenon. A historical comparison on the level of competition and contests may be useful in understanding their social importance in relation to these issues, but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> A penny sale is a combination of garage sale and raffle. Donations are solicited and participants purchase a chance to win the item for a nominal fee, the winner is chosen by random.

<sup>9</sup> In other areas of Nunavut prizes are sometimes awarded for the most fish rather than the largest fish.

could not wait to “get out of town.” As a suburban and city dweller, I had an idea that this phrase meant increased space and decreased contact with other people. As the family snowmobile and sled with travel “box” left town, a convoy of families joined us. Ages ranged from newborn babies carried in their mother’s *amautik* to elders. The journey to the northern lakes was approximately a seven-hour trip across the tundra. Travel breaks were not solitary, rather they were a social occasion where we shared tea and snacks. I began to understand that “getting out of town” simply meant leaving the physical parameters of the hamlet. When we arrived at the lake, almost the entire *town*, meaning the people, was there. People have been returning to camp in similar locations year after year and set their camps in close proximity to one another.<sup>10</sup> Although the land is not *owned*, there are certain usufructory rights over areas, and a recent trend to move cabins to the lake has created a more physically obvious claim to a location.

### The derby begins

There were a handful of people checking their watches waiting to lower their fishing hooks at the stroke of midnight but many others rested after the long journey. A few people arose early during the morning twilight to begin fishing at four or five o’clock. Most families began fishing starting at seven or eight in the morning. We had a rushed and hearty breakfast; the family could hardly wait to begin fishing. By the time we arrived at the lake, men using ice augers were drilling holes in various locations.

Before one could put a baited hook down the newly drilled hole, the slush had to be scooped out. The scoopers that people used were home-produced and were as original as the fishing handles. When people need to make something, they examine available materials and are not restricted by the function or use of an object, but see it as something that can be used for, or made into, something else. One scooper was made from an old hockey helmet attached to a piece of left-over plastic sled runner. Others looked like enlarged kitchen utensils. Not only in fishing tools but concerning technology in general, an Inuit approach to a situation is to remain open and maintain a “readiness to remake objects [...]” (Briggs 1991: 262).

We spent all day jigging for arctic char (Figure 2 ). Lunch was often skipped, as no one wanted to leave the ice and stop fishing, instead people went back to their tent or cabin for a quick snack and immediately returned to fishing. By dinnertime most people came in to eat, warm up and rest. Fishing continued after dinner until eleven or twelve at night as twilight was beginning. This focus on fishing set the daily pattern for the following five days of the fishing derby.<sup>11</sup>

Although the holes themselves provide a static indication of what is occurring, they do not accurately reflect the amount of movement that takes place. People are often moving in search of fish. The ice may be a slight barrier to accessing the lake, but

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<sup>10</sup> During the fishing derby people set camps close to kin whereas in town, housing is assigned by the housing committee.

<sup>11</sup> In contrast, smaller derbies or spontaneous contests will last only a few hours and will not influence daily patterns.



people make the most of this by drilling holes in various locations, and movement occurs nonetheless. As I stood talking with people and waiting for a few holes to be drilled, I was encouraged to start fishing. I was a little shy to begin as I thought each person had their own hole. However, the holes could be used by anyone, and the only claim a person had was to the hole he or she was standing over. If there was an open hole then anyone could use it. The individuals who had drilled the holes thought others should also bring augers and drill holes out of a sense of fairness, but there was no claim of ownership to fishing holes. For days after the holes are drilled, they may only need to be reopened with a chisel or even a scooper. Some of the same holes are used throughout the derby. As new holes are drilled, the number of available holes increases. Figure 3 illustrates a hole and *aulasaut* (fishing handle) fashioned in a common design. The hook is baited with a piece of the ubiquitous “Northern” bag, a white plastic grocery store bag. The very bottom of the picture shows the caribou skin which can be used to lie on in order to stay comfortable, dry and warm.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding the movement of fish is crucial to being able to seize an opportunity. For the Inuit, it is not random movement but one tied into previous experience and a sense of awareness. Through this knowledge and awareness, people are able to adjust their positions in order to increase their chances in finding fish. There was not only a great deal of movement from one fishing hole to another; there were also big shifts in areas of the lake where people congregated. The distances between groups of people fishing were of approximately half a mile or greater. People would try fishing in another part of the lake, depending on their success in the previous location.

In general, procurement in an arctic climate is greatly dependent upon dexterity and alacrity; people must be able to respond to opportunities with an eager readiness. As Brody (1987: 95) stresses, that “readiness to move to ensure successful hunting can hardly be exaggerated.” This mobility was also apparent in the way Inuit in Coral Harbour engaged in fishing. When someone began catching a lot of fish, people would move quickly to the area with their ice augers to make new holes as close as possible to that person. People are skilled at rapidly removing fish in order to be ready to catch another one. A sequence of movements—catching the fish, removing it, and catching a new one—could happen repeatedly. I watched one lucky fisherman catch about 20 good-sized char, one after the other, in less than 15 minutes. The catching of this many fish got people excited, and they would competitively race to the holes surrounding the person. Fishing was a competitive activity, and people rushed to take advantage of the opportunity of where and when the fish were biting. Although it is a competition, this does not mean that competition and cooperation are necessarily mutually exclusive (see Ager 1977; Balikci 1970; Gubser 1965).

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<sup>12</sup> People may also bring chairs, crates or even pull their snowmobile around to sit on. These do not indicate that the hole is claimed but rather the object where one is sitting is claimed. For example if a person asks for their chair, he or she will take it to a different hole.



Figure 2. Fishing, Southampton Is., Nunavut, 2000. Photo: Kerrie Ann Shannon.

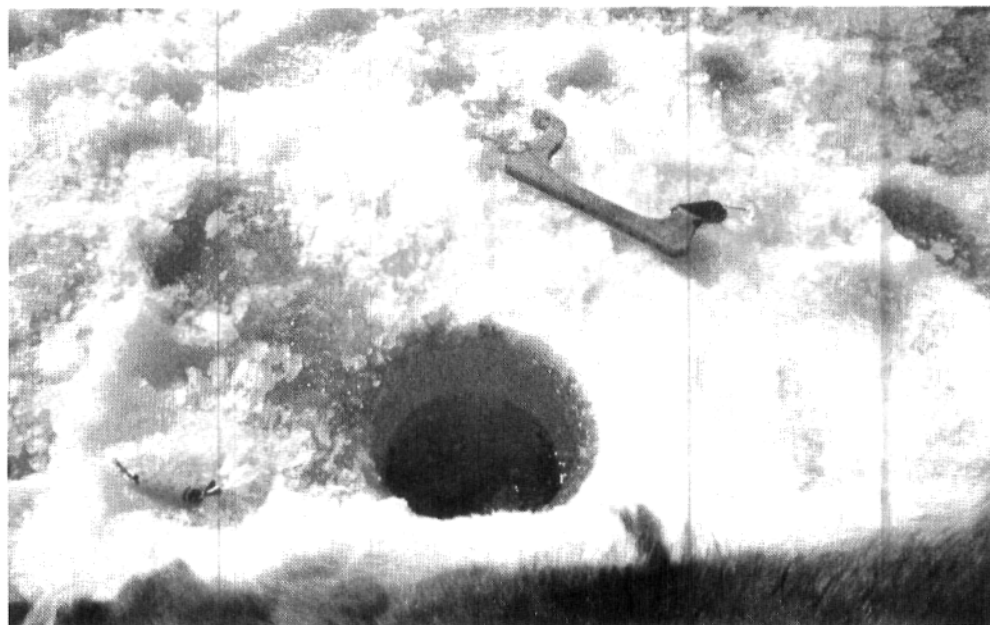


Figure 3. Fishing hole and handle, Southampton Is., Nunavut, 2000. Photo: Kerrie Ann Shannon.

## **Learning and knowing**

Inuit learn from a young age to pay attention to their surroundings and the movement of others. Watching and attending to the movement of terrestrial animals, fish, or other people is reinforced to children often by a caregiver's questions. From a young age, children are asked things like "*Nauk* birdie?" ("Where is the bird?"). As the question is being asked, the person will take the baby to the window to look at the snow bunting. When we were out fishing, a small fish was put near the baby so she could watch it and see it move. As children grow older, they will interact with animals through their own initiative and may go out to hunt lemmings or gather small fish in tidal pools. The importance of watching was something both young boys and girls learned. When I asked a woman how she knew the land, the response was that she was always taught it was important to watch. In this way *watching* the land is inseparable from *learning* or knowing the land. Although boys often have more experience out on the land as they are taken on hunting trips, young girls are also encouraged to watch the land. For example, on the way home from the fishing derby a three-year-old girl was praised for knowing the significance of passing sea ice in relation to home while travelling.

As children grow older, there is a more apparent separation of their activities based on gender. Young boys may follow their fathers or uncles on hunting trips as young girls may watch their mother preparing a skin. Children learn the complementary roles of each gender by example, but children have the autonomy to try activities that are typically done by the other gender. Despite the apparent separation of tasks by gender, it is important to recognize that not all procurement is divided this way. A significant aspect of fishing as procurement is that it is an activity not necessarily divided by gender. Fishing illustrates that women and girls know about the land in ways that are equivalent to male knowledge. I am not suggesting that knowledge of the land or environment is gendered. What has been evident from the fishing derby is that both men and women, boys and girls, have knowledge and awareness about their surroundings. By understanding procurement to include events such as the fishing derby we can value women's activities in procurement and appreciate that they too have knowledge about their environment. Gender does not necessarily determine how people watch their surroundings or how they fish.

## **Being a "real fisherman"**

Did everyone have the same chance to catch? The frequent movement gave me the impression that everyone had an equal chance of catching fish somewhere below the ice. There is impatience in the activity of fishing; if one does not get a fish, one switches holes; the impatience is compensated by mobility. However as my arm bobbed up and down all day, and as I moved to various holes, I realised that coupled with edginess, fishing was an activity which also took a great deal of patience and perseverance.

Was fishing more a matter of skill and technique than just letting fish come to certain people? I had read in anthropological accounts that animals come to certain people,<sup>13</sup> and now I was wondering if this was also the case with fish. In the context of Icelandic fishing, Pálsson (1994) shows that in the past it was believed that fish came to certain people. The quality of *fishiness* was something an individual Icelander either did or did not possess. One could not control the amount of fishiness, as it was determined by supernatural forces. Inuit similarly express the notion that fish *come* to certain people; however, the role of the fisherman is not conceived to be passive. Moreover, fish coming to someone was not the only explanation given for fishing success. Respondents in Coral Harbour would mention that a person might be “lucky” and/or be a “real fisherman.”<sup>14</sup>

Certain people were said to have luck in fishing, and that if fish come to a person it is partially due to luck. I was told that this luck could shift and that there was no assurance that if fish came to you one year they would come to you again. The people who have good luck are deemed “real fishermen.” To be a real fisherman or real hunter meant that a person *really* loves caribou hunting or fishing, and they are the ones who are successful.<sup>15</sup> There is no Inuktitut word for *luck*; rather, there is a notion of success, and someone is a successful fisherman or successful hunter. This is expressed by the ending or suffix *-sujuq* (‘s/he is good at’). When names of animals are directly followed by a verb affix, they mean “to get that animal.” Hence, *iqaluksujuq* means ‘s/he is good at catching fish’ and *tuktusujuq* means ‘s/he is good at getting caribou.’

During the 2000 fishing derby, one woman caught almost 50 fish. When I asked how she did it, she shrugged her shoulders and said: “Luck, I guess.” By attributing the situation to luck she also humbled herself; thus, luck can work as a social levelling mechanism. It is important to think how luck here might play a role; perhaps she was lucky the fish came to her, or luck is involved in her readiness to catch the fish. Although there was no prize for catching the most fish, everyone knew who caught many fish; this was well regarded by others and comments were made about that person being a good or “real” fisherman. In the case of fishing, procurement is thus a combination of the fish coming to people, along with good fortune and an ability or skill to seize an opportunity when presented. This may give us more general insight into procurement as a combination of knowledge, experience, skill and luck.

In his discussion of luck, Gubser (1965: 226) reminds us that there may be different meanings for the word *luck* as “the Nunamiut do not think in terms of pure luck as many white men do. [...] *Pilyautaktuni* means ‘to have good luck,’ but it implies effort or involvement rather than success merely by chance.” Writing of the sub-Arctic Cree, Feit (1994: 436) explains “[...] the Waswanipi usage of the terms

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<sup>13</sup> Anthropological accounts discussing the relationship between people and animals include Bodenhorn (1990); Feit (1994); Fienup-Riordan (1983, 1990a, 2000); Hallowell (1960); Hensel (1996); Ingold (1980, 1986, 1994, 1996, 2000a); Nuttall (1992); Paine (1971); Ridington (1990); Tanner (1979); and Wenzel (1991).

<sup>14</sup> The term “fisherman” is used to describe both men and women.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson (2000: 128) discusses a similar notion of the successful fisherman being the one that loves fish. As in Anderson’s account, the person that loves fishing is also the one whom the fish may come to.

'good luck' and 'bad luck' as expressions of the cycles of power," is in contrast to "[...] the school taught notion of 'luck' as unexplainable chance occurrence." Among the Inuit, the notion of being "lucky" seems to indicate the ability to seize the opportunity presented by an encounter. In other words, one is being opportunistic. This was evident in the fishing derby as people rushed to the area where there was a successful fisherman as well as the way an individual would quickly remove his or her fish from the hook in order to be ready for another fish. Luck or being a real fisherman is not pure chance.

A sense of luck, or chance, can often be intertwined with beliefs in other powers. I realized during my fieldwork that for the Inuit, treating animals with respect can influence their luck. This is different from the explanation which Palsson (1994) provides in describing the Icelandic notion of fishiness, where people were seen as passive recipients of fish. In the Inuit context, there are seemingly inconsistent views that reflect both control and lack of control over one's own success. On the one hand, a person's own actions are thought to influence whether or not the animal presents itself (Balikci 1970; Fienup-Riordan 1990a; Gubser 1965; Spencer 1959). The generosity of a person, for example, is believed to influence future human-animal interactions. On the other hand, one cannot control whether or not a fish or any animal comes to someone. This lack of control may be attributed to the inherent wilfulness of the animal. Thus, an appeal to luck does not rule out the idea that the animal or fish is empowered with properties of sentience. Despite the notion that fish may come to certain individuals, people remain mobile to increase their chances of finding them. This notion of opportunity and readiness is an important component in understanding how hunter-gatherers, more generally, view the world.

## **Skill**

Procurement is not only dependent upon knowledge or awareness but it must also be coupled with opportunity and with the skill or dexterity to act. However, skill in awareness and skill in seizing an opportunity are not easily separated. It is, therefore, important to address the nature of skill. Skill in fishing as in other kinds of procurement, is about the ability to perceive and respond to an opportunity. A skilled practitioner is continually adjusting and readjusting his/her position in attending to the task at hand (Bernstein 1996; Ingold 2000a, 2000b; Latash and Turvey 1986). This kind of adjustment and feedback combines a sense of awareness with mobility. The ability to seize an opportunity could then be viewed as the successful coming together of both awareness and action in a dynamic world. Ingold and Kurttila (2000: 1) show how skill is "a property of the whole organism-person, having emerged through a history of involvement in an environment."

In a subsequent article, Ingold (2001) discusses knowledge in terms of skill. I agree with Ingold's argument regarding skill and suggest that Inuit are skilled at living in a dynamic world where, as Briggs (1991: 262) says, "nothing is ever permanently knowable." Although previous experience is influential in one's awareness as well as in one's actions in responding to an opportunity, the ability to know how and when to do

something is not learned through prescriptive instructions but rather in the actual practice of doing it. This is a matter not simply of learning *in situ* but rather of “situated learning,” or learning an “integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 31). When I refer to Inuit as being opportunistic and valuing mobility, it is in the context of their skilled awareness and actions. In fact, the two are intimately connected, and part of having skill is to get the timing right to seize an opportunity. It is as if awareness were one side of a coin, and opportunity were the other side. That coin is skill.

## Discussion

Fishing may be just as representative of procurement as hunting because of the inclusiveness of participation in fishing. Palsson (1988, 1991) examines the significance of fishing in Iceland and suggests it is equally indicative of people’s perception of, and engagement with, their environment as hunting is. Although hunting has often been held to be representative of Inuit life, the activities of fishing, hunting, and gathering are all ways in which people engage in procurement. The fishing derby can be treated as an epitome of how people procure. By exploring fishing we may not only gain insight into Inuit procurement but also into their engagement with the world.

Through an examination of fishing and fishing derbies, ideas concerning readiness and opportunism have been highlighted. This sense of readiness has been shown to be significant in how people are involved in fishing. Unlike some understandings of flexibility, to refer to characteristics of hunter-gatherers,<sup>16</sup> readiness is not a response to an uncertain world but rather encompasses the awareness, skill, and opportunism of living in a world that is continuously changing. More recent discussions defining hunter-gatherers have omitted this notion of flexibility from the list of defining characteristics (Hitchcock and Biesele 2000). I use the term readiness in order to address the mobility, skill, awareness, and opportunity involved in the way in which Inuit engage in fishing. Another distinction between the two terms is that flexibility may imply a separation between thoughts and actions. What is observable in Inuit fishing is that people are often ready to act. In other words, their thoughts and actions are often tied together. Brody describes this ethnographically when he discusses how hunters are able to think and act without delay:

The mobility and flexible behaviour of hunters is inseparable from this state of consciousness, this form of decision-making. Actions cannot be played long before they occur. There can be no long interval between a decision to act and the action itself (Brody 1987: 93)

Ingold’s (2000a, 2000b) definition of *skill* similarly combines thought and action. The ability to fish successfully is dependent upon the awareness, mobility, and dexterity an individual needs to seize an opportunity that presents itself. This was

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<sup>16</sup> The notion of flexibility was viewed as a defining characteristic of hunter-gatherers (Lee and Devore 1968). The focus on flexibility was primarily in regard to social organization and ecological adaptation (e.g., Balikci 1968; Turnbull 1968; Watanabe 1968; Woodburn 1968). Flexibility suggests people are adapting to change rather than actively approaching the world as if it was always changing.

evident in the way people rushed to an area where the fish were being caught. Knowledge and skills are intertwined with the notion of being opportunistic or “being ready.” Being ready could be one way of describing how Inuit engage with the world around them.

In refuting the concept that hunter-gatherers were at the mercy of their environment and on a constant quest for food, Sahlins (1968, 1972) described hunter-gatherers as the “Original Affluent Society.” According to Sahlins, hunter-gatherers adopted a “Zen”-like approach to living in their environment. Although there are problems with labelling hunter-gatherers as having a “Zen”-like approach,<sup>17</sup> Sahlins’ argument does serve to highlight the point that hunter-gatherers may have a different way of engaging with their environment. In a critique of Sahlins’ argument, Bird-David (1992a) suggests that the relationship hunter-gatherers have with their environment can be expressed in terms of a metaphorical model, which she describes as “the cosmic economy of sharing.”<sup>18</sup> Bird-David (1990, 1992a, 1992b) emphasizes that the relationship hunter-gatherers have with their environment is not understood in terms of a dichotomy between nature and culture, a point which other anthropologists also make. Ingold (1994, 2000a), for example, suggests that hunter-gatherers have a different perception of their environment, one that he describes as “trust.” In contrast to a Western way of apprehending the world, hunter-gatherers engage with their environment rather than construct it. Bird-David and Ingold have both utilized northern and arctic work to support their arguments. The reciprocal relationship between the hunted and the hunter has been viewed as a key component in understanding human-animal relations.

## Conclusion

Exploring procurement broadly has beneficial consequences for understanding gender roles. The fishing derby taken as an example of procurement contributes data for understanding how Inuit engage with the world around them by providing an example of Inuit skill. First, because the activity of fishing is not divided by gender, it demonstrates the variability in these roles. I do not dismiss the complementary nature of men’s and women’s roles, but rather highlight an occasion which is not necessarily divided along gender lines. Many aspects of Inuit daily life in Coral Harbour reflect the complementary gendered division of labour, however the activity of fishing does not. In fact, understanding when gender is *not* a defining characteristic informs a broader understanding of Inuit gender roles. Second, an exploration of whole families’ involvement in fishing also extends our understanding of women’s activities beyond an investigation of how women contribute to hunting or the complementary nature of their work. A focus on activities in which women are participants adds balance to understanding how Inuit engage in procurement.

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<sup>17</sup> Although Sahlins aimed to provide a cultural explanation for economic behaviour, he imposed a cultural label rather than exploring it in terms of hunter-gatherers’ own experience (Bird-David 1992a).

<sup>18</sup> The metaphorical model “the cosmic economy of sharing” is closely related to the model of “the giving environment,” also proposed by Bird-David (1990).



Fishing is equally representative of Inuit procurement as hunting, because everyone—men, women, children and elders—participate. Focusing mainly on hunting as a way to grasp people's relationship with their environment limits our understanding. It is difficult to discuss perceptions of, or relations to, the environment without also exploring other ways in which northern peoples participate in procurement. Fishing demonstrates that skill in procurement needs not be divided by gender. This understanding of skill has implications in defining hunter-gatherer procurement as opportunistic where the skill in awareness is coupled with the skill to seize opportunities. As skill and success in fishing is not divided by gender, both men and women have the potential to be "real fishermen."

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