

## Environment and Resources

The land of the Eskimo country varies from mountains to plains, tundra, gravel, exposed rock, and here and there, permanent areas of ice cap. Some of the groups could reach wooded areas in their travels, but others had to rely on driftwood or on trade with more fortunate peoples to the south. In some parts of the area grass, willows, and other forms of plant life are abundant. Elsewhere vegetation is quite sparse. The vegetation of the area was important to the Eskimo chiefly as feed for the animals hunted.

The most important land animal hunted was the caribou, which occurred in large herds in spring and fall at many places in the North. They tended to disperse in summer, and large numbers migrated south to wooded areas of the continent for the winter; only scattered groups wintered on the arctic islands or the tundra area of the mainland. Muskoxen were also hunted but seldom occurred in large herds; usually they played a much less important role in Eskimo economy than did the caribou, which supplied clothing as well as food, or sea mammals, which provided food and fuel.

The ringed seal was generally the most important sea mammal, being especially valuable for its fat, which was burned in soapstone lamps for heat and light. Its meat was the main source of food during the winter months. The larger bearded seal (600 to 800 lbs.) appeared in much of the area as well. In the east, narwhal, white whale (beluga), walrus, and at times, large whales were all hunted from boats. Polar bear were occasionally encountered on the sea ice at a number of places.

Smaller game like the arctic hare, wolverine, and wildfowl played lesser roles in the economy, though the white fox took on great importance after the beginning of the fur trade.

Fish, especially arctic char and lake trout, supplied a significant amount of food for most of the nations of Canadian Eskimo.

Climate in the Canadian Eskimo area is typified by cool summers (generally averaging slightly below 45°F in July) and long cold winters. Although lower temperatures have been recorded in the inland domain of the Indians to the south, exposure to the wind resulted in more severe conditions in the Eskimo area. In much of the area snowfall is light; most snow is likely to fall in autumn and spring. However, little thawing takes place between the months of October and May, so the ground is continuously covered by autumn snows that shift in drifts during the course of the winter.



Plate 4. Fishing at the weir.