

Excerpts: Front matter; Chapter 4 - The Polar Ox, pages 238-304;
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**Northern Wildlife, Northern People: Native Hunters and Wildlife
Conservation in the Northwest Territories, 1894-1970**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the conflict between Native hunters and federal wildlife conservation programs within the present-day borders of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut from the late nineteenth century to the end of the 1960s. From the first conservation legislation specific to the northern Canada in 1894 to the broad range of responses to the so-called caribou crisis of the post-war era, the introduction of wildlife conservation in the Northwest Territories brought a series of dramatic changes to the lives of Dene and Inuit hunters in the region. The imposition of restrictive game laws, the enclosing of traditional hunting grounds within national parks and game sanctuaries, and the first tentative introduction of police and game wardens to the area were all part of a process whereby the nation-state had begun to assert authority over the traditional hunting cultures of the Dene and Inuit. This work traces the historical development of the discord between Aboriginal subsistence hunters and federal wildlife managers over three species that were all thought to be threatened with extinction at various points in the study period: the wood bison, the muskoxen, and the caribou. It also questions the common assumption that conservationists were motivated solely by an enlightened preservationist philosophy of wildlife management. Through a close study of the federal government's proposals to domesticate large ungulates on vast wildlife ranches in Arctic tundra, this work argues that conservationists were also motivated by a desire to conserve wildlife for commercial purposes. In either case, the subsistence hunting cultures of Native people were marginalized and excluded from state wildlife conservation programs, a process that the Dene and Inuit resisted through various forms of protest throughout the study period. The dissertation invokes themes from the literature of environmental history, northern Canadian history, and the history of science in an effort to reveal the intersection between the discourse of wildlife conservation and the expansion of state power in the Northwest Territories.

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A Note on the Terminology

The archival documents that were used as the basis for this study generally do not distinguish between the ethnic and linguistic groupings of northern Aboriginal people, referring to them only as “Indians” or “Eskimos.” In keeping with contemporary convention, the Athapaskan speaking people of the Mackenzie Valley are generally referred to in this dissertation as the Dene, although the names of linguistic sub-groups (i.e., Chipewyan, Dogrib, Gwich’in, etc.) are used when I am certain that the people being discussed are members of these particular groups. The hunting people of the High Arctic are referred to as the Inuit throughout the dissertation. The Cree people of northern Alberta also enter this story in the early chapters.

Changes to the administrative structure surrounding wildlife conservation in the Northwest Territories were a frequent and complex phenomenon throughout the twentieth century. To further complicate matters, at certain periods the federal government administered wildlife matters through a variety of divisions and bureaus within the bureaucracy. While some of these changes are highlighted in the text when they bear upon the narrative, others are left out so as to avoid cluttering the story with needless detail. To avoid confusion on the part of the reader, I have often adopted generic terms to refer to particular administrative bodies (i.e., the northern administration, the federal wildlife bureaucracy, the department). Readers who are interested in the precise evolution of the administrative structure governing federal wildlife policy in the Northwest Territories should consult the appendices (I-II).

Chapter 4

The Polar Ox

The Musk-oxen once were many in the Country but unwise Hunters [sic] killed them because it was easy to do so, and much meat was wasted because of all this killing. Now the Musk-oxen are few and if the unwise Hunters should continue to kill them the Musk-oxen will be no more. Therefore the Government commands you not to kill any more Musk-oxen so they will live and increase and in time they will again be many and the wise hunter will have much meat.

–Department of the Interior poster, “To the People of the Country”¹

Summing up their characteristics further, ovibos [i.e., muskoxen] are better than cattle because in addition to meat they supply wool; they are better than sheep because in addition to supplying wool they are several times as large; they have the advantage over any of our grazing domestic animals in that they defend themselves against wolves, are naturally disinclined to roam, are probably docile in disposition and even if vicious are too clumsy to be as dangerous as a bull or a stallion.

–Vilhjalmur Stefansson²

In his expansive monograph on wildlife conservation published in 1921, the Dominion Entomologist, C. Gordon Hewitt, issued a passionate plea for the protection of the muskoxen. He described this exotic Arctic animal as among the ‘most interesting’ of Canada’s native fauna, a creature whose biological features—long curved horns, a shaggy coat, and a short tail—displayed a certain affinity with wild species such as the American bison and domesticates such as Scotch cattle and sheep. According to Hewitt, the numbers of *Ovibos moschatus* had been reduced over the past half century to a few remnant herds on the Arctic mainland and a small number of larger herds on the Arctic Islands. Hewitt argued that the causes of this dramatic decline were many and varied. An

¹ H.H. Rowatt, Commissioner of the NWT, “To the People of the Country,” 1 March 1934. RG 85, vol. 1249, file 401-3, pt. 4, National Archives of Canada.

international trade in muskox robes that had been pursued vigorously since the 1860s, the numerous sport hunting expeditions that had sought out this exotic animal since the late nineteenth century, the thousands of animals that had been killed to provide food for exploration efforts in the High Arctic, and finally the apparent ‘recklessness’ of Native hunters had all contributed to the precarious status of this once abundant animal. Hewitt thus advocated passionately for the preservation of these animals in his monograph, claiming that the muskoxen were in need of “absolute protection,” and that their extermination “is only a matter of a few years, unless proper and adequate steps are taken to put an end to the killing of the animal for the sake of its skin.”³

Hewitt’s concern for the fate of the muskoxen was not tied solely to a sentimental interest in preserving one of the more unique and exotic big game animals in North America. He was also enthusiastic about the possibility of domesticating at least some of the remaining muskoxen herds as a source of commercial livestock in Canada’s northern territories. Citing numerous reports from promoters of northern development, Hewitt reasoned that the muskoxen might provide both a secure source of meat and milk for northern people and a supply of wool for international markets. He also suggested that the success of William T. Hornaday’s experiments raising muskoxen in the more southerly climate of the New York Zoological Park indicated that live breeding stock could be imported for use as domestic range animals in temperate latitudes. Even if further experimentation proved that muskoxen could not be raised in milder climates,

² Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1922), p. 163,

³ C. Gordon Hewitt, *The Conservation of the Wild Life of Canada* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), pp. 89-101.

Hewitt was convinced that domesticating the animals of northern Canada could “furnish a factor of inestimable economic importance in the agricultural development of large tracts of our northern regions which are at present producing only furs.”⁴

To the contemporary reader, Hewitt’s simultaneous appeal for the preservation of the muskoxen and his aggressive promotion of a new commercial ranching industry using these same wild animals might seem strange in a volume whose main purpose was to promote the philosophy and practice of wildlife conservation. How, the reader might ask, did Hewitt reconcile the contradictory goals of both saving and commercially exploiting one of the rare and endangered large mammals in the Canada’s northern territories? One could conclude that Hewitt’s position as a senior bureaucrat in the Department of Agriculture made him an anomaly among early conservationists in Canada, a senior official devoted to conserving the nation’s wildlife at the same time as his professional life demanded that he improve the fortunes of Canada’s agricultural sector. Yet Hewitt’s simultaneous enthusiasm for ‘saving’ the muskoxen and ranching the animal to help spur the development of an agricultural economy in northern Canada was not at all out of step with the philosophical blend of preservationist and utilitarian approaches to wildlife conservation that prevailed in North America during the early twentieth century. Perhaps no historical example illustrates the contradictory nature of the federal government’s early wildlife conservation programs more than its attempts to save the muskoxen from extinction. On the one hand, federal wildlife officials adopted a rigid preservationist approach toward the protection of the remaining muskoxen herds, establishing an

⁴ Ibid., p. 316.

absolute ban on hunting the animals in 1924 and creating the rigidly protectionist Thelon Game Sanctuary three years later. At the opposite extreme, wildlife conservationists within the federal bureaucracy also put forward a series of wholly utilitarian arguments for muskoxen conservation, arguing the herds should be saved from the ‘improvident’ depredations of Native hunters so they could become the basis for a new northern ranching industry. Although the previous chapters on the wood bison suggest that ambitious schemes meant to develop the commercial potential of northern wildlife were not a unique feature of big game conservation programs in the Northwest Territories, the case of the muskoxen offers perhaps the most startling historical example of convergence between the ideals of the wildlife preservationist and the industrial promoter in Canada. For federal wildlife conservationists, the muskoxen were both an exotic emblem of northern Canada’s wilderness character and also a symbol of its future economic potential. In either case, the material requirements and hunting rights of northern Aboriginal people were often ignored as federal wildlife officials set about replacing the supposedly indiscriminate hunting economy of the Dene and Inuit with a more ‘ordered’ system of exploiting the herds based, as Hewitt explained it, on “our modern knowledge of animal husbandry and veterinary science.”⁵ Hewitt’s evocation of themes such as the conversion of Aboriginal hunters into agriculturalists, the replacement of wild fauna with domesticates, and the introduction of modern scientific animal husbandry suggests that muskoxen conservation was tied to a much wider colonial discourse on the inevitable northward expansion of Canada. More than any other species, the muskoxen inspired

⁵ Ibid., p. 318.

federal officials to associate their conservation efforts with the expansionist dream of establishing a new northern ranching frontier rather than the more modest goal of merely preserving a unique form of Arctic wildlife.

The Decline of the Muskoxen

The precise extent of the late nineteenth century decline in the muskoxen population is difficult to assess. Much of the available evidence on the changes in the herd numbers is anecdotal in nature, limited almost entirely to the casual remarks of early northern explorers and hunters. Conservationists and naturalists in the early twentieth century used this ambiguous evidence to bolster their claims that the pre-contact muskox herds declined to a mere fraction of their former enormity in the late nineteenth century. In a scientific monograph on the muskoxen published in 1913, J.A. Allen, a naturalist with the American Museum of Natural History, cited a variety of anecdotal reports suggesting that the muskoxen numbers had become “much fewer” over the past hundred years.⁶ W.H.B. Hoare, a Special Investigator with the Department of the Interior who travelled to the Thelon Game sanctuary in 1928, was much more specific than Allen, citing evidence from a wide variety of exploration narratives to suggest a dramatic contraction of the muskoxen population in the Northwest Territories to only nine or ten

⁶ J.A. Allen, *Otogenetic and other Variations in Muskoxen, With a Systematic Review of the Muskox Group, Recent and Extinct*. Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 1, Part 4, 1913.

thousand animals.⁷ Perhaps the most extraordinary claim of this sort came in the classic work of the popular naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Lives of Game Animals*, where the author used the scattered reports of various Arctic explorers to suggest that the muskoxen had declined from a population of one million at the time of contact to a mere fifty thousand animals in the late 1920s.⁸ Seton based his claim on the observations of the explorer Samuel Hearne, who spoke of “great numbers” of the animals along the northwestern Hudson Bay coast during his travels through the Eastern Arctic in the early 1770s. Hearne suggested, moreover, that an even greater numbers of muskoxen inhabited interior regions above the Arctic Circle, where he frequently saw several herds of eighty to one hundred animals in the course of a day’s travel.⁹ Seton argued that the testimony of sport hunters and explorers who saw few muskoxen when they travelled to the same region in the late nineteenth century provided clear evidence that the herds were in a state of precipitous decline. Seton assigned the causes of this drop in the muskoxen population to the impact of a growing trade in muskoxen robes in the late nineteenth century, the depredations of Arctic explorers, and the introduction of rifles among the Inuit.¹⁰

Not all of Seton’s contemporaries were willing to accept the theory of a catastrophic crash in the muskoxen population over the course of the nineteenth century. In an appendix to Hoare’s report, R.M. Anderson, the Chief Biologist with the National

⁷ W.H.B. Hoare, *Conserving Canada’s Musk-Oxen, Being an Account of an Investigation of Thelon Game Sanctuary, 1928-29, With a Brief History of the Area and an Outline of Known Facts Regarding the Musk-ox*. (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1930), pp. 41-48.

⁸ Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Lives of Game Animals*, vol. 3, pt. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1929), pp. 618-20.

⁹ Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales’s Fort In Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772*, Richard Glover, ed. (Toronto: MacMillan, 1958), p. 87.

¹⁰ Ernest Thompson Seton, *op cit.*, pp. 634.

Museum of Canada, expressed severe doubts as to whether the muskoxen population had declined by over nine hundred thousand animals in the space of a century. Anderson, who had travelled widely in the Arctic as a member of Vilhjalmur Stefansson's arctic expedition of 1908-11 and as second-in-command of the Canadian Arctic Expedition from 1913-16, claimed that much of the High Arctic tundra region was in fact unsuitable for muskoxen. A landscape that contained large areas of bare rock, glaciers, and lakes could not, in his judgement, provide enough forage for one million large grazing animals. Even if hundreds of thousands of muskoxen had once roamed the northern ranges over the course of the nineteenth century, then where, Anderson wondered, were the piles of skulls and bones that would have resulted from their demise over such a relatively brief period of time? Anderson's population estimate for the Arctic muskoxen herds did not necessarily paint a much more hopeful picture than Seton's projections. He used the evidence available in police reports and exploration narratives to conclude that the vast majority of the 13,500 muskoxen in Canada were concentrated on the Arctic Islands, with a mere five hundred animals remaining on the Arctic mainland (see Table 4.1). Anderson nevertheless insisted that the population of human hunters living near the muskoxen range had not been large enough to kill thousands of muskoxen; nor was the late nineteenth century trade in muskoxen robes extensive enough to have had the kind of impact on the herds that Seton imagined. While Anderson expressed a general admiration for Seton's ability to describe in words and line drawings the native fauna he had seen on his journey northward, he concluded that his more abstract population estimates were

“extreme” and “conjectural,” a problem that was compounded by the fact Seton had only visited a small section of the mainland muskoxen range.¹¹

Table 4.1: R.M. Anderson’s Estimates of the Muskoxen Population in the Canadian Arctic (1930)

Location	Number of Muskoxen
Arctic Islands	
Melville Island	4,000
Ellesmere Island	4,000
Axel Heiberg Island	1,000
Devon Island	200
Bathurst Island	1,500
Prince of Wales Island	1,500
Cornwallis Island	200
Victoria Island	20
Mainland	
Thelon Game Sanctuary	250
South of Adelaide Peninsula	50
Murchison River (north of Wager Bay)	200
North of Great Bear Lake	2-3
Total Population	12, 923

Source: R.M Anderson, “Notes on the Musk-Ox and the Caribou,” Appendix B, *Conserving Canada’s Musk-Oxen* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1930),

Irrespective of the debate among natural scientists over the precise magnitude of the decrease in the muskoxen population over the course of the nineteenth century, there can be little doubt that there was a significant decline in the range of the herds over this period. If anecdotal information and casual ground surveys were a circumspect method of assessing scattered ungulate herds, these records did at least provide a relatively accurate means to trace the contraction in the range of a large mammal species. By the early twentieth century, naturalists had assembled a large body of oral testimony and published

¹¹ R.M Anderson, “Notes on the Musk-Ox and the Caribou,” Appendix B, *Conserving Canada’s Musk-Oxen*, pp. 49-53.

historical records of muskoxen sightings suggesting that the animals had been extirpated from a large portion of their former mainland range in the previous century. All of this evidence indicates that the muskoxen range had generally been pushed northward from its former southern limit along the length of the tree line. One of the largest regions from which the muskoxen were extirpated was a large area bounded by the west coast of Hudson Bay from Churchill almost to Chesterfield Inlet and extending inland almost to the eastern tip of Great Slave Lake.¹² The muskoxen were also displaced from a vast stretch of the western arctic coast running all the way from Coronation Gulf to the edge of the Bering Sea in Alaska. Severe reductions in the numbers of muskoxen on Banks Island and Victoria Island were also reported near the turn of the century.¹³ Although the extirpation of a species may indicate a shift in range instead of a general decline in abundance, the large size of the areas from which the muskoxen were extirpated does strongly suggest that the species experienced significant downward pressure on its population throughout the nineteenth century.

The reduction in the range and numbers of the muskoxen herds was likely the consequence of a series of profound changes to the social and economic landscape of the Canadian Arctic over the course of the nineteenth century. In particular, the growth of the fur trade economy during this period brought unprecedented hunting pressure to bear on

¹² For exhaustive discussions of the decline in the muskox range during the nineteenth century, see Allen, *op cit.*, pp. 160-64, 183-87, 205-07; Anderson, *op cit.*, pp. 49-53; Hoare, *op cit.*, pp. 41-48; E.A. Preble, *A Biological Investigation of the Athabaska-Mackenzie Region Prepared Under the Direction of Dr. C. Hart Merriam*. (Washington : G.P.O., 1908), pp. 150-55.

¹³ Anne Gunn, Chris Shank, and Bruce McLean, "The History, Status and Management of Muskoxen on Banks Island," *Arctic* 44, 3 (September 1991), pp. 188-95; R.M. Anderson, "Memorandum on Barren Land Caribou and Musk-ox," Appendix No IX, in John Gunion Rutherford, James Stanley McLean, and James Bernard Harkin, *Report of the Royal Commission to Investigate the Possibilities of the Reindeer and Musk-ox Industries in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Regions of Canada* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1922), pp. 71-76.

the muskoxen herds of the Arctic mainland. Before this period, the muskoxen were largely a marginal food resource for Dene and Inuit hunters, taken only when the preferred staple of caribou meat was unavailable.¹⁴ As the fur trading economy gained influence and importance throughout the nineteenth century, however, the subsistence cycle of Native hunters began to shift gradually from one based on broad seasonal movements along the border between the taiga forest and tundra forest—a strategy designed to ensure the optimal exploitation of diverse game populations—to more restricted and linear movements within the economic orbit of the new trading posts.¹⁵ As with the wood bison further to the west, the increased traffic of hunters and trappers to and from the Hudson’s Bay Company post at Churchill may have resulted in more frequent opportunistic hunting of the relatively sedentary muskoxen herds in the surrounding region. In addition, the flesh and particularly the hides of the muskoxen became objects of trade in their own right. In the late eighteenth century, Hearne reported that a small amount of muskoxen meat was being traded annually at Churchill.¹⁶ The Hudson Bay Company also began to accept muskoxen robes as a regular trade item at

¹⁴ See James G.E. Smith, “Local Band Organization of the Caribou Eater Chipewyan,” *Arctic Anthropology* 13, 1 (1976), p. 13. For an overview of the probable casual use of the muskoxen by the Inuit in the eighteenth century, see Ernest S. Burch, “Canadian Muskoxen and Man in the Central Canadian Arctic,” *Arctic* 30, 3 (1977), p. 143.

¹⁵ See Arthur Ray, “Periodic Shortages, Native Welfare, and the Hudson’s Bay Company,” in *The Subarctic Fur Trade: Native Social and Economic Adaptations*, Shepard Krech III ed., (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), pp. 1-20.

¹⁶ It is unclear how much of an impact the provision trade may have had on the muskoxen herds. Hearne reported that up to one thousand pounds of muskoxen meat had been purchased from native hunters in any given year at Prince of Wales Fort. It was likely, however, that the trade in muskoxen flesh at the fort remained minimal because it was not “esteemed” by the HBC employees. See Hearne, *op cit.*, note on p. 88.

Churchill in the 1820s.¹⁷ By the 1850s, the trade in muskoxen robes had expanded at least as far as west as Fort McPherson. Roderick McFarlane, Chief Factor of the Hudson Bay Company, cited oral testimony in 1904 from the son of a fur trader who remembered seeing the first muskoxen skin arrive at McPherson “upward of fifty years ago.”¹⁸ It is nevertheless clear that the robe trade remained a rather marginal economic activity before the end of the 1870s. The records of the Hudson Bay Company suggest that the number

Table 4.2: The Numbers and Prices of Muskoxen Skins Traded to the Hudson Bay Company, 1864-1911

Dates	Total Number of Hides	Average Price in Dollars
1864-1873	214	8.71
1874-1883	2608	9.07
1884-1893	7773	18.27
1894-1903	5181	14.08
1904-1911 ¹	957	N/A ²

Source: Maxwell Graham to James Harkin, 23 June 1914, RG 85, col. 664, file 3910, pt. 2, NAC

¹Data was only available for an eight-year period

²No average dollar figure was given for this period, but figures in shillings suggest that prices reached unprecedented levels from 1909-1911, likely a reflection of the looming shortage of supply.

of robes traded between 1864 and 1877 did not exceed one hundred animals annually and frequently the yearly take fell below ten. The scale of the robe trade nevertheless increased sharply in the 1880s, most obviously because the collapse of the bison population further south had severely restricted the supply of wildlife robes in North America and European markets, but also because American whalers on the western arctic coast began to provide competition for the Hudson Bay Company. The result was sharp

¹⁷ For the beginning of the muskox robe trade and its possible impact on the herds, see Burch, *op cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁸ Roderick MacFarlane, “Notes on Mammals Collected and Observed in the Northern Mackenzie River District, Northwest Territories of Canada, with Remarks on Explorers and Explorations of the Far North,” *Proceedings of the United States National Museum*, vol. XXVII (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905), p. 685-86.

price increases and an expansion in the number of robes traded to the HBC from 235 in 1879 to 1,935 in 1889 (see Table 4.2). Over the six year period from 1890 to 1895, 7,534 muskoxen were killed on the arctic mainland ranges to provide robes to the Hudson's Bay Company, a figure that does not even begin to account for the number of muskoxen that Native hunters may have killed to provide flesh and robes for rival trading outfits or the whalers along the Arctic Coast.¹⁹ It is likely that such a dramatic expansion in the exploitation of the muskoxen hide trade near the end of the nineteenth century had a dramatic impact on the herds in the regions where the hide trade was concentrated: the broad expanse of tundra from Great Bear Lake to the arctic coast, the country between Great Slave Lake and Bathurst Inlet, and a stretch of land along the west coast of Hudson Bay from Churchill to the Boothia Peninsula. The muskoxen herds in these areas were well within the reach of trading centres at Churchill, Fort Resolution, Fort Rae, Herschel Island and Fort McPherson, further reinforcing the idea that the robe trade was a major

¹⁹ Extremely detailed data on the HBC's muskoxen skin trade is printed in a letter from Maxwell Graham to James Harkin, 23 June 1914. RG 85, vol. 664, file 3910, pt. 2, NAC. There are some year-to-year discrepancies between the data cited by Graham and a similar body of HBC data that the CWS biologist John Tener obtained from Charles Elton at the Bureau of Animal Population, Oxford University. Although the exact numbers differ somewhat, the same general trend of a dramatic expansion in the robe trade in the late 1880s and early 1890s is apparent in both sets of numbers. I have chosen to use the data set in Graham's report, however, because Tener's data set contained no figures for the crucial years from 1892-6. Inexplicably, Tener interprets the lack of data after 1891 as an indicator of a dramatic drop in the muskoxen population. Graham's records suggest, however, that a drop in the take of muskoxen occurred in 1896, when the annual take of approximately one thousand animals through the early 1890s dropped to mere hundreds in the latter part of the decade. Of course, both of these claims rest on the assumption that a decline in the number of skins traded represents a decline the population of the species and not a diminished hunting effort. Regardless, the cause of the discrepancy between the two data sets is unknown, and thus each should be treated as only a general indicator of trends in the muskox trade. For Tener's data, see his monograph, *Muskoxen in Canada: A Biological and Taxonomic Review* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1965), pp. 114-15. In a more general reference, the anthropologist Paul F. Wilkinson has estimated that at least 16,000 muskoxen were killed for robes between 1860-1916, a figure that accords reasonably well with Graham's data. The figure does not include hunting for food by whalers, explorers and the Aboriginal population. See Paul F. Wilkinson, "This History of Musk-ox Domestication," *Polar Record* 17, 106 (1974), p. 14.

influence on the contraction of the muskoxen range away from the boreal fringes of the Central Arctic.²⁰

The demands of the robe trade were not the only source of increased hunting pressure on the muskoxen during this period. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Victorian sport hunting ‘cult’ composed largely of British and American upper class males had extended its reach to most of the remaining big game regions in Africa and South Asia.²¹ The Canadian Arctic and its exotic retinue of muskoxen and vast caribou herds remained relatively unknown, however, a territory that was now ripe for exploration after the completion of the transcontinental railroad had made it possible to mount a northward journey from Calgary.²² Clearly one of the primary objectives of these hunting excursions was an opportunity to obtain a trophy from an animal that clearly enthralled sport hunters with its ‘prehistoric’ appearance. The British hunter Warburton Pike attempted his northern trek to the Arctic in 1889 for the sole purpose of killing an animal that was “a relic of an earlier age.” Accordingly, when Pike and his party of Native guides met two large bands of muskoxen, they killed seven near the headwaters of the Coppermine River and at least forty-five animals close to Aylmer

²⁰ According to Tener, between 1862 and 1885, 2,216 skins were taken from the Great Bear Lake herds and 1,172 from the herds to the northeast of Great Slave Lake. On the west coast of Hudson Bay, 3,300 muskoxen were taken from 1862 to 1916. Tener identifies these regions as the major suppliers for the trade. See Tener *op cit.*, pp. 113-15.

²¹ See John Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

²² See R. G. Moyles and Doug Owsam, *Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities: British Views of Canada 1880–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 61–86. See also Tina Loo “Making a Modern Wilderness: Conserving Wildlife in Twentieth-Century Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 82, 1 (March 2001), pp. 92-121. For a further discussion of the sport hunting ethos and its influence on the emerging practice of wildlife conservation in Canada, see Chapter Five of this study.

Lake.²³ Others followed in their footsteps. In 1893, the American hunter Frank Russell and his party killed sixteen muskoxen, while the brothers J.W. and J.B. Tyrrell also killed eight on their exploratory missions for the Canadian Geological Survey that same year. One year later, a second American sport hunter, Caspar Whitney, killed one and his party hunted down an unspecified number of muskoxen on the tundra plains. The British hunter and adventurer Henry Toke Munn also killed a “band” of muskoxen with a group of Native hunters near Fort Resolution in 1894. A second British sport hunter, David Hanbury, killed sixteen of the animals on his travels through the Arctic interior west of Hudson Bay between 1899 and 1902.²⁴ The mortality rates caused by such sport hunting expeditions were relatively small, but many of the forays coincided with the peak of the hide hunt in the early 1890s, and thus may have contributed to the cumulative impact of hunting mortality during this intense period of human predation on the muskoxen herds.

A much greater source of muskoxen mortality from ‘outside’ hunters was felt during the period of intense high arctic and polar exploration that began in the late nineteenth century. Early arctic explorers such as Robert Peary, Donald MacMillan, Otto Sverdrup, and Vilhjalmur Stefansson adopted a strategy of ‘living off the country’ so they could travel great distances overland without being burdened by excessive provisions. The impact of these expeditions was concentrated on the relatively large muskoxen herds

²³ Warburton Pike, *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada* (New York: MacMillan, 1892), p. 5, pp. 103-105, pp. 168-9.

²⁴ Frank Russell, *Explorations in the Far North: Being the Report of an Expedition Under the Auspices of the University of Iowa During the Years 1892, '93, and '94* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1898), pp. 108-124; J.W. Tyrrell, *Across the Sub-Arctic of Canada, a Journey of 3,200 Miles by Canoe and Snowshoe Through the Barren Lands* (London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), pp. 108-109; Caspar Whitney, *On Snow-Shoes to the Barren Grounds: Twenty-eight Hundred Miles After Musk-Oxen and Wood-Bison*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1896), pp. 216-23; Henry Toke Munn, *Prairie Trails and Arctic By-ways* (London:

that inhabited the Arctic Islands. Sverdrup's party killed 120 muskoxen on Ellesmere Island on his expedition of 1898-1902, for example, while Peary's second High Arctic expedition took 340 of the Ellesmere animals in 1905-06. In 1916, Stefansson and seventeen of his men from Canadian Arctic Expedition lived off the spoils of 400 muskoxen as they spent much of the year on Melville Island. In a broad analysis of the available published sources, the geographer William Barr has estimated that the total kill of muskoxen by exploration parties in the High Arctic from 1875 to 1917 amounted to no less than 1,252 animals.²⁵ The precise impact of this hunting on the muskoxen herds of the Arctic Islands is almost impossible to determine. The death of just over 1,200 animals in the space of forty years does not suggest that northern explorers caused any broad collapse in the arctic island or mainland muskoxen herds. It is possible, however, that the tendency of explorers such as Peary and MacMillan to slaughter entire herds in support of their expeditions resulted in the severe decline of some local muskoxen populations on the Arctic Islands.²⁶

In addition to human hunting pressure, there were several non-anthropogenic factors that may have contributed to the reduction of the muskoxen population in the late

Hurst and Blackett, 1932), pp. 70-71; David T. Hanbury, *Sport and Travel in the Northland of Canada* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), p. 39, p. 225, p. 234.

²⁵ Except for the amount of muskoxen killed by Stefansson's party, all of these figures on muskoxen mortality, including the results of Barr's study, were quoted in Lyle Dick, *Muskox Land: Ellesmere Island in the Age of Contact* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001), pp. 410-13. The mortality figures for Melville Island in 1916 were taken from Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1922), p. 140.

²⁶ At a meeting of the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection held on 30 October 1924, Lauge Koch, a geologist and cartographer with the Danish government, informed those present at the meeting that MacMillan killed 300-400 muskoxen on Ellesmere Island each year from 1913-18. Apparently, the local Inuit population continued to conduct large slaughters of muskoxen after MacMillan's departure. See Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, Minutes, 30 October 1924, RG 10, vol. 4085, file 496,658-1B, NAC.

nineteenth century. More than almost any other species of arctic big game, the behavioural ecology of the muskoxen rendered them particularly vulnerable to the depredations of human hunters. A non-migratory species with fairly localized grazing areas, the muskoxen herds were much easier to locate on the open tundra than elusive boreal wildlife such as the moose or the wood bison. Furthermore, muskoxen herds tend to huddle together in a protective circle in response to threats from wolves, a defensive strategy that may have been effective against canines, but one that also allowed human hunters easily to slaughter large herds after releasing their sled dogs in pursuit of the hunted animals. Aside from their vulnerability to human hunting, there is also evidence to suggest that changes in weather and climate might also have been a key limiting factor for various muskoxen populations. Recent studies have suggested that heavy snowfall or freezing rains that produce layers of ice within the snow cover may limit the ability of the muskoxen to access the preferred forage of sedges and cause dramatic crashes in local herd populations. On the Queen Elizabeth and Parry Islands, for example, researchers attributed major crashes in the muskoxen population to severe weather conditions in the winter of 1973-74.²⁷ Although it is impossible to determine what influence weather related incidents may have had on the late nineteenth century contraction of the range and numbers of the muskoxen, one group of researchers has speculated that the sudden crash in the muskoxen population of Banks Island at the turn of the century was likely due to

²⁷ Frank Miller, Richard Ruddell, and Anne Gunn, *Peary Caribou and Muskoxen on Western Queen Elizabeth Islands, NWT, 1972-73*, Canadian Wildlife Service Report No. 40 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1977); G.R. Parker, D.C. Thomas, E. Broughton, and D.R. Gray, *Crashes of Muskox and Peary Caribou Populations in 1973-74 on the Parry Islands, Arctic Canada*, Canadian Wildlife Service Progress Notes No. 56 (December 1975). See also Gerald R. Parker, *The Diets of Muskoxen and Peary*

severe freezing rains and a subsequent lack of suitable forage.²⁸ Further to the south on the Arctic mainland, it is possible that the combination of a sporadic occurrence of heavy snow or freezing rain combined with the increased pressure from human hunters in the late nineteenth century may have been enough to completely eradicate several local populations of muskoxen.

None of this evidence provides a conclusive account of the causal factors behind the late nineteenth century decline of the muskoxen. It is nonetheless reasonable to conclude from the available documents that a combination of broad economic and ecological changes, including the introduction of the commercial hunt for hides and meat, the arrival of non-Native explorers and sport hunters, and possibly the recurrence of severe weather conditions, all contributed to the diminishment of the muskoxen range and population in the late nineteenth century. On a broad scale, the arrival of the fur trade in the Canadian Arctic did not bring about the same kind of wholesale changes to the local ecology and traditional subsistence economies of northern Aboriginal societies as did the arrival of the trade in buffalo hides and the cattle economy on the southern prairies. It did nonetheless bring about subtle changes to the hunting patterns and seasonal movements of Native people that, in concert with the depredations of 'outside' hunters and the likely influence of weather related environmental stresses, reduced the mainland muskoxen population to a remnant of its former range and population.

Certainly by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the mainland muskoxen

Caribou on Some Islands in the High Arctic, Canadian Wildlife Service Occasional Paper No. 35 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1978).

²⁸Anne Gunn, Chris Shank, and Bruce McLean, "The History, Status and Management of Muskoxen on Banks Island," pp. 188-95.

herds had diminished to the point where they were no longer a commercially viable wildlife population.²⁹ The stage had thus been set for conflict between federal wildlife conservationists who thought the remaining herds should be ‘saved’ so they could be used for a much higher national purpose and those Native hunters who continued occasionally to use the muskoxen for subsistence purposes.

The Last of the Muskoxen

The earliest proposals to establish formal protective legislation for the muskoxen came from several of the very sport hunters who travelled north to obtain a trophy of the species in the late nineteenth century. Many of the sport hunters who pursued the muskoxen across the Arctic were clearly enthralled by the act of killing the animals: even the conservation-minded naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton described his party’s successful muskoxen hunt the “supreme moment” of his journey north in 1907.³⁰ There were, however, other ‘outside’ hunters who wondered if the animal was a suitable target for a true ‘sporting’ gentleman. In a hunting narrative published in 1898, Frank Russell described killing a herd of muskoxen that had been forced by dogs into a defensive formation as a “simple act of butchery.” Furthermore, he urged sport hunters to stay out of the muskoxen country, for the act of killing such hapless animals carried none of the

²⁹ Only 107 muskoxen skins were sold to the HBC in 1909, 76 in 1910, and 91 in 1911 despite unprecedented price levels paid for the hides during this period. See Maxwell Graham to James Harkin, RG 85 vol. 664, file 3910, pt. 2, NAC.

³⁰ Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Arctic Prairies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1911), p. 235.

“triumphant exhilaration” associated with the moose or the wapiti. The geologist J.B. Tyrrell had no ethical qualms about killing muskoxen for sport, but he recommended in 1901 the creation of a strict game sanctuary between the Thelon and Back Rivers in an effort to preserve the remaining muskoxen herds of the arctic interior. The hunter David Hanbury also urged protective measures, particularly a legislated ban on the trade in muskoxen skins, in the narrative account of his travels published in 1904.³¹ This early proliferation of conservationists sentiment toward the muskoxen produced no immediate response from the federal government, but the idea that some sort of protective legislation was needed if the herds were to survive had clearly begun to filter through the popular literature on the North at the turn of the century.

Despite this, the federal government only began to take serious notice of the muskoxen herds until halfway through the second decade of the twentieth century.³² The increased attention directed toward the species was largely due to the incessant lobbying of the famous arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson. Without a doubt, Stefansson influenced the federal government’s muskoxen conservation policy more than any other popular figure during the early decades of the twentieth century. An eccentric explorer who was enthralled with the Arctic and the traditional Inuit methods of survival in the region, Stefansson gradually became obsessed with the idea of conserving the muskoxen as the basis of a future Arctic ranching economy while he was leader of major

³¹ Russell, *op cit.*, p 117, 124; J.W. Tyrrell, “Report on the Country North and East of Great Slave Lake,” 1901. RG 85, Vol. 1087, file 401-22, pt. 1, NAC; Hanbury, *op cit.*, p. 27

³² In the absence of protective legislation to protect the muskoxen, at least one federal field agent took the law into his own hands. In 1904, the Royal Northwest Mounted Police Superintendent for Cape Fullerton, J.D. Moodie, enacted a local ban on the trade in muskox skins as a means to preserve the species as a food

expeditions along the arctic coast from 1908 to 1911 for the New York Museum of Natural History, and second set of investigative journeys under the auspices of the Canadian government as leader of the Canadian Arctic Expedition from 1913 to 1918.³³

The primary focus of Stefansson's early career, however, was simply to conserve the remaining muskoxen and the vast caribou herds as a supply of country food for the Inuit.³⁴ In January 1914, Stefansson wrote to Prime Minister Robert Borden to warn that the trade in muskoxen robes might cause the extirpation of the species west of the Back River in less than ten years.³⁵ One month later, the explorer again wrote to Borden and also to Clifford Sifton, Chair of the Commission of Conservation, to caution that the extirpation of the caribou from the Mackenzie Delta region had resulted in a general impoverishment of the Native people in that region. In contrast to these 'fallen' people, Stefansson claimed that the relatively untouched Inuit in the Coronation Gulf region still lived in a state of primitive affluence because the introduction of guns had not yet destroyed the local wildlife supply and the human population of this region had not yet been decimated by the introduction of disease. The situation was nevertheless swiftly becoming desperate, according to Stefansson, on account of an American trading schooner, the 'Teddy Bear,' having arrived in the region in 1911 to distribute rifles and trade for caribou and muskoxen hides. In order to conserve the muskoxen herds, Stefansson recommended an absolute ban on the robe trade, a measure he felt would

source for Inuit hunters. See William R. Morrison, *Showing the Flag: The Mounted Police and Canadian Sovereignty in the North, 1894-1925* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), pp. 90-92.

³³ Stefansson's career is summarized in Richard Diubaldo's, *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978).

³⁴ For a discussion of Stefansson's influence on caribou conservation policy, see chapter 5.

create a *de facto* sanctuary for the species in the interior tundra region by removing the incentive for Inuit to travel inland from their coastal settlements.³⁶

Stefansson's reports of a dwindling muskoxen population created a great deal of anxiety among federal wildlife officials. In March 1914, Maxwell Graham, who was Chief of the Parks Branch's Animal Division at this time, responded to the sentiments in Stefansson's first letter to Borden with the suggestion that protective legislation for the muskoxen was a greater priority than formulating a conservation policy for the still abundant caribou. Graham proposed the creation of a game sanctuary on Victoria Island and in the Coronation Gulf region where only the Inuit of that region would be permitted to hunt. He also suggested the distribution of wolf traps among the Inuit so that the impact of these predators on the caribou and muskoxen herds could be reduced.³⁷ Three months later, Graham produced an extensive report on the muskoxen at the behest of the Minister of the Interior. The document provided extensive material on the biology of the species, but more importantly it discussed the possible reasons behind the dramatic decline in the muskoxen herds. For the most part, Graham blamed the impact of the robe trade for the decline of the herds, but he also highlighted the possible impact of the more recent lucrative trade in live muskoxen calves for zoos, particularly the "wicked and criminally wasteful" practice of killing an entire herd just to obtain the young. He finally recommended several conservation measures that would address all of these issues: a closed season for all but Native hunters and travellers who were in need of food, a

³⁵ Stefansson to Prime Minister Robert Borden, 8 January 1914. MG 36 H, Borden Papers, vol. 785, pp. 101514-101520, NAC.

³⁶ Stefansson to Clifford Sifton, 8 February 1914. RG 85, vol. 665, file 3914, pt. 1, NAC.

³⁷ Maxwell Graham to James Harkin, 26 March 1914. RG 85, vol. 664, file 3910, pt. 2, NAC.

permanent ban on hunting muskoxen with dogs, a restriction on the sale of skins to those with an approved government tag, and finally the creation of absolute sanctuaries where the muskoxen might multiply and “overflow” into the surrounding districts.³⁸ Henry J. Bury, the Inspector of Timber for Indian Affairs, expressed similar sentiments in his report on game conditions in the Northwest Territories issued in November 1915. As in Graham’s report, Bury laid much of the blame for the decline in the muskoxen at the feet of the skin trade, particularly the demand the traders had created for the soft fur of the unborn calves. Although Bury had held strong reservations about the feasibility of enforcing game regulations in the vast tundra regions, he recommended the implementation of a closed season “as soon as an organized scheme of administration in matters pertaining to the Northwest Territories is placed in motion.”³⁹

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Graham and Bury’s reports is the lack of any explicit condemnation of Native hunters for the role they may have played in the decline of the muskoxen. In contrast to the prevailing conservation discourse that tended to admonish northern Aboriginal hunters for the decline in the wood bison and for their allegedly ‘wanton’ methods of slaughtering caribou, the initial response to the muskoxen ‘crisis’ was—in keeping with Stefansson’s analysis—to blame the influence of external forces such as the fur trade and arctic exploration for the decline in the muskoxen herds. Certainly in some cases, the overt racism that was a common feature of the early

³⁸ Graham to Harkin, 23 June 1914. Ibid. Graham reiterated all of these recommendations again in September 1914 after he was asked by Sifton to examine Stefansson’s assertions on the dire state of the muskoxen, the caribou and the people who hunted them. Graham’s second report can be found in a letter to Harkin, 2 September 1914. RG 85, vol. 665, file 3914, pt. 1, NAC.

³⁹ Henry J. Bury, “Report on the Game and Fisheries of Northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories,” Unpublished Report, 6 November 1915, RG 85, vol. 664, file 3910, pt. 2, NAC.

conservation movement did make its way into the discussions over the fate of the muskoxen. In 1914, the American naturalist J.A. Allen wrote that “the Eskimos and muskoxen can never live together, owing to the improvident ways of the Eskimos, who are unable to resist the temptation to destroy every animal of a muskox herd they chance to meet, regardless of the waste of life and resources thus incurred.”⁴⁰ More commonly, however, senior wildlife officials in Canada apportioned much of the responsibility for the decline of the muskoxen to forces that were largely outside the control of Native hunters. In his 1921 monograph, C. Gordon Hewitt did remark on the “recklessness” of Inuit hunters toward the muskoxen, but his comments were tempered by an acknowledgement that the species had declined largely because of the demands of the fur auction houses, the plunder of the arctic explorers and, to a lesser extent, the depredations of the sport hunter.⁴¹ Hewitt proposed several measures to protect the muskoxen before the Commission on Conservation in 1914 and again in 1916, including the creation of muskoxen sanctuary on Victoria, Banks, and Melville Islands, and also a limit of two hides per licensed hunter (a regulation that would not apply to Native hunters and *bona fide* explorers that were in need of food).⁴²

Hewitt’s focus on the hide trade seems to have struck a chord with fellow members of the newly created Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection when they were charged with the task of drafting a new Northwest Game Act in 1917. Although the debates over the provisions of the new legislation were not found in the archival records

⁴⁰ Allen, *op cit.*, p. 206.

⁴¹ Hewitt, *op cit.*, p. 99.

associated with the Advisory Board, it is safe to assume that the members took a hard line on the issue of stopping the trade in muskoxen hides. When the new Northwest Game Act was passed in June 1917, it included a complete ban on the trade in muskox robes and a year-round closed season on the species. The latter provision nevertheless included an exemption for all Indians, Eskimos and ‘half-breeds’ who were “actually in need of the meat.”⁴³ The incorporation of this ‘starvation clause’ may have reflected the resolve of the Department of Indian Affairs, and particularly its representative on the Advisory Board, Duncan Campbell Scott, to prevent the northern Natives from becoming dependent on relief issues rather than any overt concern for the material needs of Dene and Inuit hunters on the part of the board’s wildlife conservationists.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the subsistence hunters of the northern tundra could still, for the time being, use the muskoxen as an emergency food supply if the caribou migration failed to appear. It was a hunting privilege that would soon be compromised, however, as the federal government began to consider a more ‘judicious’ means of exploiting the muskoxen herds in the years following the First World War.

⁴² Hewitt’s recommendations for muskoxen conservation are reproduced in a letter from Clifford Sifton to W.W. Cory, 8 August 1914. RG 85, vol. 665, file 3914, pt. 1, NAC. They also appear in his monograph, *The Conservation of the Wild Life of Canada*, p. 100.

⁴³ “An Act Respecting Game in the Northwest Territories of Canada,” *Statutes of Canada*, 7-8 George V, vol. 1, c. 36, s. 1, 1917, pp. 337-343. The events leading up to the passing of the Northwest Game Act are summarized in Hewitt, *The Conservation of the Wild Life of Canada*, pp. 258-60, and Hewitt, *Conservation of Wild Life in Canada in 1917: A Review*, Reprinted from the Ninth Annual Report of the Commission of Conservation (Ottawa, 1918).

⁴⁴ For Scott’s philosophy toward subsistence hunters in the North, see his paper “Relation of Indians to Wild Life Conservation,” in the proceedings, *National Conference on Conservation of Game, Fur-Bearing Animals and Other Wild Life*, 18-19 February 1919 (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1919), pp. 19-21. For a full discussion of the conflict between federal wildlife officials and the Department of Indian Affairs over

Arctic Ranching

The idea to domesticate the muskoxen as a source of meat and wool has a fairly long history in North America. The French officer Jérémie, who was in charge of Fort Bourbon on the west coast of Hudson Bay from 1697-1714, sent muskox wool to France as early as 1709 so it could be manufactured into fine stockings.⁴⁵ In 1784, the noted British naturalist Thomas Pennant made the first explicit proposal to domesticate the muskoxen for the purposes of commercial wool production when he opined that, “beneath every part of the [musk oxen’s] hair grows in great plenty, and often in flocks, an ash-coloured wool, most exquisitely fine, superior, I think to any I have seen and which might be very useful in manufactures if sufficient could be procured.” Although there were a few promoters who continued to extol the commercial potential of muskoxen ranching throughout the nineteenth century, there was no explicit attempt to domesticate the species until the very end of the century.⁴⁶ In 1899, A.G. Nathorst, a Swedish university professor interested in the economic opportunities offered by muskoxen, shipped four experimental calves from Greenland to his native country, all of which died from diseases shortly after their arrival in Europe.⁴⁷

subsistence hunting, see Chapter One. The conservationists on the Advisory Board included James Harkin, Gordon Hewitt, James White, and Rudolph M. Anderson

⁴⁵ N. Jérémie, *Twenty Years of York Factory, 1694-1714: Jérémie’s Account of Hudson Bay and Strait* (Ottawa: Thurnburn and Abbot, 1926). Quoted in Paul Wilkinson, “The Domestication of the Muskoxen,” *The Polar Record*, 15, 98 (1971), p. 683.

⁴⁶ For a summary of the proposals to domesticate the muskoxen in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, including the quote from Pennant, see Paul F. Wilkinson’s, “The History of Musk-Ox Domestication,” pp. 14-16. Pennant is probably best remembered as one of Gilbert White’s correspondents in the classic work, *A Natural History of Selborne*.

⁴⁷ See Graham’s report to Harkin on the muskoxen, 23 June 1914. RG 85, vol. 664, file 3910, pt. 2, NAC.

This early interest in the commercial possibilities associated with the muskoxen paled in comparison to the dedication and enthusiasm with which the arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson pursued the dream of domesticating the species in the early twentieth century. By his own account, Stefansson's conversion to the idea of muskoxen ranching came about in 1916 as he and his party of sixteen men spent a year living in "intimate association" with the species on Melville Island, consuming the meat and fat of the animals, making candles with the tallow, and building shelter with the hides. Despite the frequent killing of the muskoxen by Stefansson's party, the explorer noted that there were "numerous herds still peacefully grazing about the camp."⁴⁸ Based on this experience, Stefansson's initial interest in conserving the muskoxen primarily for the use of Aboriginal hunters expanded into a persistent international campaign to promote ranching the species as a harbinger of economic expansion into the Far North. In 1917, Stefansson drafted a report titled "Possible new Domestic Animals for Cold Countries" for the High Commissioner for Canada in London, Sir Richard McBride, copies of which were circulated to C. Gordon Hewitt and the Parks Commissioner James Harkin in November 1918. Within the document, Stefansson argued that the muskox was a far superior range animal to the reindeer for the purposes of a northern ranching industry. According to Stefansson, the muskoxen produced three to four times the meat and milk of the reindeer, they were much easier to herd, they were not susceptible to wolf attacks or stampeding in the vicinity of dogs, and finally they could furnish large amounts of wool without ever having to be killed. Stefansson believed that the domestication of the

⁴⁸ Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire*, p. 140-41.

muskoxen would create an agricultural base for a settled and industrious ‘Polar Mediterranean,’ a foundation for whole new economic order in Arctic Canada:

If the rate of increase of muskoxen is similar to that of sheep under domestication, or even similar to that of cattle and if—as seems certain—ther [sic] proves a commercial market for their wool, a hundred thousand square miles of the continental and island part of arctic Canada could eventually be converted into as profitable pasture land as large sections of Australia, to say the least. Should mines and other industries develop, that would only increase the value of the muskox as a local source of meat and milk.”⁴⁹

So intent was Stefansson on bringing to fruition his scheme to develop a muskoxen ranching industry, he began to promote the idea among the politically powerful and moneyed classes near the end of the war. In 1917, he sent samples of muskoxen wool to Prime Minister Borden and to Edmund Walker, President of the Canadian Bank of Commerce. On Armistice Day, Stefansson addressed the Empire Club at Massey Hall in Toronto, where he managed to impress upon the city’s financial and social elites with the idea that civilization could only be brought to the North if large herds of domesticated reindeer and muskoxen were established as an agricultural base. Stefansson also obtained the support of one of North America’s most famous sport hunters and wildlife conservationists, Theodore Roosevelt, who responded to Stefansson’s entreaties in March 1918 with the assertion that “it is a capital misfortune that the muskox has not been tamed. To tame it would mean possibilities of civilization in

⁴⁹ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, “Possible new Domestic Animals for Cold Countries.” This memo was originally sent to Sir Richard McBride on 9 February 1917. A copy that Hewitt forwarded to Harkin on 28 November 1918 was found in RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC. Stefansson’s ideas on the ‘livable north’ are summarized in his monographs, *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in the Polar Region* (New York: MacMillan, 1922), and particularly, *The Northward Course of Empire*.

northernmost America which are now utterly lacking.”⁵⁰ It is perhaps strange that an ardent conservationist and sport hunter such as Roosevelt would have preferred to see the muskoxen become a ranch animal rather than remain in its wild state. Yet Stefansson’s vision of an expanding northern civilization held an irresistible lure for imperialists such as Roosevelt, and also for the political and business elites who turned their gaze toward a last frontier in Canada’s Northwest Territories.

But did Stefansson’s muskoxen scheme represent a ‘visionary’ form of arctic utopianism or a much more narrow form of crass commercialism? One of the more bizarre twists in Stefansson’s promotional endeavours was his campaign to change the name of the muskoxen as means to overcome the persistent rumours that the meat held an unpleasant ‘musky’ odour. In the fall of 1920, Stefansson attempted to convince James Harkin that a change in name to polar oxen, Canada Ox, woolox, or simply ovibos might enhance the commercial potential of his scheme to domesticate the animals. The proposal received some harsh criticism when it was brought before the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection in November 1920 and was ultimately abandoned. Nonetheless, the incident suggests that Stefansson played the part of both the charlatan and the visionary, a man who was willing to mix his dream of a northern Mediterranean with the more prosaic concerns of a salesperson.⁵¹

⁵⁰ These events are summarized in Diubaldo’s, *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic*, pp. 137-42 and Stefansson’s, *The Northward Course of Empire*, pp. 137-67. Roosevelt’s letter to Stefansson was printed in full on pp. 163-64 of the latter volume.

⁵¹ For Stefansson’s entreaties to Harkin on the issue of changing the name of the muskoxen, see his letters dated 15 October 1920 and 13 November 1920 in the J.B. Harkin Papers, MG 30, E-169, vol. 2, NAC, and also his letters to J.G. Rutherford, Chair of the Royal Commission on Reindeer and Muskox Industries, 6 September 1920. RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC. Stefansson’s proposal to change the name of the muskoxen was severely criticized by the biologist and Advisory Board member R.M. Anderson. A more general public feud had erupted between Anderson and Stefansson over the latter’s attempt to appropriate

If Stefansson's penchant for publicity inspired some skepticism within the federal bureaucracy, he was nevertheless able to inspire a general enthusiasm among senior wildlife officials for his proposal to domesticate the muskoxen. In February 1919, the members of the Advisory Board on Wildlife protection, including Harkin, Hewitt, R.M. Anderson, and the Assistant Chair of the Commission of Conservation, James White, met with G.J. Desberat, Deputy Minister of Naval Services, and E.W. Nelson, Chief of the Biological Survey of the United States, to discuss the possibility of a cooperating with the Americans to implement the proposals found in Stefansson's report on muskox domestication. On Desberat's advice, the board concluded that transferring animals from Melville Island to an experimental station on the mainland, as Stefansson had suggested, was likely to prove unsuccessful due the difficulties involved with marine navigation. Nonetheless, the board decided that it was both possible and desirable to transfer muskoxen from Ellesmere Island to experimental ranches at Chesterfield Inlet on the west coast of Hudson Bay and St. Michael's Island in Alaska, with costs to be shared evenly among the governments of both countries.⁵² In April, Hewitt and White went so far as to meet with the explorer Donald MacMillan in Boston to secure his services capturing muskoxen calves on Ellesmere Island.⁵³ Although the project was never carried out, it was clear that the members of the Advisory Board had thoroughly embraced

supplies from Anderson's southern party of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, and also over proper credit for the scientific discoveries made on the expedition. In general, Anderson saw Stefansson as a shallow promoter rather than a true scientist. See Anderson to Harkin, n.d. "Memorandum Re: Proposed Change of Name of Musk-ox." RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC. For an overview, see William A. Waiser, "Canada Ox, Ovibos, Woolox... Anything But Musk-ox," in *For the Purposes of Dominions: Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow*, Kenneth S. Coates and William R. Morrison, eds. (Toronto: Cactus Press, 1989), pp. 189-99.

⁵² Minutes of the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, 28 February 1916. RG 10, vol. 4084, file 496,658, NAC.

Stefansson's intention to transform the 'barren' arctic tundra into a landscape rich with commercial wildlife ranches. Possessed of only limited knowledge of the muskoxen, and without any scientific appraisal of whether the species could actually be domesticated, Canada's leading wildlife conservationists had rushed to endorse the idea of conserving the 'woolox' for its use value as a domesticated farm animal.

Most importantly for Stefansson, his grandiose scheme also received increased and enthusiastic support from the senior political wing of the Canadian government. In the early months of 1919, Stefansson gained a powerful ally when he managed to favourably impress the Minister of the Interior, Arthur Meighen, with his vision for northern development. Meighen began to promote the muskoxen proposal throughout the corridors of Parliament, finally arranging for Stefansson to deliver an address to a joint session of the Senate and the House of Commons on May 6th, 1919. The speech was a remarkable success, as Stefansson's evocation of the northern tundra as a future meat and wool-producing region of unparalleled productive potential managed to capture both the collective imagination of the assembled legislators and embody the heady optimism associated with the end of the war years. Two weeks later, Meighen convinced his cabinet colleagues to authorize the creation of a royal commission to examine the possible development of reindeer and muskoxen industries in the Far North.⁵⁴ The members of the commission included the railway commissioner John Rutherford, James McLean, a manager at Harris-Abattoir Co., the Parks Commissioner James Harkin, and of course Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who later resigned because of a potential conflict of

⁵³ Waiser, *op cit.*, p. 192

interest over his application for a grazing license on Southern Baffin Island.⁵⁵ The commission held a series of hearings in Ottawa from January to May 1920. No hearings were ever held in the Northwest Territories, and the testimony of Dene and Inuit hunters was conspicuously absent from the proceedings. The commission instead relied on the testimony of several ‘expert witnesses,’ mainly missionaries, fur traders and members of the Canadian Geological Survey who had traveled extensively in the Northwest Territories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In some respects, the information gathered from these informants failed to provide the unqualified support for muskoxen domestication that Stefansson and his supporters had hoped for. Several witnesses described the meat as superior to beef, but others found it unpalatable, with Henry Toke Munn attesting to the rankness and ‘muskiness’ of meat from the older bulls.⁵⁶ Perhaps the most damaging evidence for Stefansson and his supporters came in a letter to the commission from William Hornaday, a leading American conservationist and curator of the New York Zoological Gardens, who suggested that combing the wool

⁵⁴ For a summary of these events, see Diubaldo, *op cit.*, pp. 142-45.

⁵⁵ Harkin’s participation on the Royal Commission is not surprising. He had taken a personal interest in the idea of introducing reindeer to parts of northern Canada at least since 1913, when he recommended approval of a request from the Yukon Council for permission to establish a herd of reindeer in that territory. Maxwell Graham was also an enthusiastic supporter of the idea, as Harkin based his recommendation in part on research conducted by Graham on the introduction of European reindeer into Alaska. Harkin thought the introduction of reindeer in the Yukon would “offer a simple solution to the matter of a permanent food supply for the native population.” See Harkin to Cory, 10 June 1913. RG 17, vol. 1188, docket 228571, NAC. See also Graham to Harkin, 5 June 1913. *Ibid.*

Stefansson received his lease for reindeer grazing from the federal cabinet in June 1920. He later transferred the lease to the Hudson’s Bay Company, which formed a subsidiary—the Hudson’s Bay Reindeer Company—with share options and employment provided to Stefansson in an advisory capacity. The venture was a near total disaster. In November 1921, over six hundred reindeer purchased in Norway were released at Amadjuak Bay. The herd scattered in search of food, and most perished or ran off with the wild caribou that winter. For a summary, see Diubaldo, *op cit.*, pp. 147-60.

⁵⁶ For example, the whaling captain George Comer testified that the meat was inferior to beef, but Frank Hennessy, a former member of Captain Bernier’s arctic expedition, attested to the superior qualities of the

out of the thick hairy overcoat of the muskoxen held in the zoo was an extremely tedious process. To make matters worse, the animal that was subjected to this experiment died of pneumonia one month later. Based on this experience, Hornaday doubted if muskoxen wool could ever be produced on a commercial scale, a sentiment the commissioners shared in their final recommendations.⁵⁷

The commissioners did nevertheless agree with Stefansson that the muskoxen should be saved from the depredations of local hunters. Indeed, Harkin, Rutherford and McLean took a more aggressive stand on muskoxen conservation than did either Stefansson or the witnesses that came before the commission. In fact, only a very few of the informants that testified at the commission's hearings described the hunting methods of the Dene and Inuit in pejorative terms, and most of these referred to the 'wanton' slaughters visited upon the caribou. Regardless, the commissioners concluded the following in their final report: "witnesses agree that the Esquimaux, like the Indian, is naturally improvident in the matter of food supply, and that he will, when opportunity offers, destroy an entire herd [of muskoxen] without regard to possible future requirements." They also recommended a study to determine the numbers and location of the remaining mainland muskoxen herds, and also that proper "safeguards" be put in

meat compared to beef. Transcripts of the testimony of all witnesses are bound under separate unpublished volume, found in RG 33-105, vol. 1, NAC.

⁵⁷ John Gunion Rutherford, James Stanley McLean, and James Bernard Harkin, *Report of the Royal Commission to Investigate the Possibilities of the Reindeer and Musk-ox Industries in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Regions of Canada* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1922), p. 16. Hornaday's comments are contained in Appendix L, pp. 52-54.

place “to provide against future contingencies, such as the local Esquimaux [on the Arctic Islands] becoming possessed of modern firearms.”⁵⁸

But if the muskoxen herds were to be protected from the depredations of local hunters, certainly it was not for the sake of mere posterity. Based largely on Hornaday’s limited experience handling muskoxen at the New York Zoological Gardens, the commissioners concluded that the muskoxen were a suitable source of livestock for the development of a domestic meat industry in the Far North. They recommended the creation of a research station on one of the Arctic Islands where small herds of muskoxen could be domesticated for experimental purposes. If the project proved successful, then the commissioners recommended that “considerable numbers” of muskoxen be brought further south to more accessible areas such as the coast of Hudson Bay, where “their development from a national economic standpoint may be carried on and extended.”⁵⁹

Such comments seem in retrospect to be almost extravagant and whimsical, more the product of a naïve and utopian faith in the wisdom of transforming the Far North from a so-called wasteland to a productive pastoral landscape than a realistic assessment of the prospects for muskoxen ranching in the Northwest Territories. If the commissioners advocated a cautious and experimental approach to the actual process of taming the wild muskoxen, they neglected to provide any consideration of the social and economic

⁵⁸ Rutherford, McLean and Harkin, *op cit.*, pp. 14-15. In the unpublished transcripts of the testimony, Rev. W.H. Fray spoke of the Inuit themselves being concerned by the unwarranted slaughter of caribou. Storker T. Storkenson suggested that whites and Native hunters alike were killing off the muskoxen. The explorer Donald MacMillan, who killed large numbers of muskoxen on his arctic expeditions in the early part of the century, did accuse the Inuit of slaughtering the species indiscriminately. Many other informants were sympathetic to the hardships faced by northern Natives, emphasizing the importance of preserving the wild game supply from the depredations of outside hunters. See RG 33-105, vol. 1, NAC.

⁵⁹ Rutherford, McLean and Harkin. *op cit.*, pp. 14-15, p. 36

impact that industrial-scale muskoxen production might have on local Native hunters. Some of the commission's witnesses suggested that it might be difficult for Natives to transform themselves immediately from hunters and trappers to herders, but none contemplated how Native hunters might react to the possible enclosure of vast tracts of their traditional hunting and trapping lands for grazing purposes. Indeed, to the Dene and Inuit, the recommendations of the royal commission might have seemed less a visionary scheme than a blatant appropriation of land and resources. It might also have appeared as an overt form of colonialism, a demand on the part of the state authorities that Native hunters give up their 'bush life' so that they could take part in a more modern agricultural economy as herders or general labourers. The potential for cultural conflict between native hunters and the agricultural promoters within the federal bureaucracy never did materialize, however, as logistical problems prevented any project to domesticate the muskoxen from being carried out until after the Second World War.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the Dene and Inuit hunters of the Northwest Territories still experienced increasing regulation and surveillance of their hunting activities in the years immediately following the release of the royal commission's report as the federal government continued to protect the muskoxen as a prospective source of wealth for the entire nation.

⁶⁰ While a proposal to remove muskoxen from Ellesmere and domesticate them in the protected environment of Anticosti Island had emerged in response to the royal commission, O.S. Finnie, Director of the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch, wrote to the Deputy Minister in August 1914 to explain that the live capture and domestication of muskoxen on Ellesmere had thus far been "difficult to achieve." According to Finnie, muskoxen had not been captured because the few ships that passed through the region were rarely able to stay long enough to search for the animals. Moreover, the police officers that were stationed on Ellesmere Island beginning in 1922 lacked the personnel and equipment to capture the animals. See Finnie to Cory, 25 August 1924. RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC.

Providence, Profit, and Conservation

The first clear sign that the federal wildlife officials had adopted a ‘get tough’ approach to the enforcement of the game laws preventing muskoxen hunting came even before the work of the royal commission was completed. In May 1919, Captain George Comer wrote to Stefansson with the suggestion that Inuit hunters from Etah, Greenland were intent on hunting muskoxen on Ellesmere Island because they found the crossing to be not as difficult as they had formerly supposed. Furthermore, Comer reported that Donald MacMillan, the explorer who had previously killed hundreds of muskoxen on Arctic Islands, was heading north to set up a trading post on Ellesmere Island.⁶¹ In July, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, W.W. Cory, requested that the Royal Northwest Mounted Police set up a post on Ellesmere to curb any potential mass slaughter of the muskoxen herds.⁶² The Mounted Police Comptroller, A.A. McLean, informed Cory that it would be too costly to establish a post on such a remote territory. The best he could do was to ask his officers at the Chesterfield Inlet and Herschel Island posts to warn all traders and Inuit hunters not to infringe upon the provisions of the Northwest Game Act.⁶³

Lacking the ability to enforce its own game laws in the High Arctic, the federal government turned to diplomatic channels in an effort to conserve the muskoxen. On July 31st, 1919, the Canadian government sent an official request to Denmark asking for local authorities to act decisively to prevent the Greenland Inuit from killing the muskoxen on

⁶¹ Comer to Stefansson, 19 July 1919. RG 10, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC

Ellesmere Island.⁶⁴ The reply from Denmark, which was not forthcoming until April 1920, included a letter drafted by Knud Rasmussen, an explorer and businessman who had recently set up the Thule trading post in Greenland and who was reported to be organizing Inuit expeditions to Ellesmere and other arctic islands to procure muskoxen skins. Rasmussen's correspondence had originally been sent to the Danish colonial administration in response to the Canadian government's concerns; it was enclosed with the official Danish response presumably because of its spirited defense of the Ellesmere muskoxen hunt. Within the letter, Rasmussen argued unequivocally that muskoxen skins provided absolutely essential material to the Greenland Inuit for clothing and bedding; to deny them this material good would have "disastrous consequences" for these particular 'esquimaux.' Rasmussen also insisted that the muskoxen herds on Ellesmere were still large enough that "the danger of extermination can scarcely be described as imminent." Finally, and most provocatively for Canadian officials, Rasmussen contended that "the territory of the polar esquimaux falls within the region designated as 'no man's land' and there is therefore no authority in the district except that which I exercise through my station."⁶⁵ Based on this reasoning, the Danish government rejected the Canadian government's concerns over the muskoxen hunt, stating that they concurred entirely with the views expressed in Rasmussen's correspondence.⁶⁶

⁶² Cory to, A.A. McLean, Comptroller, Royal Northwest Mounted Police, 18 July 1919. Ibid.

⁶³ McLean to Cory, 24 July 1919. Ibid.

⁶⁴ The letter is summarized in a report on the status of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic Island prepared for a Technical Advisory Committee established to investigate the issues. See, "Memo Re: Northern Islands, Prepared for Information, Technical Advisory Board Meeting, November 10th, 1920," n.d. MG 30, E-169, vol. 2, NAC.

⁶⁵ Rasmussen to the Administration of the Colonies of Greenland, 8 March 1920. RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC.

⁶⁶ Danish Minister to Earl Curzon of Kedleston, 12 April 1920. Ibid.

The Canadian response to the Danish position was predictably negative. Rasmussen's letter represented a threat not only to Canada's claim of sovereignty over the Arctic Islands, but also to the emerging plans to domesticate the muskoxen. Indeed, the hearings of the reindeer and muskoxen commission were nearing an end just as the Danish position began to be circulated in official circles. In what was perhaps a reflection of the weight the federal government accorded to the issue of muskoxen conservation, James Harkin was appointed in 1919 to a Technical Advisory Board composed of senior civil servants charged with the task of asserting the Canadian government's sovereign claim over the Arctic Islands. The issue became something of a preoccupation for Harkin. Throughout the spring and summer of 1920, he corresponded frequently on the issue both with senior departmental officials and also consulted Vilhjalmur Stefansson a great deal for 'expert' advice. In May 1920, Stefansson provided Harkin with a lengthy refutation of Rasmussen's arguments. According to Stefansson, the Danish trader and explorer had practiced a degree of deception when he claimed that muskoxen skins were indispensable for life in the Arctic when in actual fact they were used only for bedding. He also urged Harkin to convince the senior levels of government to assert their sovereign authority in the Arctic and take steps to prohibit the hunting activities of the Greenland Inuit.⁶⁷ One month later, Harkin reiterated Stefansson's comments in a long memo to the W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior. Above all else, Harkin argued that the sovereign right of

⁶⁷ Stefansson to Harkin, 15 May 1920. Ibid. One month later, Stefansson again pressed Harkin on the issue, imploring him to at least try to get the Danish government to adopt protective legislation for the muskoxen so that the differing regulations in each jurisdiction would not leave the door open to deceit among the Greenland Inuit. The letter also revealed some of the contradictions in Stefansson's conservation philosophy, however, as he also inquired if it would be possible to obtain two to three muskoxen to release

Canada to enforce its game laws in the Arctic Islands must be respected. If domestic laws prevented Inuit hunters in Canada from hunting muskoxen except in cases of starvation, Harkin proclaimed that it was hardly fair for hunters from Greenland to kill the animals merely for their skins. The degree of justice accorded to Inuit hunters living in Canadian territory was not, however, Harkin's only concern. He also pleaded for firm diplomatic action "on account of the probable steps to be taken for the development and domestication of muskox." If the muskoxen herds were ever to serve as an agricultural resource, Harkin concluded that it was "of the utmost importance to Canada that the last remaining herds of muskox—those on Ellesmere land—and contiguous territory—should be conserved."⁶⁸

In November, a report of the Technical Advisory Board emphasized more broadly the cornucopia of natural resources that might exist on the Arctic Islands. Not only were there herds of muskoxen to supply ranches with seed stock, coal deposits were reported on Axel Heiberg Island and Ellesmere's pre-cambrian rock formations held the promise of iron, nickel, gold and radium. To protect these valuable resources for the purposes of the Dominion, the committee recommended the establishment of police posts on Ellesmere, Bylot, and Devon Islands and the relocation of Inuit families from more southerly points to effectively occupy the High Arctic Islands.⁶⁹ While the latter proposal was not carried out until the 1950s (see chapter 7), two police posts established on Ellesmere at Craig Harbour and Pond Inlet in 1922 did provide federal wildlife officials

in Banff National Park as an experiment to see how well they would do in mountainous country. See Stefansson to Harkin, 16 June 1920. Ibid.

⁶⁸ Harkin to Cory, 16 June 1929. Ibid.

with at least some means to supervise the hunting activities of the Greenland Inuit and enforce Canada's game laws.⁷⁰ In the wake of Stefansson's campaign for muskox domestication and the royal commission's findings, it was clear that the federal government was determined to project its authority toward even the most remote Arctic locations to protect the muskoxen as a potential domesticated ranch animal.

By the middle of the 1920s, the northern administration was also intent on adopting more severe measures to protect the muskoxen herds of the arctic mainland. In November 1923, R.M. Anderson warned Maxwell Graham, now Chief of the Game Division within the newly created Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch, that Native hunters had nearly killed off the muskoxen herds near Bathurst Inlet. Graham in turn advised his branch's director, O.S. Finnie, that the plight of the muskoxen should be brought before the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection. On November 20th, Finnie informed the board's secretary, Hoyes Lloyd, that the status of the mainland muskoxen had become perilous, in all likelihood because the Inuit were travelling large distances inland to kill the animals "without the excuse of hunger and starvation."⁷¹ On January 14th, 1924, the Advisory Board adopted a resolution recommending a complete ban on muskoxen hunting in the Northwest Territories. Three months later, a federal cabinet

⁶⁹ "Memo Re. Northern Islands. Prepared for Information, Technical Advisory Board Meeting, November 10th, 1920," n.d. MG 30, E-169, vol. 2, NAC.

⁷⁰ For an account of the establishment of the Pond Inlet and Craig Harbour posts, see William R. Morrison, *Showing the Flag: the Mounted Police and Canadian Sovereignty in the North, 1894-1825* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985). The Danish government also acquiesced in 1921 to a program of muskoxen conservation on Ellesmere. Most importantly, Denmark agreed to prohibit any trading of muskoxen skins through Rasmussen's Greenland post. See Harkin to Cory, 29 June 1921. RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC. The Danish government also provided the Greenland Inuit with reindeer skins and Rasmussen subsequently prohibited hunters from his trading post from travelling to Ellesmere. See Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, Minutes, 30 October 1924. RG 10, vol. 4085, file 496,658-1B, NAC.

decree removed the ‘starvation clause’ from the regulations governing the muskoxen hunt, a change that prohibited native hunters from legally hunting the animals even in cases of extreme hunger. The rationale behind the cabinet decree included reports that native hunters had taken “undue advantage” of the starvation clause, organizing hunting parties to the interior while packing large amounts of food from their coastal camps.⁷²

The new absolute restriction on muskoxen hunting received extremely favourable reaction in the press, with many reports noting the potential for Canada’s muskoxen to supply food to world markets if they received proper protection.⁷³ Nonetheless, the degree to which the new regulations should be enforced among the ‘primitive’ Inuit along the Arctic Coast provoked a heated debate within the federal bureaucracy. The source of the controversy was a report that W.H.B. Hoare had forwarded to Finnie in the summer of 1925. Hoare was an Anglican lay missionary and experienced Arctic traveller who had been sent to the Far North the previous spring by the Department of the Interior to assess the size of the caribou herds and to preach the ‘gospel’ of wildlife conservation among the Inuit (see chapter 6). His report to Finnie stated that Inuit hunters who wintered near Bernard Harbour had killed up to thirty-five muskoxen northwest of Great Bear Lake in the late summer of 1924. After learning of the hunt from a local trader, Hoare met with the Inuit at Bernard Harbour and informed them they had broken the law and

⁷¹ See Graham to Finnie, 16 November 1923. RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC; Finnie to Hoyes Lloyd, 20 November 1923. Ibid.

⁷² Order in Council P.C. 555, 8 April 1924. A copy was found in RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC. The Advisory Board resolution calling for complete protection of the muskoxen is also quoted in full.

⁷³ See “Canada Takes Steps to Protect Musk Ox,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 September 1924; “Cow Buffalo and Musk-Ox,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 August 1924; “Canada Protects Musk-Ox from Total Extinction,” *Brandon Sun*, 11 August 1924; “Conservation of Canada’s Musk-Ox,” *Wetawiskin Times*, 7 August 1924. Clippings of all these articles were found in RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC.

“displeased” the government. The assembled hunters apparently dismissed Hoare’s threats of prosecution with the suggestion that a prison term on Herschel Island would bring good food on a regular basis.⁷⁴ Rather than interpret such comments as an indication of the desperate material conditions facing Inuit communities, many federal officials were offended by the apparent local contempt for the game regulations. Inspector T.B. Caulkin, the Commanding Officer for the RCMP in the Arctic, promoted tougher sentencing for muskox poaching, including hard labour in the guardroom at Aklavik so the Inuit “would change their opinion of the past treatment they have been accorded, and the ease with which they apparently view the same.”⁷⁵ Both Finnie and R.M. Anderson supported Caulkin’s assertion that “drastic action” was needed to halt the illegal killing of muskoxen.⁷⁶

The Parks Commissioner James Harkin nevertheless objected to such an uncompromising position on the basis that it was unjust to punish a “primitive” people when they possessed only a limited ability to understand a “white man’s” system of crime and punishment.⁷⁷ If Harkin’s comments seem more patronizing than sympathetic, they did prompt the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection to consult several ‘expert’ witnesses on the problem of muskoxen conservation. At a meeting held on November 19th, 1925, the trader Charles Klengenbergl claimed that shortages of caribou in the

⁷⁴ Hoare to Finnie, 10 August 1926. RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC..

⁷⁵ Inspector T.B. Caulkin to Officer Commanding, “G” Division, Edmonton, 14 August 1925. Ibid.

⁷⁶ Finnie to Cory, 5 November 1925. Ibid. See also Anderson to Finnie, 17 November 1925. Ibid.

⁷⁷ Harkin to W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior, 12 November 1925. Ibid. Harkin was no less an advocate of controlling the behaviour of Inuit hunters than his colleagues, but he suggested that modifications to Inuit hunting practices might best be achieved within their own cultural milieu. He hoped that perhaps a ‘superstition’ might be found within the Inuit hunting camps that would brand offenders against the game laws as deviants and outcasts.

Western Arctic had forced the Inuit to kill muskoxen out of dire need. Klengenberg repeated Harkin's view that some form of diplomacy among the Inuit was preferable to strict enforcement of the game regulations. Nonetheless, the prevailing sentiment from further witnesses was less sympathetic toward Native hunters. The explorer John Hornby, who had spent the previous winter observing the muskoxen herds at the north end of Artillery Lake, testified that diplomacy would not stop the killing of muskoxen and that "fairly drastic" actions such as the prohibition of trading posts near the interior muskoxen ranges and the creation of a muskoxen sanctuary in the Thelon River region were needed to save the herds. At an Advisory Board meeting two weeks later, the trader William Duval suggested the adoption of more dramatic measures such as prison, hard labour and a diet of bread and water so those convicted of killing muskoxen might "feel the penalty" more readily.⁷⁸

The Advisory Board resolved the issue with a compromise. On December 16th, Finnie informed the RCMP Commissioner Cortlandt Starnes that police should take care to ensure that Inuit hunters were aware of the game laws before laying charges. In cases of repeat offense or a failure to heed the warnings of the police, however, hunters "should then be arrested and punishment commensurate with the offence then be meted out to such natives." Finnie reminded Starnes that strong enforcement of the game regulations was ultimately for the greater good of local people, in part because "it is hoped some day to domesticate the musk-ox so that they can be of real benefit to the natives through their

⁷⁸ Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, Minutes, 19 November 1925 and 2 December 1925. RG 13, vol. 924, file 6101, pt. B, NAC.

wool and milk.”⁷⁹ According to Finnie’s logic, Native hunters who exploited a traditional source of food in the present must be punished so that the same source of sustenance could be exploited as a domestic range animal at some future date. His comment also reinforced the idea that the game regulations were meant not merely to save a species in severe decline but also to facilitate a dramatic shift in the culture of Native northerners from itinerant hunters and trappers to sedentary ranchers. A project that had always been promoted as a development scheme for the benefit of the national economy was now assumed to have inherent benefits for local people, even if these same Dene and Inuit hunters bore the brunt of the impact of regulatory measures designed to protect the seed stock of this future northern ranching economy.

The Thelon Game Sanctuary

To mention the Thelon Game Sanctuary in a contemporary setting is to invoke a whole range of images associated with Canada’s luminous Arctic wilderness. Although not as widely known as such iconic wilderness spaces such as Banff and Jasper National Parks, the Thelon Game Sanctuary has achieved an almost legendary status among wilderness enthusiasts in Canada and throughout the world. A canoe trip through the sanctuary takes one through the heart of the northern tundra landscape. At the confluence

⁷⁹ Finnie to Starnes, 16 December 1926. RG 85, vol. 1203, file 401-3, pt. 1, NAC. In keeping with the new policy of lenience toward ‘primitive’ hunters, two Inuit hunters, Khow-joack and Pookeenak Hayes, were not charged with poaching after killing two muskoxen near Backs River because the two men had not been informed of the new regulation other than through rumour and second-hand reporting. The investigating officer, O.G. Petty, reported that he had received assurances from the Backs River band that they would no

between the Thelon and Hanbury Rivers a wooded ‘Thelon Oasis’ contains a rich assemblage of rare wildlife such as muskoxen herds and the barren ground grizzly bear. Since the pioneering canoeist Eric Morse completed the first recreational trip down the Thelon River in 1962, many other adventurers and wilderness tourists seeking the solitude of the ‘pure’ wilderness have followed in his footsteps.⁸⁰ Some have written extensively of the rapture they experienced in the Thelon region. The wilderness writer M.T. Kelly described the Thelon region as a landscape that is “capable of love,” while the canoeist David Pelly described the experience of his trip down the Thelon River as “a feeling of having awoken from a dream, to find yourself within a beautiful, peaceful sanctum.”⁸¹

But for all the recent and contemporary superlatives bestowed upon the Thelon Region, very few people are aware that the official designation of this ‘loving’ landscape as an official wilderness area gave rise to a vehement conflict between federal conservation officials and the local Native and non-Native trappers who worked this landscape for their living. The existence of a relatively large herd of muskoxen in the area

longer hunt muskoxen. See O.G. Petty, Chesterfield Inlet Detachment to Officer Commanding, RCMP Headquarters, 1 June 1926. RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

⁸⁰ The retinue of wilderness tourists has included two Canadian Prime Ministers—Turner and Trudeau—and the Duke and Duchess of York. The government of the Northwest Territories has produced a fascinating record of the etched notes that canoeists have left on a cairn just upstream from the Thelon on the Hanbury River next to Helen Falls. See *Canoeists Reflections on Arctic Cairn Notes* (Toronto: Betelgeuse Books, 1997)

⁸¹ M.T. Kelly, “The Land Before Time,” *Canadian Forum* 104, 7 (July 1989), p. 74; David Pelly, *Thelon: River Sanctuary* (Hyde Park, Ontario: Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association, 1996). Although these quotations do represent a common sentiment toward the Thelon among nature writers, both of these works are quite complex meditations on the cultural meaning of the Thelon as a ‘wilderness’ region. Pelly’s popular book discusses the human history of the region, including the local discord caused by the creation of the sanctuary. Kelly’s article is sophisticated meditation on whether such a vast wilderness is indifferent to human beings. In fact, the author was so taken with the Thelon that he explored these same themes in his fictional account of a canoe trip down the Thelon River titled *Out of the Whirlwind* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995).

had attracted the interests of government officials for some time. Indeed, the first official recommendation to set aside an area between the Thelon River and Back River to preserve the remaining mainland muskoxen herds came as early as 1901 in a report from the geologist J.W. Tyrell on the region to the northeast of Great Slave Lake.⁸² No action was taken, however, until John Hornby proposed the idea of establishing a game preserve to protect the muskoxen in a report presented before the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection in November 1925. Hornby had spent much of 1924 and 1925 exploring the region to the northeast of Great Slave Lake with his fellow adventurer J.C. Critchell Bullock; both men confirmed that a large number of muskoxen survived in a large and apparently uninhabited area near the confluence of the Thelon and Hanbury Rivers. Hornby recommended to the Advisory Board the extension of the Back River Game Preserve southward to protect the muskoxen, a move that would have excluded non-Native hunters and trappers from the area.⁸³ The Advisory Board went one step further than this, however, passing a resolution on May 28th, 1926 calling for the creation of a game sanctuary that would exclude all hunting and trapping activities within its borders.⁸⁴ Although the sanctuary was conceived as an emergency measure meant to save one of the last viable herds of muskoxen on the Arctic mainland, commercial considerations were also used as a justification for the creation of this new protected area. An article from the “Natural Resources Canada” newsletter published by the Department

⁸² J.W. Tyrell, “Report on the Country North and East of Great Slave Lake” 1901. RG 85, vol. 1087, file 401-22, pt. 1, NAC.

⁸³ For Hornby’s recommendation, see Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, Minutes, 19 November 1925. RG13, vol. 924, file 6101, pt. B, NAC. The quote from Hornby’s report was taken from W.H.B. Hoare’s, *Conserving Canada’s Musk-Oxen*, p. 40.

of the Interior claimed that the Thelon Game Sanctuary would do much to conserve a species that was easily domesticated and valuable for its meat and robe. According to the newsletter, “Canada’s effort to save [the muskoxen] is not actuated by sentimentality but by business prudence. The Dominion government must care for the big game for the sake of the Indian and Eskimo inhabitant, both from humanitarian motives and as a means of maintaining a vigorous native population, without which development of the various resources of the north would be impossible.”⁸⁵

If the conservation of the muskoxen in the Thelon Game Sanctuary was thought of as a contribution to the broader development of the North, it is clear that federal officials failed to take into account the impact of the new protected area on the existing hunting and trapping economy in the region. In a letter to Hoyes Lloyd, the Advisory Board Secretary, O.S. Finnie justified the exclusion of both Native and non-Native hunters and trappers from the sanctuary with the claim that “no person or persons are trapping in this area and there are no trading posts. The creation of the a sanctuary, if it is done at once, would not interfere with the rights of anyone.”⁸⁶ When 24,000 square kilometres of Arctic tundra was finally set aside as the Thelon Game Sanctuary by a cabinet decree on June 15th, 1927, it was immediately apparent that the new wilderness area did in fact encroach upon the livelihoods Native and non-Native trappers in the

⁸⁴ The resolution calling for the creation of the sanctuary was passed at an Advisory Board meeting held 28 May 1926. RG13, vol. 924, file 6101, pt. B, NAC

⁸⁵ The article, entitled “Sanctuary for Musk-Ox,” was reprinted in “The Fifth Column,” *Ottawa Morning Citizen*, 12 August 1927. A clipping of this article was found in RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

⁸⁶ Finnie to Lloyd, 15 June 1926. RG13, vol. 924, file 6101, pt. A, NAC.

region.⁸⁷ Contrary to Finnie's appraisal of the region as an unpopulated wilderness, there were several individuals who maintained cabins and traplines in the area, all of which had now become unusable in light of the absolute ban on killing fur-bearers and game within the sanctuary. The loudest of those who protested against this policy were the non-Native trappers who were excluded from the sanctuary, many of whom already felt grievously wronged by the setting aside of all the Arctic Islands the previous summer as game preserve restricted only to Native hunters. In July 1927, several newspapers reported that the trappers Malcolm and Allen Stewart, J.W. Cooley, F.L. "Bearcat" Buckley, and Fred Lind had arrived in Edmonton and were extremely upset to find that the new game sanctuary had enclosed many of their trapping areas. These men complained bitterly to the media that the sanctuary represented a grievous injustice, particularly since they had not seen a single muskox in the vicinity of their traplines for years. In one interview, Cooley was quoted as stating that, "he and all the trappers from the Far North now in the city do resent the way in which departmental 'experts' at Ottawa have coolly sliced off a large area without consulting the trappers concerned."⁸⁸ In a similar tone, Malcolm Stewart declared,

it is just a case of someone no nearer than Ottawa taking out a map and blocking out a district and naming it as a preserve without knowing whether the animals it is desired to preserve are in that district or not... The government charges us \$75 a year for a trappers' license and after we have gone in there and done all the heavy spade work necessary and made considerable financial outlay, someone in

⁸⁷ This despite the fact the Order in Council creating the sanctuary repeated Finnie's assertion that "there are no trading posts or permanent residents, either white or native, in the area proposed to be set aside." See Order in Council P.C. 1146, 15 June 1927. A copy was found in RG 13, vol. 924, file 6101, pt. A, NAC.

⁸⁸ "Trappers are Resentful of New Rulings," *Edmonton Journal*, 27 July 1927. A clipping of this article was found in RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

Ottawa draws a pencil around a district on the map, calls it a sanctuary, and we are driven out of the country.⁸⁹

With only two to five years of experience as trappers, these relative newcomers to the Arctic possessed only the most tenuous moral and legal claim to an inherent right to exploit the game and fur-bearers of the region. Yet their criticisms of federal officials for failing to conduct more than a rudimentary biological survey prior the creation of the sanctuary are apt. Other than the observations contained in J.W. Tyrrell's report on his travels through the region in 1900 and Hornby's account of his trip down the Thelon in 1924-25—both of which emphasized that the muskoxen were concentrated near the confluence of the Hanbury and Thelon Rivers—very little was known of those portions of the sanctuary that were far removed from the common canoe routes. With large areas of the sanctuary well to the south and west of the main muskoxen range, the original boundary did indeed have the appearance of a pencil line drawn haphazardly on a map in an Ottawa office building.

The arbitrary nature of the sanctuary's establishment did not only impact outsiders who had gravitated to the Thelon region in their search for fur. Although there are fewer records of protest coming from the affected Dene trappers than from their non-Native counterparts, it is clear that Native hunters resented the establishment of this first game sanctuary in the Northwest Territories to completely ban the hunting and trapping activities of its Aboriginal residents. In February 1932, Bishop Gabriel Breynat appeared before the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection to plead the case of several Dene

⁸⁹ "Trappers Here to Fight New Regulations," *Edmonton Bulletin*, 25 July 1927. A clipping was found in RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

hunters from the east end of Great Slave Lake who complained that they had been excluded from their former hunting and trapping grounds in the southwestern end of the Thelon Game Sanctuary. Perhaps for strategic reasons, Breynat framed his proposed resolution of the issue in terms of expedience rather than the pursuit of justice. According to Breynat, no muskoxen were known to inhabit the western portion of the sanctuary and re-opening it to Native trappers might therefore alleviate the severe hardships resulting from a poor game and fur year without compromising the federal government's conservation objectives. Breynat's petition hardly received a sympathetic hearing from the board. Both James Harkin and R.M. Anderson countered with the claim that the sanctuary was intended not simply to preserve the muskoxen, but also to serve more generally as a breeding reservoir for all types of fur and game so that they might spill over into the surrounding landscape. After much discussion, Breynat's proposal was consigned to the administrative purgatory of further consideration at a later date.⁹⁰

Such indifference to local grievances in the Thelon region was typical of senior wildlife officials in the years immediately following the creation of the sanctuary. Rather than adjust the game regulations or boundaries of the sanctuary according to local knowledge of the location and abundance of the muskoxen, Finnie's Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch moved quickly after 1927 to establish more direct control over Native hunters in the Thelon region. In January 1928, W.H.B. Hoare was sent north once again on Finnie's orders as a special investigator for the Department of the Interior. His mission was to identify the most appropriate sites within the sanctuary for warden

⁹⁰ Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, Minutes, 29 February 1932. RG 10, vol. 4085, file 496,658-1, pt.

cabins, an administrative headquarters, and likely routes for anti-poaching patrols. He was also instructed to provide information “to enable the Department to formulate regulations for the control and management of the sanctuary.” In addition, Hoare was again ordered to preach the virtues of conservation to the local population, advising “all whites, Indians, or Eskimos that it is unlawful to kill or molest any wild life in the Sanctuary.”⁹¹ Hoare and his assistant A.J. Knox, a warden from Wood Buffalo National Park, spent the next nineteen months on a remarkable journey by dog sled and canoe that traversed hundreds of kilometres of tundra and sub-arctic forest between Fort McMurray, Alberta to Chesterfield Inlet on the west coast of Hudson Bay. Due to the harsh climate and the very real danger of starvation, Hoare and Knox devoted a great deal of time to securing their own bare survival, relaying huge amounts of supplies from camp to camp, building rudimentary shelters, and in one extraordinary episode, building a canoe almost from scratch to enable their escape down the Thelon River.

The two men did have the occasion, however, to confront Native people they found hunting and trapping within the sanctuary. On May 5th, 1928, Hoare discovered a trail with caribou remains scattered along its length that led inland from the western boundary of the sanctuary at Artillery Lake. That same evening, Hoare crossed over to the other side of the lake to remonstrate the ten Dene families that lived there in a hunting encampment, warning them that hunting caribou in the sanctuary was an offense that

4, NAC.

⁹¹ Hoare’s instructions are summarized in the introduction to the diary of his journey to the Thelon. See MG 30 B138, NAC.

could lead to fines or imprisonment.⁹² In a separate incident on March 20th, 1929, Hoare encountered two Dene hunters named Nezra and Wezo in the western portion of the sanctuary with caribou meat and a white fox killed so recently that it was still warm. Hoare confiscated the fox as evidence that the two men were hunting illegally and then ordered them to leave the sanctuary. While Hoare does not record the two hunters' reaction to their expulsion from the sanctuary, it is clear that the Dene assembled at Artillery Lake rejected Hoare's reprimand and displayed a distinct bitterness toward the sanctuary. The hunters in the group claimed that they "did not want any area closed to them as, in times of scarcity, when hard pressed for food they considered it their right to hunt anywhere." As Harkin and Anderson would do several years later, Hoare dismissed such concerns with the paternalistic suggestion that the creation of the sanctuary was in the Natives' best interest. He advised this particular group of hunters that protection of game within the sanctuary would lead to better hunting and trapping in adjacent areas, and thus the "chances of hard times would be greater if there was no sanctuary."⁹³

Hoare concluded from his encounters with Native hunters, and from the frequent signs of campsites, trails, and caribou remains along his route, that poaching was a common occurrence within the Thelon Game Sanctuary. Hoare's evidence suggests, however, that Native hunters were for the most part killing white fox for fur and caribou for subsistence purposes (Hoare and Knox somewhat hypocritically pursued the latter of these activities throughout their time in the sanctuary). Hoare did find one cache of rotted muskoxen meat near the eastern boundary of the sanctuary in July 1929, but there was

⁹² Hoare, *Conserving Canada's Muskoxen*, p. 12. See also Hoare's Diary, 5 May 1928. MG 30 B 138,

very little evidence to suggest that Native people hunted these animals to any great extent.⁹⁴ Hoare nevertheless concluded that a greater law enforcement presence was necessary to preserve the wildlife within the Thelon Game Sanctuary. According to his reckoning, the muskoxen population in the sanctuary was critically endangered, with only two hundred and fifty animals remaining in the herds.⁹⁵ Hoare thus sent Knox back to the interior region shortly after the two arrived at Baker Lake to set up a warden station at Artillery Lake. With Finnie's authorization, Hoare also hired the trapper Hjalmur Nelson to guide Knox upriver and an Inuk named Telirhuk to assist the game warden in his efforts to guard the southwestern portion of the sanctuary against the presence of Native poachers.⁹⁶ Hoare subsequently travelled to Ottawa to report on his findings, but he returned to the Arctic in the summer of 1930 to build a warden cabin at the eastern end of the sanctuary where the Thelon River drains into Beverly Lake. While the cabin was completed in the summer of 1931, Hoare's efforts proved futile as no game warden was ever assigned to the site. By 1932, Knox had also left his 'western' warden station on Artillery Lake empty. The sanctuary was now left only with the distant and infrequent supervision of the RCMP detachments at Fort Reliance and Baker Lake.⁹⁷

It is not clear why the plan to establish a warden service in the Thelon Game Sanctuary was abandoned. The dissolution of the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch in 1931 and the subsequent departure of its director O.S. Finnie, one of the most

NAC.

⁹³ Hoare, *Conserving Canada's Muskoxen*, p. 12.

⁹⁴ See Hoare's Diary, 26 July 1929. MG 30, B138, NAC.

⁹⁵ Hoare, *Conserving Canada's Muskoxen*, p. 48.

⁹⁶ See Hoare's Diary, 9 August 1929. MG 30, B138, NAC.

⁹⁷ See Pelly, *op cit.*, pp. 70-72.

ardent conservationists within the civil service, may have dampened the administrative enthusiasm for establishing a new law enforcement agency in such a remote location. Budgetary restraint was also likely a factor. The number of game wardens in Wood Buffalo National Park fell from twelve to eight in 1933 due to a reduction in Departmental expenditures; it is unlikely that there were funds available for an entirely new warden service within such an austere fiscal environment.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, Hoare's call for a stricter approach to conservation within the Thelon Game Sanctuary was not completely ignored. In November 1929, the northern administration responded to Hoare's reports that Native people were hunting in the sanctuary, and also to an incident where a prospecting crew had shot a muskoxen while travelling through the sanctuary, by amending the game regulations to make it illegal for any person to enter or pass through the Thelon Game Sanctuary without the written permission of the Department of the Interior.⁹⁹ Although federal officials lacked a comprehensive means to enforce the new measure, this exclusionary policy represented one of the most radical conservation measures ever introduced in Canada. For the first time, a wilderness area had been set aside that allowed no humans to set foot within its boundaries, not even the people who had lived and hunted in the region for centuries.

It is difficult to determine how Native hunters reacted to this new restriction on both their hunting activities and their movements within such a large area of the Arctic

⁹⁸ For the reduction in Wood Buffalo Park wardens, see H.H. Rowatt, Deputy Minister of Interior to Mr. H.E. Hume, Chair of the Lands Board, 11 May 1933 and a list of the wardens for 1933 in RG 85, vol. 152, file 420-2, pt. 2, NAC.

⁹⁹ For a discussion of the rationale behind the amendment, see Finnie to R.A. Gibson, Acting Deputy Minister of the Interior, 13 November 1929. RG 85 vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC. The regulation was

interior. Hoare's encounter with the ten Dene families on Artillery Lake suggests that at least some Natives in the region were willing to defy the hunting restrictions in the new sanctuary because they saw them as a violation of their traditional hunting rights. Yet the absence of an active warden service or RCMP patrols in the sanctuary makes it difficult to judge whether this form of resistance to the ban on hunting and travel within the Thelon region was widespread. There are, however, scattered records that at least allude to the emergence of a broad and popular feeling of discontent among local trappers in response to the exclusionary nature of the game sanctuary. The reports of Harry Snyder and his companion F.M. Steel, who the Northwest Territories Council granted permission to enter the sanctuary in April 1935 to take photographs and moving pictures of the muskoxen herds, offers at least some insight into the attitudes among Dene hunters toward the sanctuary in the years shortly after its establishment.¹⁰⁰ In the starkest terms imaginable, Steel's report stated that both Native and non-Native trappers "seem to be badly disposed towards the Thelon Game Sanctuary." His informants reiterated the longstanding complaint that the southern and western portions of the game sanctuary contained no muskoxen but had withdrawn a substantial portion of good white fox country from the use of local trappers. Steel quoted local Natives as stating that, "apparently the Government thinks more of the survival of the musk-oxen than they do of

amended by Order in Council P.C. 2265, *Canada Gazette*, vol. 63, no. 23 (20 November 1929), pp. 2079-80.

¹⁰⁰ Snyder wanted to kill three adult muskoxen and one calf outside the sanctuary for museum exhibits, but the NWT Council refused this request. See "Extract from the Minutes of the Fifty-seventh Session of the Northwest Territories Council held on April 2, 1935." RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

our welfare.”¹⁰¹ Snyder elaborated on these objections to the sanctuary, suggesting that the enclosure of the southern portion of the sanctuary had left them bereft of an important hunting ground for the migrating barren ground caribou herds:

the natives feel that since this country south of the Thelon-Hanbury Junction is the natural early spring and later fall range of the caribou, the Government have [sic] deprived them of their normal supply of clothing and food without benefiting the other animals. Therefore they take it, and so express themselves, that the muskoxen have become their enemy.¹⁰²

Snyder’s description of the local anger directed at the muskoxen suggests that the exclusionary conservation policies associated with the Thelon Game Sanctuary had produced profound feelings of hostility and alienation among the local Native population. If Snyder’s assessment of such local hostility is accurate, it recalls Ramachandra Guha’s argument that the imposition of restrictive conservation policies by the colonial forest authorities in northern India often caused rural peasants to intentionally degrade their own environment. As the cultural ties that bound these subsistence farmers and forest dwellers to their surrounding ecosystem became severed by a state bureaucracy determined to conserve the forests for commercial production, the result was often haphazard cutting or burning of the forest by local villagers. In such cases, a natural ecosystem that was controlled by an external authority to serve the interests of the commercial class became a nature that was at odds with the subsistence needs of local

¹⁰¹ “Extract from F.M. Steel’s report November 1935 – Snyder Expedition, Mackenzie District, File 7883,” n.d. Ibid.

¹⁰² “Extract from the Report on the Harry Snyder 1935 Barren Lands Expedition, Northwest Territories.” 31 January 1936.” Ibid.

peasants. According to Guha, conservation imposed from above had turned the hill peasants of northern India against the very forests that had once sustained them.¹⁰³

The creation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary—though perhaps not as overtly tied to economic interests as a commercial forest reserve—nevertheless represented a similar imposition of an ‘outside’ or neo-colonial conservation authority over the traditional hunting grounds of the Dene and Inuit. Is it possible that the exclusion of local hunters from a large expanse of their own local environment created such an intense feeling of alienation that some began to see muskoxen as an enemy that should be destroyed? Certainly if Snyder’s perception of local sentiment is accurate, the creation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary had done more to produce local animosity toward the muskoxen than to secure protection for the species. Indeed, both Snyder and Steel concluded from the frequent occurrence of temporary hunting camps and the skittishness of the muskoxen herds that poaching was rampant in the sanctuary. Although the two men paradoxically suggested an the expansion of the sanctuary to the Back River in order to protect the muskoxen herds now outside the northern boundary, they also recommended the deletion of the area south of the Thelon and Hanbury Rivers, a policy initiative that Snyder felt

¹⁰³ Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya, Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 55-58. Guha compares the alienation of the hill peasants from their local environment to Marx’s analysis of the alienation of workers under capitalism. In either case, Guha argues, customary modes of production such as subsistence farming and cottage industry are replaced by alien systems of production (industrial forestry and factory production) controlled by capitalists. In this sense, the analogy with the Thelon Game Sanctuary is not perfect. Nonetheless, while the Thelon Game Sanctuary did not represent a new system of production, it did represent a radical shift in traditional land use patterns that was imposed by an external colonial authority.

“would go far to remove from the Indians’ minds the feeling of hostility toward the muskoxen.”¹⁰⁴

Snyder and Steel’s anecdotal evidence of local anger toward the muskoxen must nevertheless be treated with caution. The Snyder expedition found no physical evidence of muskoxen kills. Furthermore, the RCMP deemed allegations of muskoxen poaching made the following year by the expedition’s Métis guide, E.G. Jones, to be false after further investigation.¹⁰⁵ The biologist C.H.D. Clarke, who was conducting an investigation of the wildlife in the sanctuary throughout the summers of 1936 and 1937, concluded that Jones had concocted the rumours because he had opposed the creation of the sanctuary and wished to discredit the northern administration. Yet Clarke also concluded from clear physical and oral evidence that Inuit hunters who travelled up the Thelon River each summer to gather wood were actively killing muskoxen in the remote northern section of the sanctuary.¹⁰⁶ The biologist claimed he had obtained evidence of these infractions from Inuit hunters who were “blissfully ignorant of any wrong-doing,” freely admitting their ‘crimes’ because they thought they were engaged in a legitimate subsistence strategy.¹⁰⁷ If these Inuit hunters were not being evasive in an effort to avoid prosecution, then poaching in this part of the sanctuary was certainly not carried out as a form of conscious political protest.

¹⁰⁴ “Extract from the Report on the Harry Snyder 1935 Barren Lands Expedition,” RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

¹⁰⁵ See Acting Lance Corporal W.J.G. Smith, RCMP, Fort Reliance, to Officer Commanding, Fort Smith, 17 April 1937. RG 85, fol. 1249, file 401-3, pt. 4, NAC.

¹⁰⁶ Such poaching, Clarke suggested, was preventing the muskoxen herds from increasing. See C.H.D. Clarke to R.A. Gibson, Deputy Commissioner of the NWT, 16 June 1938. Ibid. See also C.H.D. Clarke, *A Biological Investigation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 96, Biological Series No. 25 (Department of Mines and Resources, Mines and Geology Branch, 1940), pp. 9-11.

Snyder's recounting of 'hostility' toward the muskoxen among the 'Indians' may nevertheless be accurate despite the scant evidence that Dene hunters were poaching muskoxen within the sanctuary. The Dene hunters living near the east arm of Great Slave Lake tended to concentrate their illegal hunting and trapping activities in the southwest portion of the sanctuary where muskoxen were extremely rare. As the experiences of W.H.B. Hoare and John Hornby attest, a journey inland from Fort Reliance to hunt the herds near the Hanbury and Thelon Rivers entailed considerable hardship and risk. A widespread poaching campaign to destroy the muskoxen as a means to discredit the *raison d'être* of the sanctuary may not have been practical or even possible for Native hunters, regardless of how much local hostility may have been directed toward the species.

If the evidence in support of a widespread 'revenge' campaign against the muskoxen remains ambiguous, there can be little doubt that local anger toward the exclusionary boundary that had been established with the sanctuary continued to simmer throughout the late 1930s. Undoubtedly, many Native hunters expressed their general dissatisfaction with the sanctuary by illegally entering the area on a regular basis to hunt caribou and trap white fox, as Clarke found several recently used hunting camps during his survey of the southern section of the sanctuary.¹⁰⁸ While many of these trips to the interior of the sanctuary were undoubtedly carried out to fulfill material needs for caribou, fur, and perhaps in some cases muskoxen, there is scattered evidence to suggest that dissatisfaction with the sanctuary remained at the forefront of the popular political

¹⁰⁷ C.H.D. Clarke to R.A. Gibson, Deputy Commissioner of the NWT, 16 June 1938. Ibid.

discourse in local Dene communities throughout the late 1930s. According to W.H.B. Hoare, who was again travelling through the region as an assistant to Clarke's scientific study in the summer of 1936, a rumour had recently spread among local Natives that Harry Snyder had been given permission to kill muskoxen in the sanctuary.¹⁰⁹ The story was unfounded, but it proved to be a catalyst for the expression of a more general anger toward the restrictions on access to former hunting grounds within the game sanctuary. In September 1936, the RCMP Constable at Fort Reliance, W.J.G. Stewart, reported that the 'Snyder rumour' had caused a great deal of general discontent that summer among the Dene at Snowdrift and Artillery Lake, who claimed they had more entitlement to kill muskoxen than any white man. At the annual Treaty gathering that summer, the assembled Natives rejected Stewart's warnings not to enter the sanctuary because, as far as they were concerned, the southwest corner was now open and they could enter whenever they pleased.¹¹⁰ The animosity toward the sanctuary had clearly grown to the point where local people were willing to reject outright the laws that federal wildlife officials had imposed on them. At least some Native hunters in Thelon region refused to surrender their access rights on traditional hunting grounds to an outside authority that had little knowledge of conditions within the sanctuary, and which seemed almost indifferent to the material needs and political interests of Aboriginal people living within the region.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hoare to Anderson, 14 July 1936. RG 85, vol. 1383, file 401-3, pt. 2, NAC.

¹¹⁰ Report of Constable W.J.G. Stewart, Fort Reliance, to Officer Commanding, Fort Smith, 18 September 1936. RG 85, vol. 1249, file 401-3, pt. 4, NAC.

Despite the local hostility toward the sanctuary, the circulation of results from C.H.D. Clarke's biological investigation in 1937 undoubtedly precluded the possibility that restrictions on hunting and human movements within the sanctuary might be lifted in the near future. The biologist estimated that the total muskoxen population in the sanctuary had only increased marginally to 300 head over Hoare's appraisal of 250 in 1929.¹¹¹ In light of these disappointing numbers and the allegations of extensive poaching within the sanctuary, the northern administration began to pressure the RCMP to enforce the game regulations in the region. In July 1937, the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, Charles Camsell, wrote to the RCMP Commissioner, S.T. Wood, to inform him of Clarke's hypothesis that Native hunters and trappers were illegally operating within the southern boundary of the Thelon Game Sanctuary. Camsell asked Wood if he could "please instruct [his] officers to give special attention to this problem as opportunity permits."¹¹² Wood's immediate reply to this request is unknown, but one year later he wrote to R.A. Gibson, Assistant Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, to advise him that the RCMP were hoping to patrol the sanctuary by air from time to time.¹¹³ It is not clear if these plans for stricter law enforcement measures ever materialized, but there was almost no discussion in official circles or among biologists of muskoxen poaching or 'problem' Natives within the sanctuary after the late 1930s. Indeed, the biologist John Tener concluded after a series of studies beginning in the early

¹¹¹ Clarke, *A Biological Investigation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary*, p. 76. For Hoare's estimate, see *Conserving Canada's Musk-Oxen*, p. 48.

¹¹² Camsell to Wood, 6 July 1937. RG 22, vol. 866, file 40-6-5, NAC.

¹¹³ Wood to Gibson, 6 July 1938. RG 85, vol. 1249, file 401-3, pt. 4, NAC.

1950s that Native hunters were not killing the muskoxen in the Thelon Game Sanctuary to any great extent.¹¹⁴

It is impossible to determine whether this apparent reduction in the amount of lawbreaking was the result of local anger toward the sanctuary dissipating after 1940 or a lack of police patrols in the region. The records of the northern administration indicate that sporadic muskox poaching did occur outside the sanctuary from time to time, but these killings were described as a response to local food shortages rather than a form of organized protest.¹¹⁵ There can be little doubt, however, that the Thelon Game Sanctuary was a focal point for conflict between Native hunters and the federal government's muskoxen conservation program in the first decade after its creation. The radical preservationist policy pursued by the northern administration in the Thelon region created a sense of both alienation and disaffection among the resident Native population. One might argue that such a strict policy was necessary to preserve one of the last remnant herds of muskoxen on the mainland Northwest Territories, but such heavy-handed approach to this otherwise worthy goal created a profound sense of local animosity and disaffection toward the sanctuary, a phenomenon that might have actually led to an increase in muskoxen poaching within the sanctuary.

One of the great contradictions associated with the history of the Thelon Game Sanctuary is that the preservationist principles that so severely restricted access to local game and fur were somewhat more pliable when economic interests were at stake. In

¹¹⁴ John Tener, *Muskoxen in Canada: A Biological and Taxonomic Review* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1965), p. 102.

¹¹⁵ Reports of poaching incident outside the sanctuary are found in RG85, vol. 1249, file 401-3, pt. 4- 4a, NAC.

1956, the northern administration finally did remove the contentious southwest corner of the sanctuary, not as a conciliatory gesture to Native hunters but in response to pressure from mining companies who wanted the area opened for mineral exploration.¹¹⁶ The hope that the muskoxen might someday be domesticated also continued to play a part in the management of the Thelon Game Sanctuary, as a total of nineteen muskoxen calves were removed from the sanctuary prior to 1965 for the purposes of agricultural experimentation.¹¹⁷ The biologist C.H.D. Clarke captured the lingering hope that the muskoxen in the sanctuary might one day provide stock for northern ranches when he mused openly in his biological report that “it is impossible to see the musk-ox on his native heath without thinking of the possibilities of domestication.”¹¹⁸ Such a willingness to accommodate the development of commercial enterprises within a strict wildlife preserve suggests that the history of the Thelon Game Sanctuary is as much a testament to the callous indifference of federal wildlife officials toward the Aboriginal people who depended on the area for fur and game as it was a visionary conservation initiative that saved an animal on the brink of extinction.

Conclusion

In some respects, the history of the federal government’s attempts to both preserve and manage the muskoxen is the least noteworthy among the efforts to conserve

¹¹⁶ See F.J.G. Cunningham to the Commissioner, RCMP, 9 February 1956. RG 85, accession 1997-98/076, box 73, file 406-7, pt. 3, NAC. A copy of the ordinance amending the boundaries dated 23 January 1956 was found in the same file.

¹¹⁷ Tener, *Muskoxen in Canada*, p. 102

big game in the Northwest Territories. For many Native hunters, the muskoxen were no more than a casual or emergency source of subsistence and thus the attempts to conserve the species did not engender the same kind of widespread hostility and conflict as the efforts to conserve the caribou. Certainly there were eruptions of local conflict over the federal government's approach to muskoxen conservation in the region surrounding the Thelon Game Sanctuary in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but the lack of a superintendent or a game warden service precluded the kind of sustained conflict between Native hunters and federal officials that was such a prominent feature of the social landscape surrounding Wood Buffalo National Park. Constrained by budgetary austerity and the remoteness of the animals themselves, the federal government's muskoxen conservation program remained more of an ideal than a coherent policy initiative.

Yet for all of its pragmatic shortcomings, the attempt to conserve the muskoxen in the early twentieth century provides perhaps the clearest illustration of the contradictory philosophical principles that lay behind the federal government's approach to wildlife conservation in the Northwest Territories. In no other instance did federal wildlife officials so readily combine the passion of preservationist rhetoric with the pragmatism of Progressive-era utilitarianism. Indeed, federal wildlife officials thought of the muskoxen both as an exotic creature that was emblematic of Canada's vast northern wilderness, but also as a potential farm animal that could provide meat, milk and wool as a basis for a new Arctic ranching economy. Of course, to a large extent, the federal government's interest in muskoxen conservation after the First World War was a product of Vilhjalmur

¹¹⁸ Clarke, *A Biological Investigation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary*, p. 83.

Stefansson's singular talent as a promoter of Arctic development in the halls of power. Nonetheless, Stefansson's ideas also fit perfectly with the prevailing philosophy of wildlife conservation in the early decades of the twentieth century; one that valued the preservation of a species in direct proportion to its potential utility for human enterprise. More than any other example, the case of the muskoxen belies the notion that the early wildlife conservation movement in Canada was imbued solely with a preservationist philosophy dedicated to protecting wildlife populations for their intrinsic value.¹¹⁹

Indeed, even after Stefansson had fallen out of favour with the federal government in the early 1920s, the domestication of the muskoxen never faded completely from the conservationist agenda in Canada.¹²⁰ In 1951, the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection gave John J. Teal, an experimental farmer with the Vermont Animal Research Foundation, permission to take eight muskoxen from Ellesmere Island for the purposes of domesticating the creatures in his home state.¹²¹ The project was modest in scale, but Teal was no less enthusiastic about the commercial potential of qiviut (i.e., muskoxen wool) than Stefansson. Teal argued publicly that, "the quest for qiviut, the golden fleece of the arctic, may be the means by which we will open up the north for permanent settlement, and will achieve that greater wisdom, the happy

¹¹⁹ See Janet Foster, *Working for Wildlife: the Beginnings of Preservation in Canada. Second Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

¹²⁰ Stefansson set off an international dispute between the British and the Soviet Union when he convinced his company, the Hudson Bay Reindeer Company, to drop a party on Wrangel Island in 1921 to claim British sovereignty. The matter was not resolved until 1926, but the British were more angered than impassioned by Stefansson's brash move. The explorer subsequently experienced a fall from grace from his privileged position with Canadian officials. See Diubaldo, *op cit.*, pp. 161-87.

¹²¹ Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, Minutes, 15 January 1951. RG 85, vol. 1249, file 401-3, pt. 4, NAC.

adjustment of economy and environment.”¹²² Teal’s project was, in the end, only moderately successful. He proved that muskoxen could reproduce under open farm conditions and the wool could be gathered easily after the animals had shed their undercoat, but his promotional efforts resulted in the creation of only a few small muskoxen ranches in the Arctic rather than the radical transformation of the northern economy that he had envisioned.¹²³

If the tangible results of Teal’s project were somewhat tentative, it is clear that the broader dream of building a northern civilization around an agricultural base of muskoxen ranching had survived for more than three decades since Stefansson had first began to promote the idea. During this period, federal wildlife officials did not limit their plans for conserving muskoxen to the usual legislative tools such as closed seasons or the creation of game sanctuaries. They also hoped that a transformation of the Arctic economy from the apparent vagaries of hunting and trapping toward the certainty of farming might also save the muskoxen from annihilation. Canada’s early wildlife conservationists had thus tied their effort to a novel form of ecological imperialism. Following Stefansson’s advice, federal officials recognized that the harsh climate of the Northwest Territories would prevent conventional settlers and their attendant Old World domesticated animals from causing the kind of radical changes to the northern ecology that had so brutally displaced Aboriginal people from their traditional territories further to

¹²² John J. Teal, Jr., “Golden Fleece of the Arctic,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 201, 3 (March 1958), p. 81.

¹²³ See John J. Teal, “Domesticating the Wild and Woolly Musk Ox,” *National Geographic* (June 1970), pp. 862-79.

the south since the earliest period of European colonization in North America.¹²⁴ Instead, the promoters of muskoxen domestication believed that agrarian civilization could be readily imposed on northern Aboriginal people using a species that was already native to the region. Conventional restrictions on the hunting activities of the Dene and Inuit were thus not intended merely as a means to save a species on the brink of extinction, but were also a prelude to the introduction of an entirely new way of life in the region. More than any other example, the history of muskoxen conservation suggests that the federal wildlife bureaucracy functioned as a colonial instrument meant to facilitate the rapid expansion of 'southern' industrial agricultural activity in northern Canada. For Canada's early wildlife conservationists, wildness held no hope for the preservation of the world. Instead, they believed it was the wholesale domestication of the 'polar ox' that offered the best opportunity for the progress and salvation of Canada's northern frontier.

¹²⁴ See Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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