

TRAPPING – WINTER EXPEDITIONS

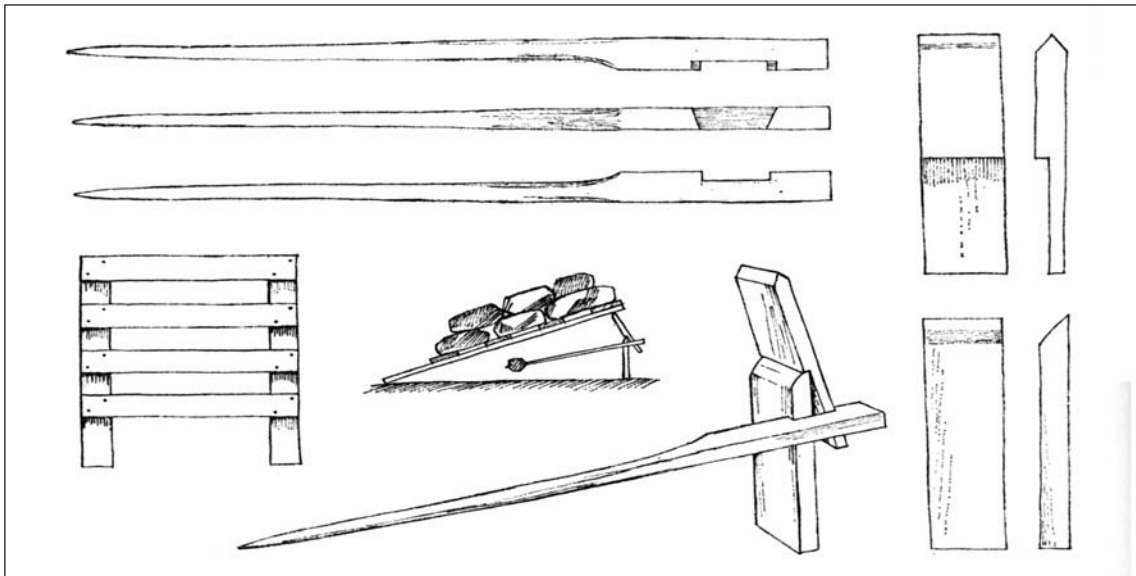
The commercial enterprise that has left the most visible traces in North-East Greenland is the trapping of foxes by Norwegian and Danish hunters, specifically the winter trapping. The objectives were simply to trap arctic fox and to sell their skins. In the cold climate of North-East Greenland, the arctic fox develops a thick winter fur of high quality as protection against the cold. There are two colour variations: white fox and 'blue fox', of which the white is dominant. In the summers foxes shed their fur, and the thin brown summer coats have no value. Only the thick winter skins, from foxes trapped in the period from November to April, have commercial value, and since North-East Greenland can only be reached by ship in the short summer months, the trappers – or hunters – had to over-winter in Greenland.

The trapping was undertaken by hunting companies based in Norway and Denmark, with the principal activities essentially restricted to the period 1908-60. In reality, fox-trapping was only profitable for a few years, and was only continued due to government subsidies and the support of private

sponsors, that was linked mainly to political circumstances.

Both Danes and Norwegians generally used the same trapping methods. In the years 1908-24, usually three to four trappers lived at a so-called trappers' station. From the station regular trips were made to check their traps, which were placed within a radius of a day's walk. This method was known from Svalbard, but was not optimal in North-East Greenland, where the fox roam more widely. From the end of the 1920s a different system was introduced that greatly expanded the region covered from each trappers' station. For each trapping territory a network of small trappers' huts or cabins were built, so that one or two trappers from each station could undertake long trapping journeys using dog sledges, visiting large numbers of traps and staying overnight in the often very primitive trappers' huts, returning to the station with their catch after an absence of a week or more.

The type of traps used developed and changed through the years. At first foot-traps and poisoned bait were used along with box traps for catching foxes



"As far as I know, the most used wooden fall-trap originates from Arctic Canada. After 1930 Danish and Norwegian trappers almost exclusively used this trap. The fall-trap has the advantage that it kills the fox instantly, and when the trap is checked the prey is found dead and frozen stiff. The trap consists of two wooden boards, to which four cross-boards of untreated wood or drift wood are nailed. This wood framework is loaded with heavy stones and suspended at one end, at an angle of about 30° from the ground, by two short, shaped wood planks and a locking stick, that also holds the bait. The pressure from the weight of the stones on the trap holds the two shaped planks in the notch of the locking stick. When the fox grabs the bait on the locking stick, the trap collapses". © Kristoffersen 1969

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White arctic fox in its summer fur. The Greenlandic fox population consists of two colour variants, the white fox and the blue fox. In North-East Greenland the white fox makes up 90% of the fox population. The blue fox keeps its dark fur throughout the year, whereas the winter fur of the white fox is completely white. The fur of the blue fox is finer and more delicate than the white fox, and during the trapping era it would bring three times the price of the white fox fur. Since 1974, the fox has been completely protected within the area of the National Park. Ella Ø, 1979. © Peter Schmidt Mikkelsen

The polar bear is the largest known furred carnivore. Since 1974, only registered hunters living in the Greenlandic settlements are permitted to hunt polar bear in the National Park.

To the Danish and Norwegian trappers of the trapping era the skins of the polar bear had only secondary value in comparison to those of the arctic fox. Kap Franklin, May 1979.

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Muskox cows with calves. The muskox population in North-East Greenland varies greatly, and estimates range from about 8,000 to 20,000 animals. The muskox was the most important source of fresh meat during the trapping era, for both the hunters and their sledge dogs. Since 1974, the muskox has been protected within the area of the National Park. Daneborg, June 1979.

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Bearded seal sun-bathing on an ice floe.

Various species of seal are found in North-East Greenland, the most common being the ringed seal. Seal meat was also good dog food, and part of the trappers' traditional summer duties was to hunt seal. At the present-day the Sirius Dog Sledge Patrol is permitted to hunt a certain number of seal for dog food. Kong Oscar Fjord, August 1979. © Peter Schmidt Mikkelsen

