# Exploring Material Culture in the Barrenlands

*By Zabe MacEachren*

Although I love winter camping (in forested regions where I can have a fire) and hold the Inuit culture in great regard (from all I have obtained from reading and movies), thinking about material culture in a northern landscape referred to as barren constitutes a daunting lesson. I wondered, when a landscape is barren is it possible at all for someone to find material, make useful items and survive? So it was I joined the Mara River Expedition with a group of fellow outdoor educators and ventured for my first time into the far north, the landscape commonly known as the barrenlands.

As part of this travelling conference we were all asked to do two things: One, write an article that would be read by everyone so it could be discussed on trip and, two, create a practice others could engage in during the trip. My practice was to challenge everyone to find the material to make a serviceable device to catch a fish—like a fishhook. Devising such a little item seemed simple, but was not. In the barrenlands nothing is simple, unless perhaps one is well versed in the landscape having been raised in a culture that directly supports itself from its immediate surroundings. None of us were Inuit. We were all very dependent upon our modern clothing to protect us from the rain and insects. We brought all our food from the city and the few fish we caught resulted from the use of fishing gear made of modern synthetic materials. We travelled in an invisible bubble that made us dependent on a far-away landscape. As a person who studies material culture (specifically how we engage with the land through the making process), I discovered that venturing into the barrenlands with a simple quest to make a small thing like a fish hook can end miserably.

Throughout the trip, I witnessed my peers pick up rocks, antlers, bones and so on, trying to determine if they could somehow be transformed into a suitable tool, perhaps with an edge or hook. As a person who has done all her canoe travels in forested regions, it was challenging to wrap my head around the idea that no trees means no wood bigger than your thumb. The bones and antlers we found were from previous caribou migrations; both harden as they dry, thus making them difficult to carve and shape into a tool. Despite my fascination with making things, I did not want to spend all my free time in this landscape scraping and sanding down an old bone or antler in an attempt to make a fish hook. My desire to find something in the landscape that could become a valuable item for our trip was only realized after both our large cooking spoons had broken. I managed to find a plant with strong roots that could be worked like spruce roots to provide a flat edge when wrapping the handle back onto the spoon portion. This repair was serviceable. While it prevented some burnt fingers when preparing dinner, for me it engendered the cold, hard realization that none of us would survive very long in this landscape without the bubble of modern, highly manufactured contrivances. Although we all loved the beauty of the place, one slip might well have left us in peril.

Our trip ended at Bathurst lodge. It was here my appreciation for the handwork skills of the Inuit culture soared. On the walls of the lodge was evidence, material culture, pieces of the landscape reworked into the tools and devices needed to either survive or thrive in this landscape. Despite the land's barrenness to my eyes, here was evidence that to an Inuit hunter's eye all their material needs could be satisfied if they had some ingenuity. Long bows were not carved of wood but carefully crafted (laminated to be exact) out of shorter animal parts, like muskox horns. Ingenious, really ingenious, perhaps beyond ingenious. I thought about my favourite story of a craft. It involves an Inuit man shaping a knife out of his own excrement, letting it freeze, sharpening it with polished spit and using this knife to survive and build upon all the rest of his material needs (Davies, p. 194). The Inuit excelled at awareness by noticing small details in

the landscape and construction methods, because they had to in order to survive.

Staring at these Inuit-made items I began to realize that today survival can be correlated with purchasing power, versus former times when survival was based upon the self-empowerment one achieves by knowing where to look for and how to work with a material. After our trip I read further about the Inuit culture. I wanted to learn more about the relationship between people and a barren landscape. Some books offered me an account of the hardship the culture endured after contact (Coccola & King, 1989) while another shared personal accounts of past lives lived in the area I had travelled (Sperry, 2005). Collignon (2006) and Kleinfeld (1971) both offered perspectives on the way the Inuit language "increases the speakers' attentiveness to memory, visual forms and patterns. This results as each speaker shares their understanding of something by stringing together localizers (integral parts of words) to create sentences that convey." Collignon (2006, p. 157) explains how, to the Inuit, lecturing is considered rude as it does not allow people to make sense of what they experience through having to formulate their own description. In experiential education this is referred to as processing, or reflection. Kleinfeld expands the understanding of Inuit education further by exploring the way ecological demands made by a particular environment combine with the group's cultural adaptations to these demands and results in the population developing specific types of cognitive abilities. I don't know Inuktitut (Inuit language), but these two authors have opened a window for me to begin to recognize how this "barren" landscape taught the Inuit to be aware of every detail around them, to excel when working with technology and their hands, and ultimately to survive. This deeper awareness and knowledge is embedded in the learning process of Inuktitut speakers. It also means that those who find the term "barren land" appropriate to describe this landscape—perhaps tourists, outdoor travellers and even some outdoor educators—may be missing a critical understanding.

Traveling in the barrenlands with an understanding of material culture is humbling to say the least. It is easy to want to feel part of such an incredibly beautiful landscape. Seeing thousands upon thousands of caribou wandering through this land it is hard not to think of plenitude. But once these large herds move on, only rocks and small plants remain. Our trip was dependent upon airplanes, synthetic material and the industrial outside world. To forget this would be foolish, arrogant and disrespectful of the wildlife that lives there all year. I would love to go back, but if I do, I will be darned sure to pack well, tread carefully and really look for the small details. The land may be barren of the many material items I need to survive, but this means it is full of opportunities to explore and learn in a new, subtle, but-not-so-barren way.

### References

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