Introduction

Garden River is a Strongwoods Cree settlement in the southwest section of Wood Buffalo National Park, Alberta. In the fall of 1983, Park officials proposed a series of moose hunting restrictions. This paper briefly examines the moose hunting complex as it exists at Garden River, and evaluates the effects such restrictions would have had on the social and economic life of various task groups. Finally, this paper documents the social processes leading to group concensus and solidarity.¹

The Hunting Complex

Moose are the only large animals hunted throughout the year and, like bear, shot wherever found regardless of trap line or group area. Although moose hunting is a year-round activity, hunting peaks during the fall when environmental conditions allow easy detection and luring. At other times, more labour-intensive hunting methods are used, such as tracking or surrounding the animals.

Individuals, male task groups, or families periodically leave the settlement for up to eight weeks while moose hunting. The composition of these groups varies with the hunting purpose or method.

¹I would like to thank the Urgent Ethnology Programme, National Museum of Man, for the funding for this research. I am also indebted to the people of Garden River for their kindness and patience and to the Little Red River Band Council for permission to do research in Garden River.
Solitary hunters and task groups usually return with meat for a feast or community-wide distribution. Family hunting camps remain in the bush longer in order to smoke and dry meat for their own use.

Hunting groups have diminished in size and in duration of bush residence since the late 1960s when local bands moved to Garden River to take advantage of wage opportunities and primary education (Smith 1981:259). Solitary hunting has become common with the use of snowmobiles and outboard motors. Hunting groups are composed of either age-grade related males or an older hunter and his apprentice. The once common larger hunting groups are formed periodically to help with tracking or butchering. Participation in these task groups depends upon the availability of wage labour, time factors, or shifting political and domestic alliances. Extended family hunting groups are being replaced by nuclear family camps, and bush residence has been curtailed due to compulsory school attendance. Solitary hunters and task groups hunt in any of the four group areas, while families camp on their trap lines where cabins and trails are available. All hunters must inform others of their destination to insure safety and limit competition.

Social and Economic Concerns

Moose hunting and the community-wide sharing of meat are major components in the social life of the settlement. For hunters and hunting groups, temporary bush residence relieves economic, social and psychological stresses associated with settlement residence (Savishinsky and Frimmer 1973:42). This stress valve helps curtail inter-family disputes and ease tensions from internal and external sources. Parents use bush residence to teach children values and skills not provided by the local school curriculum. Hunting also provides individuals with independence and identity. In the bush a man is “boss of himself”, responsible for his own decisions and actions. Settlement life, with jobs, appointments and other obligations offers few opportunities for such a degree of self-reliance. Successful hunters gain status by providing meat for distribution or giving it away for a feast.

The distribution of moose meat is both a social lubricant and a positive sanction. Each residence, regardless of need, receives a portion of meat determined by the hunter’s wife or daughter. This
sharing contributes to the solidarity of the community and marks it as the one Native settlement in the area "where they still share moose meat". Receiving moose meat entitles the receiver to the status of a person who shares with others and does not waste "a gift from the bush". Meat is returned whenever possible, insuring households with a year-round diet supplement.

The symbolic aspects of moose meat and sharing are extensive. Moose meat is considered a gift from God, and wasting it is regarded as sin. Refusing to share uncured moose meat, or feeding it to dogs can invoke several social and economic sanctions. Moose plays a vital role in ceremonies, from rituals insuring hunting luck and good health to life crises ceremonies marking birth, marriage and death. Communal feasts celebrating marriage are often not given until enough moose meat is available for the entire community and other guests.

Moose meat seasonally provides the bulk of country foods offsetting dependence on the local store. Dry meat provisions trappers with part of their grubstake until other bush foods can be obtained. Bear meat is not suited for this, as it does not dry well, and store-bought meats are impractical and costly. In addition, hunting and sharing offers an alternative or a delay to dependence on government social services. Wage-labour opportunities are seasonal and moose hunting is used as a fall-back strategy in case of layoffs or unemployment. Temporary bush residence also tends to delay credit problems by insuring that the family’s bill does not increase.

Moose hide provides material for bush-related activities and tourist crafts. Raw hides are made into snowshoe webbing or thread, while tanned hides are made into moccasins, mukluks or gloves. These items have not been replaced by modern materials as their comfort and quality are inferior to traditional materials and workmanship. Several households receive craft commissions from Euro-Canadians, and depend upon a steady supply of moose hide.

In summary, hunting and sharing are important social markers for hunters, their families and the community. Moose meat and hides are important components of settlement and bush economic life as a medium of exchange and the subsistence core of the trapping economy.
Community Response and Reaction

This section describes community response to proposed moose hunting restrictions. The data were collected during September and October, 1983. The methodology used included informal interviews, participation in female task groups and official record-keeping during community meetings.

Decision-making in Garden River consists of a series of interrelated processes. Decisions resulting in action (consensus) or non-action (disagreement or indecision) are reached over a period of anywhere from two to six weeks. In this particular case, information concerning the Park’s proposal was provided by the Little Red River Band councilor for Garden River. Residents were told that Park officials, concerned with indications of a severe moose population decline, would introduce quotas and seasonal hunting limits. The Park administration felt that the effects of these restrictions would be minimal due to the recent introduction of electricity which would allow families to freeze meat and to new local employment opportunities.

The initial debate centered in the kinship networks which became the vehicle for informing other residents of potential conflicts. Public dissention or non-attendance at meetings is discouraged, and efforts were made during this time to avoid these problems. During the debate stage an informal survey revealed uniform opposition to the Park proposal, but produced varied responses regarding the purpose of these restrictions and their effects on the community. Informants regarded the restrictions as either an attempt to erode the tenuous legal status of the settlement, or as an action designed to force acculturation through enhanced use of modern technology and institutions.

Elders and adults with growing families generally agreed that past and present Park policies discouraged permanent settlement within the Park, and that the proposed restrictions were evidence of the Government’s continuing desire “to clean us out of here”. Younger informants feared that the restrictions would lead to a decline in traditional lifestyles and more dependence on seasonal jobs.

During the council period, elders were consulted by community

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2Spur-of-the-moment presentation of a new issue has very little chance of approval. Even school board decisions are delayed “until we have a chance to talk to the people and think about it”.


residents. Their direction limited the debate to issues of tradition and rights. Elders provided historical sketches of the Government’s reluctance to recognize Native land claims based on tenure, use, residence and treaty promises. They recalled other situations where Park policy resulted in confrontation, and pointed out possible repercussions of certain actions. The primary objections to the proposed restrictions were made during this time, and presented by elders and community representatives at a community meeting attended by Park officials. The issues presented were as follows:

1. Garden River residents claim descent from people living in the area before the Unorganized Territories Game Preservation Act (1894) and the creation of the Wood Buffalo National Park (1922), and therefore have traditional claim to natural resources.

2. Moose hunting restrictions would seriously threaten community sharing traditions.

3. Moose hunting restrictions would seriously harm the economic life of trappers and low income families.

4. The Park did not consult the hunters and trappers who would know about moose populations, migrations, wolf predations and cyclic disease patterns. Instead they “flew above the trees in helicopters where you can’t see anything.”

5. If moose populations had been threatened, the Park should have acted sooner and imposed only partial restrictions such as limiting cow or bull moose kills.

Several factors contributed to the defeat of the Park proposal, but I believe the primary one was the reluctance of Park officials to enforce restrictions against wide-spread opposition. At the conclusion of the meeting, Park officials agreed to consult Native residents on moose populations, but did not comment on land claims. This omission may be partially responsible for the current discussions on land claims and the interim transfer of jurisdiction from the Park to 

3 Informants questioned were particularly agitated by the Park officials’ use of the term “privileges” to describe what they felt were “rights”. As one man said, “It’s not a privilege to feed my family. And it’s not a privilege to have decent housing. These are my rights.”

4 It should be noted that Garden River has enjoyed rather good relations with the Park administration. Poaching is internally sanctioned, as residents have a genuine fear of being expelled from the Park. Efforts are also made to comply with other game regulations, such as providing buffalo mandibles for study when an animal is killed outside the Park, and informing wildlife officials of wood bison migrations outside the Park boundary.
the Little Red River Band and Garden River community representatives.

Analysis

This short description of decision-making at Garden River demonstrates the community's response to outside agents by merging traditional authority structure with adaptations to community lifestyle. Garden River is a new "frontier settlement" (Fried 1963:98) where residence is more a matter of individual choice than the coercion of reserve residence. This lack of reserve status has been a mixed blessing. The uncertain legal status and isolation discourages bureaucratic intervention which may be a factor in the adjustments made over the last 15 years to new institutions and lifestyles. Its status within the Park as a trapping community and Park regulations limiting residence, building materials, transportation and communications also have a bearing on the retention of traditional values and slow exposure and adaptation to outside influences.

Except for the local trading company, white presence is not permanent. Even interaction with a major white institution, the school, has not diminished the "... self-sufficient system of action..." (Helm 1965:42) which is constantly challenged by outside forces and modified by internal responses. These internal responses include changes in role structure to accommodate social change, such as appointing elder and non-elder spokesmen and relying on opinions of all community residents to form a pattern of action.

In conclusion, community response to proposed moose hunting restrictions involved processes of concensus and confrontation to ward off a perceived threat to the social and economic life of the community. The above paper documents one Native community's reaction to directed change and will hopefully increase our understanding of developmental processes in Northern Alberta Cree communities.

REFERENCES

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