

RC 46

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*Some Notes on Mulchatna Caribou Herd Winter and Spring Hunting from the Perspective of Local Knowledge*

While winter hunting by snowmachine transport is the most common strategy employed by Mulchatna caribou hunters today, respondents in the 2017 Division of Subsistence Traditional Ecological Knowledge study said that prior to the 1960s, winter hunting of the Mulchatna Caribou Herd was primarily accomplished by dog team transport.

Several elders interviewed during this study recalled these winter hunting trips. “Those were dog team days. We slept in the snow and under the stars. We would camp for 3 or 4 days,” said an Ekwok elder. The elder said that these winter caribou hunting camps would occur in the headwaters areas of the Nushagak and Mulchatna rivers and that hunters from all of the Nushagak River communities would also make such trips, including hunters from Levelock and Igiugig. New Stuyahok elders recalled a long tradition of dog sled transport for trapping and hunting and reported that the Wood River mountains area was a frequent winter fishing, trapping, and caribou hunting region.

New Stuyahok hunters also pursued caribou by dog sled in the Kvichak and Naknek river drainages. “We would travel even during blizzards to harvest caribou for our families,” said a New Stuyahok elder. Oftentimes families would set out for extended snow camps during the late winter and early spring. For example, a Lime Village respondent explained that caribou were often most heavily harvested when Lime Village families would travel to the Tundra Lake and Stink River area by dog sled during early spring to establish spring whitefish camps.

Similarly, Kwethluk hunters maintained a long tradition of travelling into the mountains by dog sled in the spring to establish ground squirrel, bear, moose, and caribou hunting camps and eventually float back downriver during the early summer in boats made from the skins of harvested caribou, moose, or bear (Coffing 1991; Simon 2016). “Heart Mountain on down...[that’s] where they’d all jump in their skin boats and float down. Go up there with their

dog teams and stay up there all spring, come down summer time,” explained a Bethel respondent. A Kwethluk elder said:

Some of our people used to go up by dog team to spring camp. Up at the headwaters of [the] Eek, Kwethluk, and Kisaralik [rivers], and a few times up in the Aniak [River headwaters] and Heart Lake area. They start going up there first part of April, sometimes, by latter part of March. They go by dog team, following the traditional trails, sled trails, or hiking trails. Go up with dog team and you drift [in the skin boat] all the way down to, back to the village. Almost every year we used to go by dog team up there. Then roughly 1969 or 1970, a few times we went by snowmachines. Probably the last dog sled team with my dad and family was back in 1952...Starting around 1960 my dad used to go up there with a charter air taxi service...In the spring time they used to go with combination ski and tundra tires. They land mostly on lakes up there.

“Dog teams went obsolete with [the introduction of] snowmobiles in the 1960s,” explained an Ekwok elder.

Study respondents frequently discussed the benefits of snowmachine travel for caribou hunting during winter, particularly the capability to travel long distances to harvest caribou. Togiak elders said that obtaining snowmachines during the 1960s was a great benefit because it allowed them to access an abundance of caribou previously unavailable to them. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Togiak hunters obtained caribou primarily from annual winter trips made by snowmachine to the Nushagak and Kvichak river watersheds, where they would hunt caribou with relatives from New Stuyahok. Togiak elders said that during March and April they would travel 10 hours by snowmachine along the coast to Dillingham and then cross the Wood River and arrive in New Stuyahok. The next day they would hunt.

“We would load up all our sleds [with caribou meat] and spend another night in New Stu on the way back to Togiak. We would leave barrels of gas along the way so we would have a place to refuel our snowmachines. We can haul 2 or 3 caribou, quartered and gutted, in each sled,” said a Togiak elder. “We’d take ‘em out, guide ‘em, and they’d go home with a sled load [of caribou meat], and in return, towards spring, we would receive seal, herring, clams,” recalled a New

Stuyahok elder about visits by Togiak hunters. During these times, Togiak hunters also traveled long distances by snowmachine to hunt caribou in the Aniak River drainage. Starting in the 1990s, when increasing numbers of Mulchatna caribou began to enter GMU 17A, Togiak hunters no longer needed to embark on such extended journeys to harvest caribou.

Today, hunters in the study area often still need to travel considerably long distances by snowmachine to access caribou during the winter. In early March 2017, ADF&G Subsistence Resource Specialist James Van Lanen travelled with Igiugig hunters approximately 110 miles, round-trip, to harvest 2 caribou by snowmachine. Scattered caribou were first encountered by the party at approximately 37 miles from Igiugig, but additional miles were added to the journey due to the dynamics of the chase and route finding. The cost of fuel and the overall challenges of long distance winter travel sometimes deter hunters from pursuing caribou during winter.

For example, while Nushagak Peninsula caribou are available to Dillingham hunters within a technically reasonable distance from the community, accessing the Nushagak Peninsula requires travel over rough terrain and multiple river crossings that require optimal snow and ice conditions. Dillingham hunters said that the logistics involved rarely make the Nushagak Peninsula caribou herd worth pursuing for them. However, “some guys take planes to try and hunt the NPH, but not everybody has a plane,” commented a Dillingham hunter.

An Igiugig elder said that hunters from his generation were more successful in finding caribou because they moved slower on the land and were more easily observed. Similarly, a Nondalton elder said:

Modern technology allowing these day trips is a problem. Long ago people had to camp for several days to hunt, and then they would see more and be more successful. Now they [local hunters] are in a rush. Today the travel required is too extensive. People want to do day trips from the village, and there are few hunters. It's not worth it for them to hunt if they don't want to camp or pack meat. If they did that, they would be more successful, but everything is too easy for younger people today.