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## 16

# Huskies and hunters: living and dying in Arctic Greenland

Rick De Vos

This chapter looks at the lives of, and the practices surrounding, Greenland huskies in Ilulissat and Qaanaaq, two towns in Arctic Greenland that I visited between May and July in 2011. It argues that attitudes towards dogs and their welfare, regulation and legislation, and towards hunting in Greenland, contribute, along with environmental changes, to a situation in which Greenland huskies are confined spatially, temporally and physically, and their perspectives, welfare and ultimately their deaths are concealed and forgotten. The chapter is instigated by a particular instance of death I encountered in Qaanaaq and found hard to understand and discuss. In part this chapter is a way of critically reflecting on my own response to what I saw, as well as attempting to understand the significance of the death of animals, specifically that of huskies, in Greenland.

Greenland huskies, or Greenland dogs, are large huskies characterised by their strength, speed and endurance. They are believed to be one of the oldest breeds of dogs, and to have accompanied the Saqqaq people from Siberia to Greenland between four and five thousand years ago (Meldgaard 2004, 88–90). Approximately two-thirds of Greenland lies above the Arctic Circle. Legislation prohibits Greenland huskies

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from being moved south of the Arctic Circle and other dog breeds from being brought into the Arctic Circle, ensuring that Greenland huskies are the only dogs in the region. The dogs are kept as working dogs rather than pets, with most dog-owning households keeping a pack of between eight and sixteen dogs. Greenland huskies have been used by explorers on Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, being renowned for their hardiness, their ability to withstand extreme cold conditions and survive on virtually any source of food, and their willingness to work to exhaustion.

Ilulissat is situated at the mouth of a 40 km ice fjord in Disko Bay on the west coast of Greenland. It is the third largest town in Greenland, with a population of around 4000 people. The town is also home to about 6000 huskies, almost all of whom live in designated areas on the outskirts of the town. In the summer months of July and August it is a popular tourist destination, with most visitors flying in from Denmark and Germany as part of tour groups, or sailing in on cruise ships. For the rest of the year Ilulissat is comparatively quiet. The town is dotted with a number of children's playgrounds, scattered around the residential areas. The equipment in them is brightly coloured, and each playground is surrounded by a white or coloured picket fence. The fences, while providing a pleasant border to the colourful structures, also serve a more serious purpose, calling attention to a sadder past. Greenland huskies, particularly when in packs, occasionally attacked small children playing in the streets or in playgrounds. A number of deaths and serious injuries have been recorded, especially before 2000. While laws now enforce that all huskies over the age of five months be chained up in permitted areas, there is always the danger that one or more may escape.

Between May and late August, Arctic Greenland experiences 24 hours of daylight each day, meaning that it is possible to move around easily and see the surroundings all night as well as all day. The dogs in Ilulissat are not immediately evident, their shapes emerging from the rocks as they stretch and stand up, sniffing the air. On my second night in Ilulissat I watched a dog escape its tether and wander off, exploring the rocks nearby, looking for food and other diversions. The sight filled me with interest but also with fear for the dog. Huskies that wander off into the town area of Ilulissat are likely to be shot by rangers if they are seen. Over the next few days, on two occasions, I saw stray dogs ex-

ploring the central area of Ilulissat. I gave them a wide berth without feeling too much concern for my safety, and they reciprocated. The one or two other people in the general vicinity did not pay them any particular heed either. However, I still had the sense that I was watching a dog that was soon going to die.

Ilulissat is the birthplace of Knud Rasmussen, the best known of Greenland's modern explorers. Rasmussen was of Greenlandic and Danish descent, born in 1879, the son of the local Lutheran pastor. His childhood was spent in and around Ilulissat, playing with the local Greenlandic children. His first language was Greenlandic, the language of his Inuit mother. He only became fluent in Danish after commencing studies at the University of Copenhagen. He accompanied the other children and their families on hunting trips, learning to drive dog sleds. In 1910, after returning to Greenland from Copenhagen, he established the Thule trading post at Dundas (Uummannaq), which became the base for seven major anthropological expeditions led by Rasmussen between 1912 and 1933. The expeditions made major contributions to the mapping of northern Greenland, and collected a vast amount of ethnographic, archaeological and biological data. During the Fifth Thule Expedition, Rasmussen and two Inuit hunters travelled for 16 months across North America to Alaska by dogsled, crossing the Northwest Passage (Rasmussen 1999, 216–17). His exploits are celebrated by both Greenlanders and Danes. He was a prolific writer, and his journals display a deep interest in Inuit stories and culture, a love of the Arctic landscape, and an almost dismissive attitude to the hardships and privations of Arctic exploration. Both tourist and historical accounts of his life and adventures quote his most famous utterance: 'Give me winter, give me dogs, you can have the rest' (Ehrlich 2001, 8).

I met a young Danish tour guide who had lived in Ilulissat for a number of years, attracted to the town because of the promise of a dogsledding lifestyle. He recalled learning about Knud Rasmussen in school, and acknowledged him as a source of inspiration in coming to Greenland. He now owned a team of dogs, and took every opportunity to go sledding. He said that while fishing by boat was the main source of both income and recreation for most Ilulissat residents, the majority of families still kept dogs, and took the opportunity to go hunting in the winter months. Indeed dogsleds are a common sight in the streets of Ilulissat in winter, with road signs showing that dogsleds have right of

way over cars and pedestrians. Paintings in the local art gallery depicted Ilulissat in earlier times with people and dogs living in close proximity. Dogs lived outside their owners' homes or camps in scenes contrasting sharply with the reality that now presented itself outside the gallery.

The Ilulissat Museum, housed in the family home of Knud Rasmussen, juxtaposes representations of the area's hunting past, underlying its cultural significance, with representations of Ilulissat's future, characterised by receding icefields, longer summers, shorter winters and rising temperatures. Audiorecordings of residents' attitudes to these changes are made available via installations with on/off buttons. While detailing older people's memories of past winters and their changing experiences over ensuing decades, the installations also include the attitudes of other residents who see advantages in the climatic and environmental changes, including less time confined indoors in winter, and the opportunity to grow plants, and have small gardens. However, these changes are also seen as restricting the activities and wellbeing of the huskies around Ilulissat. Where dogs worked in sleds for eight to nine months of the year, the lack of suitable ice for sledding meant that they were now tethered for eight to nine months each year. Combined with their largely being restricted to designated dog areas on the outskirts of the town, these changes constituted a dramatically more adverse experience for the Greenland huskies. Where once they lived in packs or teams in close proximity to the men they hunted with, and perhaps their families, they were now tethered just out of reach of their fellow pack members with little knowledge of where and when they might be visited by their owners or fed. While there was general agreement that winter was the time during which the huskies were happiest, it was acknowledged that that time was becoming shorter each year, testing the patience of both the helpless dogs, and their owners who had to visit them each day to feed them.

The day before I left Ilulissat I saw four primary school students, three boys and a girl, walking back to school after lunch. The children were walking past a house outside of which a mother husky was tethered, with four puppies playing around her. As they walked by, the little girl stopped and approached the puppies, petting them and picking one up. The boys called out to her to leave the puppies alone and come with them, but she lingered as long as she could, quite clearly taken by the puppies she cuddled, before eventually joining her class-



*Figure 16.1 Dogs tethered in the designated dog yard, Illulissat, June 2011.  
Photo: Monika Szunejko.*

mates. I found this very affecting. Upon reflection I realised that it was the first time I had seen anybody in Greenland show physical affection towards dogs. My own natural response before coming to Greenland was to pat any dog that approaches or appears friendly. I understood what I had read and had been told: Greenland huskies are working dogs and should not be handled by anybody but their owners. While walking past huskies in Greenland without fear or apprehension, respecting their space and careful not to stand and stare at them, I was also resisting the desire to make closer contact with them.

Qaanaaq is the main town in the northern part of the Qaasuitsup municipality in northwestern Greenland, 1066 km north of Ilulissat. Situated on the northern bank of the Inglefield Fjord, it is one of the northernmost towns in the world. It has a population of around 650, and was established in late 1953 when the United States expanded their airbase at Thule, which it was given permission to build in 1951, and forcibly relocated the people living in the settlements of Pituffik and Dundas to the north during the height of the Cold War. As no roads

existed in the area, and no airstrip had been constructed yet in the new town site, the majority of residents made the 130 km trip north, along with their possessions, by dogsled. At Qaanaaq, people were forced to live in tents from May 1953 until November 1953, well into the polar winter, while new houses were constructed for them. The cost of the relocation was shared by the United States and Danish governments. The first houses built were very rudimentary, single-room dwellings without raised floors. The dogs lived immediately outside the dwellings (Ehrlich 2001, 142–43).

On 21 January 1968, a United States Air Force B-52 bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs on a Cold War alert mission over Baffin Bay crashed onto sea ice in North Star Bay, Greenland, causing the nuclear payload to rupture and disperse, which resulted in widespread radioactive contamination. The United States and Denmark governments launched an intensive clean-up and recovery operation, but the secondary of one of the nuclear weapons could not be accounted for after the operation was completed. Strategic Air Command operations were discontinued immediately after the incidents. Radioactive plutonium from the 1968 bomber crash contaminated the nearby ancient hunting grounds, affecting the livelihoods of the region's inhabitants. There is evidence both of genetic deformities in land and marine mammals in the area, as well as a spike in cancer among Greenlanders employed in service duties at the air base (Ehrlich 2001, 176).

On my first morning in Qaanaaq I was filled with a sense of dread and impending death. As I walked along the stony shoreline in front of the Inglefield Fjord, I could see men in their familiar blue overalls working on the hulls of fishing boats. Unlike the streets of the main town area of Ilulissat, Qaanaaq does not give any impression of being open to visitors or tourists. People studiously ignored us. I felt that I had no place being there. Unlike Ilulissat, where at least a few tourists were always present, Qaanaaq did not appear to rely on foreign visitors or be used to engaging with them. Along the shore I saw remnants of fish and the signs of previous catches, skin and fur. I was reminded of an online posting I had recently read which had mentioned that the icy ground was too hard to bury animals in Qaanaaq. Further up the beach I saw a structure upon which what appeared to be two small bodies were hanging. As I approached I saw that they were harpoon bladders made from sealskins. The flippers of the seals were still attached. Unlike

floats I had seen in museums, where the skin was old and weathered, these floats appeared to be recently made, resembling two small, inflated seals.

Looking out over the frozen fjord I was able to make out two or three small teams of huskies on the ice. Most were lying down, making them difficult to see. That evening I was told by the hotel owner that most of Qaanaaq's dogs were now starting to be taken from the ice, where they had remained during the winter and most of the spring. June was proving to be a month of waiting – the ice was too thin and unpredictable to be negotiated by dogsled or for anyone other than the most experienced hunters to walk on, but still thick enough to prevent boats from getting through to the open water where fish and marine mammals could be found. I watched and listened to the dogs, largely silent earlier in the day except for singular growls or whimpers, howling together as they lay on the thin ice.

People I spoke to in Qaanaaq expressed resentment that their families had been moved from Pituffik and Dundas, as well as a strong desire to move back.<sup>1</sup> Historically the people of these settlements were subsistence hunters, and while a considerable proportion of the population now depend on welfare payments, hunting and fishing still constitute the major source of employment for residents. While hunting and fishing had proved to be good around Qaanaaq for a few decades after the move, numbers of both land and sea mammals had dwindled since the 1990s (Hansen 2002, 75; Ehrlich 2006, 4). This in turn has increased the resentment towards both the US and Danish governments, and the urge to return to Thule, even though some acknowledge that their historical home has been contaminated by radioactive waste, making hunting difficult and hazardous.

The cemetery at Qaanaaq, lying to the east of the town site within sight of the town's Danish Lutheran church, draws to mind both those

<sup>1</sup> My partner and I were the only non-residents of Qaanaaq on our flight north to the town. About half an hour before our scheduled arrival, I became aware that all the other passengers on board had gotten up and were looking through their windows or moving into the aisle to get a better view west. One passenger pointed out a tiny speck, suggesting two or three small buildings, near the coast in the distance. "Thule!" he said. The passengers started to smile and exclaim, expressing both joy in sighting their historical home, and a longing to return there.



*Figure 16.2 Dogs tethered on the ice, Inglefield Fjord, Qaanaaq, June 2011.  
Photo: Monika Szunekjo.*

that have passed away in the past 60 years and those that lie buried in the old settlements. A front end loader is employed in the burial of humans and of waste in the icy soil of Qaanaaq.

Hunting plays an important part in both the social organisation and the imagination of Greenlanders. While only about 3000 Greenlanders are registered as professional hunters, most residents have engaged in recreational hunting from a young age. Teaching children hunting skills, including the handling of dogs and sleds, is seen as a parental duty. Children can be seen walking around towns in Arctic Greenland with dog whips, practising their technique. While in Ilulissat residents mix hunting and fishing with paying day jobs, such as fish factory work and tourist services, Qaanaaq and its surrounding settlements still place great importance on subsistence hunting and fishing. Dogsleds are used throughout the winter to hunt seals, narwhal, beluga and walrus. In the spring they hunt polar bear. Municipality restrictions in north-western Greenland prohibit the use of motorboats and snowmobiles by hunters, meaning that hunters must rely on dogsleds and kayaks. In



Figure 16.3 Cemetery, Qaanaaq, June 2011. Photo: Rick De Vos.

addition, marine mammals other than seals can only be hunted and struck with spears and handheld harpoons, with rifles only to be used for finishing off a wounded animal. In the spring and summer, birds, including dovekies and ptarmigans, are hunted and their eggs collected. Seals continue to be hunted from boats and kayaks in the open water. Small halibut, capelin and other fish are caught for at least half the year in the fjords near the settlements. Musk oxen are hunted in late summer and in the spring a large proportion of the Greenland population takes time off to hunt reindeer.

Huskies facilitate hunting in the winter by pulling sleds but also by keeping predators, primarily polar bears, at bay, working as a pack to surround or distract bears in order to alert hunters and allow them to shoot the bear. While hunting, dogs and hunters share food, with dogs being fed the same meat as the hunters, albeit more scraps and bones.

While not everyone is a hunter, most men in Arctic Greenland aspire to be hunters, or consider themselves part-time hunters. Hunters enjoy a high social status, and demographic figures suggest that they are the healthiest and richest people in Arctic Greenland, possessing

the most respect among their fellow Greenlanders. Access to what is known as Greenlandic or country food, that is, meat derived directly from hunting (bowhead whale, narwhal or beluga meat and skin, seal and walrus meat, polar bear, musk ox and reindeer meat, and local birds and their eggs) is seen as the source of this physical, social and emotional wellbeing. The lack of access to these foods has been identified in studies as a major cause of illness and other problems in older people, women and other social groups removed from contact with hunters and hunting activities (Ford 2011, 4; Golhar, Ford & Berrang-Ford 2009). My comments to locals regarding my desire to see narwhal, beluga and walrus, generally led to exclamations and responses praising the deliciousness of these animals as food, with little understanding of my wanting to spend time with these animals without hunting and eating them.

While hunting remains socially and culturally significant to Greenlandic people, it makes a negligible contribution to Greenland's annual revenue. Fishing and fish processing, principally Greenland halibut and prawns, constitute the main industries in Greenland, as well as providing the second largest source of employment after public administration. The Greenland economy, however, is still dependent on considerable subsidies and financial support from Denmark. The annual block grant from the Danish state was set at 35 billion Danish kroner (approximately 5.9 billion Australian dollars) in 2010. This represents approximately 40 percent of the total revenue. According to the Act on Self-Government which came into force in 2009, this amount is now fixed until Greenland establishes regular income from oil or minerals (Statistics Greenland 2012).

Both hunters and Greenland's wildlife have been adversely affected by environmental changes that have been most strongly felt since the 1990s. The sea ice has receded along with the polar ice cap as temperatures have increased throughout Greenland. Summers have increased in duration while winters have contracted. Marine mammal numbers have decreased in the fjords and coastal waters, with the higher temperatures and thinning of the sea ice leading to a lack of ice ledges, on which walrus and seals feed, rest and give birth. Polar bears are affected both by habitat loss, as they move with the sea ice, hunting ringed seals from the edges of ice floes, as well as from a shortage of prey, with less seals present in hunting areas. Beluga whale and narwhal num-

bers, decimated by commercial practices which continued until 1987, decrease each year, with populations becoming increasingly vulnerable to indigenous hunting. Like the hunters, huskies in Greenland are witnesses to this changing environment and the disappearance of animals. Traditional hunting in northern Greenland faces both a loss of hunting grounds as well as a loss of animals and species. Hunters are forced to fish more and to supplement their diet with food bought from shops, which is often expensive and subject to limitations in supply. This in turn leads to a loss of face, and perceived status. Specialised dog food also needs to be bought when food from hunting is scarce. While keeping dogs represents the promise of hunting, the reality of feeding and maintaining working animals is leading many to reconsider the worth of doing so.

There is a noticeable loosening of the spatial arrangements made for dogs in Qaanaaq when compared to those in Ilulissat. Adult dogs still remain tethered, but most packs remain within sight of their owners' homes, and puppies wander the streets more frequently. While the Danish Home Rule government, in the face of increasing complaints about the neglect and abuse of Greenland huskies, has introduced legislation in regard to dog welfare, and instituted an action plan aimed at educating hunters and dog owners about disease, living conditions and access to veterinary advice and medicine, only two veterinary officers have been employed to patrol the whole of the area of Greenland above the Arctic Circle and carry out inspections and information sessions. The difficult relationship between local municipalities and the Home Rule government, combined with hunters' resentment at legislation drawn up in the south, far removed from the realities of life in northern Greenland, means that enforcing minimum standards of care is currently impossible (Ray 2006, 1). A hunter in Qaanaaq told me that a neighbour of his complained to him that each generation of his dogs was getting smaller in size and were less healthy. The neighbour poured scorn on this hunter's advice that he needed to find dogs outside the pack to breed with, in order to increase his pack's genetic diversity and lessen the effects of in-breeding. I noticed that the dogs in each pack bore a strong and distinct resemblance to each other in terms of their markings and colour. The hunter told me that while many hunters in the Qaanaaq/Thule area held a preference for dogs with darker markings, dog owners in Ilulissat often sought to obtain dogs that were

almost pure white in colour, believing that such dogs more closely met the expectations of tourists looking for a dogsledding experience.

Walking along the edge of the frozen fjord, less than an hour from Qaanaaq, I noticed a shape along the shoreline that did not appear to be a rock. As I looked closer, I saw the decomposing body of a husky, its ribcage still intact, the blue straps of its harness still in place. In that moment the inexplicable sense of dread I had felt when first walking along the beach had been confirmed and starkly clarified. Dogs lie where they die. They become sick on hunting trips, or weak from fatigue and hunger. At this point they are often killed by the rest of the pack or shot by the hunter. The alternative to dying on a hunting trip is to be put down at the age of four or five, when huskies are believed to become too aggressive and independent to work in a sled team, or when keeping and feeding them through increasingly long summers proves too expensive. While the killing of hunted wildlife is celebrated, marking a time of sharing, and the death of Qaanaaq's residents is marked by funeral services and burials, the deaths of dogs are ignored and forgotten, lacking in significance. Seeing the husky's body stopped and silenced me. I could not point it out to my partner some distance away, nor could I discuss it at the time. In Greenland I felt a social pressure not to photograph local people. To do so was to contravene an unspoken tolerance, the camera being viewed as the weapon of the tourist, one that often breaches the bounds of respect and equality. At this moment, for the same reason, I could not photograph the dead husky, but retreated, the sight of the body committed to my memory.

I concede that my response to the death and to the lives of huskies is shaped by my own metropolitan perspective, devoid of the social and cultural experiences connected to traditional subsistence hunting. I do not believe that the treatment of huskies is viewed as unethical by the majority of hunters in Arctic Greenland. However, I maintain that where such a lifestyle is so markedly subsidised and represented as romantic, fragile and exotic in the face of growing evidence that it is unsustainable, then those that choose to support it must take responsibility for its victims. In Ilulissat, where traditional subsistence hunting has disappeared and dogsledding is more aligned with tourism, huskies have begun to take on a more symbolic role in their relationship with humans and their environment. For tourists, a hunting experience or long-distance dogsledding trek may include the death of the hunted



*Figure 16.4 Hunters and huskies, Inglefield Fjord, Qaanaaq, June 2011.*

*Photo: Monika Szunejko.*

animal, but not the death of the hunting dog, whose death occurs in an occluded space. A more profound relationship between hunter and husky is ceding to one that is more fleeting: the production of a memorable, commercial experience rather than an everyday one. The space that was once shared is now increasingly segregated.

Greenland huskies possess a liminal status, afforded neither the status of hunters nor the attention and respect given to hunted wildlife. They are neither celebrated nor mourned. They facilitate dogsledding and hunting, and as working animals are viewed as property and transportation, despite having helped to shape the social environment in which they live and die and despite being active participants in human life. Their space is restricted by the sea ice and changing climate, the geographical limits of settlements, designated dog areas, and by physical tethers and harnesses. Their time is restricted by the seasons and the opportunities for hunting, and by their perceived ability to work effectively, and their future generations are restricted by selective and ill-informed breeding control.



Figure 16.5 Dogs look out over Inglefield Fjord, Qaanaaq, June 2011. Photo: Rick De Vos.

Since returning to Australia I have reflected regularly on the image of the lone husky's death on the outskirts of Qaanaaq. The blue traces of the dog's harness signify restriction and control of the dog's movements, even in death, and yet at the same time show that the dog was working at the time of its death, part of a pack and a hunting party, and not one of thousands of dogs languishing in the designated dog areas of Ilulissat. Despite the harshness of working life for huskies in Arctic Greenland, a way of life threatened by social and environmental changes, to die while hunting would appear far preferable to dying isolated and separated from one's pack and fellow hunters.

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