

## An examination of the impact of the commercial use of muskox underwool upon Native Alaskan villagers

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*Summary:* The Musk Ox Producers' Co-operative was begun in 1969 under the «Musk Ox Project», a project aimed at domesticating muskoxen and harvesting their underwool («qiviut»), which would then be handknit into garments by Native Alaskan villagers. The aim of the co-op was to provide the cash income for the villagers without disturbing the villager lifestyle. It was reasoned that by using an Arctic animal to benefit an Arctic people, the villagers could gain income without losing their Native heritage and lifestyle. By examining the past and present status of the Co-operative we can evaluate the impact that it has had on the villagers compared to these original objectives.

**Key words:** qiviut, muskox, co-operative, Alaska, Eskimos

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### Introduction

The Musk Ox Producers' Co-operative began as an offshoot to John J. Teal Jr.'s and INAR's (the Institute of Northern Agricultural Research) efforts to domesticate the muskox.

As Paul Wilkinson and Pamela Teal (long-time associates of the Musk Ox Project) point out, the domestication of the muskox «provoked complex and varied reactions» (1984), as does the corresponding Co-operative. The Co-op's history is closely connected to the domestication project but is separate nevertheless, and needs to be considered separately. In many ways, the Co-op's evolution was one of experimentation and adaptation, so its present state does not lend itself to easy explanation. I would like to examine the original objectives of the Project set out by John J. Teal Jr. and the

other founders, and compare those objectives with the Co-op's present state. Finally I will explore the actual impact that it has had on the Alaska villagers it set out to benefit.

### Objectives of the Co-operative

The aims of the Co-operative are essentially the same as the aims of the original «Musk Ox Project». Teal's reasons for domesticating muskoxen were «to improve the economic and social conditions of the native peoples of the Arctic», and to do so using «an indigenous rather than exotic species of plants and animals» (Wilkinson, 1971). Teal stated it in economic terms: «What is sought is a converter, an animal which can convert northern grasses into ready employment and cash incomes» (1975; as in Wilkinson and Teal, 1984). The concept of the

Co-operative was the true motive behind the entire muskox domestication project: «whilst animals are the apparent focal point of our attention, it is people with whom we are concerned» (Teal, no date; as in Wilkinson and Teal, 1984). Teal figured that by domesticating the muskox, Native Alaskans could benefit in two ways: 1) villages would have individual herds of muskoxen and reap the benefits of herding, and 2) the muskox qiviut could be harvested and used to support a cottage knitting industry, where trained Eskimo knitters could produce garments for sale to the public. As of yet, the goal of individual herds in the villages is unrealized. Whether this is feasible is something that must be discussed elsewhere, as the domestication part of the project has faced very different problems than the Co-operative and so has developed differently (see Wilkinson and Teal, 1984 for a clear explanation of the domestications project's history and difficulties up to that time).

Most people would agree that Teal was a dreamer, yet in looking at the present state of the Co-op, it has apparently maintained his original aims and essentially has succeeded in doing what he intended it should do. In purely economic terms, the Co-op paid a total of \$91,882.75 to its Alaskan Native Knitters in 1990, money that is definitely needed in the Alaskan bush. The Co-op itself is a relatively successful business, run independent of any aid (the business took in \$402,556.68 from sales in 1990 and employes 4 to 7 people full-time), and qiviut garments have achieved a reputation (even worldwide) as a specialty item of high value and quality.

### **History and present status of the Co-operative**

The Co-op was officially begun in 1969, with the assistance of Teal and INAR, as an organization to oversee the design, production, marketing and sale of garments made of qiviut collected from the domesticated muskox herd. There were many factors that lead Teal and the others to choose a cottage knitting industry over the other possible alternatives. Teal insisted on using the muskoxen as a renewable resource for their qiviut rather than for their meat, so the herd could be continually enlarged and the animals would be useful throughout their lives. Earlier tests on qiviut had suggested that it

was better suited for knitting than for weaving (Atkinson, 1922), and later tests confirmed this opinion (Schell, 1972). Knitting was a skill that many Eskimo women already knew, having been taught by missionaries. Knitting does not require a lot of expensive equipment such as looms, so that knitters would not need a large monetary investment to begin (a deterrent which would keep most from even joining the Co-op). «Another reason for concentrating on knitting rather than weaving is the cost of looms and the expense of freight to bring them into scattered Eskimo villages. There is no background of weaving in most of Alaska, so training would also have to be extensive» (Griffiths, 1971). Knitting is portable, so that it can be taken back and forth from the summer fishcamp to the winter village. Finally, it was reasoned that knitting would «fit» well into the Eskimo life-style, an important aspect of Teal's philosophy:

The Co-op's purpose is: to provide a cash economy dovetailed into the established life pattern. Handwork is not new to the Eskimos but it has mostly been for their own use, seldom for sale. Knitting is something that can be picked up whenever there is time to work on it, and it fits into the Eskimo workday. In the arctic the day is half a year long and the night is the other half, so work depends more on the seasons and on the movements of animals than it does on the hour. (Griffiths, 1971).

Knitters were not required to fill any quotas but could knit as much or as little as they chose, so knitting could be worked around whatever was going on in their lives. Knitter's individual earnings have ranged anywhere from \$9 to more than \$4000 in one year.

Teal also wanted the knitters to have a say in how the business operated and share in its profits; hence it became a «co-operative». To be members, knitters pay dues of \$2 a year. If profits are high enough, the Co-op pays each one a dividend calculated on the amount of knitting they have done. This has happened in the past, but profits are not high enough to make it a regular occurrence. In addition, several knitters serve on the Co-op's board of directors.

The Co-op knitters are of all ages; currently they age from 11 to 81, with an average age of 37.5. 99 % are women (2 are men), and 98 % are Alaskan Natives (Caucasians who live in Native villages are allowed to become mem-

bers). Most of the knitters are related to other Co-op knitters. In fact, the most common way for the Co-op to gain new members is through relatives and friends. For some, knitting is their only income. The Co-op provides a secure market for a knitter's work, unlike basket making or other handicrafts, in which the market can be seasonal and unpredictable. Ideally, the Co-op offers a small but sure income for hard times.

The actual beginnings of the Co-op were modest: in December 1968, Ann Schell, a textile specialist, visited the Alaskan Eskimo village of Mekoryuk and held knitting workshops in order to gather interest to start the new knitting industry. The interest was limited, with only 25 women attending the workshops. During the first year, the Co-op's production was small: in 1969 there were 27 active knitters, and they produced a total of 291 items (an average of roughly 11 items per knitter). The knitters were paid a set price for each item, and yarn was given out as needed. As production slowly got underway, the garments were marketed. This was an involved process. There was a lot of interest in qiviut around the world, and many people had ambitious plans for how qiviut would fit into the marketplace. A paragraph by Teal from the Musk Ox Project's Third Annual Report illustrates the optimism:

During the past several years, most of the major textile firms in the world have written to the Project asking that they be considered as the company which will handle the raw muskox qiviut. In addition, several of the largest retail stores in the United States have asked that they be allowed to handle the products made by Eskimo women (;) for example Brooks Brothers of New York City has recently stated that, if the Eskimo women can be taught to knit and weave cloth for suiting according to their specifications, they will purchase the entire output for many years to come. Thus the market for their labors and such industry as may be established is assured (1967).

In the early years of the Co-op, stores such as Nieman-Marcus featured qiviut scarves and placed orders for them. Unfortunately, marketing in such as places was difficult, as the orders were often too large for the small Co-operative to handle. Large stores required special sizes and particular colors within a short period of time. As a small producer of handmade goods,

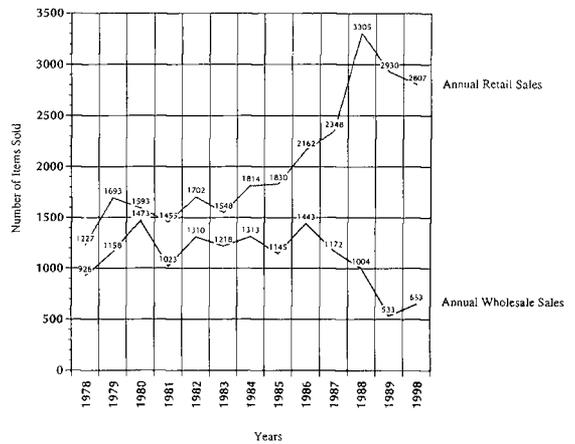


Fig. 1. Annual sales since 1977 (sales statistics before 1977 unavailable).

the Co-op found it impossible to fill the orders exactly with its small stock and delayed production. However, sales of qiviut items to private customers stepped up and eventually filled the niche.

Today, the bulk of the Co-op's customers are individual buyers, although the Co-op still sells a certain number of items at wholesale to a number of smaller stores. In fact, the numbers of items sold at wholesale has had to be scaled down in recent years to accommodate the growing sales in the shop (Fig. 1). In retrospect, perhaps it was overly ambitious to think that handknit qiviut garments could easily step into the fast and fickle world of fashion. Instead, the qiviut garments have found their own particular market, one that can accept their peculiarities and appreciate their very special qualities.

The Co-op was headquartered in Fairbanks until September 1977, when it was moved to the small building in downtown Anchorage where it remains today. This building houses the Co-op office as well as the gift shop where qiviut items are sold. From there, all the qiviut yarn is weighed, checked out and mailed to the knitters, and all the knitting is weighed, checked in, washed, blocked and packaged, before being sold. The knitters are paid immediately for each item. The Anchorage office/shop provides a form of «quality control» and uniformity for the knitting before it goes to the public, to ensure that every item is as perfect as possible. Originally the plan was to have some of the washing and blocking done in knitter's homes in the villages, but it proved easier to have

it all done in one place. Initially it was hoped that it would be possible to form individual co-operative in various villages, so the co-ops could be closer to the knitters and be entirely Native-run. There would be definite advantages to having headquarters in one form or another in the villages, especially for holding knitting workshops and helping individual knitters, but at the moment expansions on such as scale would not be feasible.

The office also manages the sale and marketing of the qiviut garments. In general the supply of garments meets the demand. Most of the sales are to tourists in Alaska, many of whom have heard of qiviut before. Qiviut is known for its special qualities: because it is so light, soft and warm, it is often said to be better than cashmere; because the items are handknit by Alaskan Natives and come from a rather exotic Arctic animal, they have a particular appeal for consumers looking for more than mass-produced souvenirs. There is no question that there is a market for high-quality qiviut garments. Since 1986, the Co-op has also run a small gift shop at the Musk Ox Farm in Palmer, Alaska. From mid-May through mid-September, while the Farm is open for tours, the gift shop sells qiviut garments and other small items. Approximately 15 % of the qiviut items are sold from the farm shop. In addition, around 25 % of the items are sold to other gift shops at wholesale. Just as when the Co-op first began, there are still many people expressing interest in using and marketing qiviut in new ways. The Co-op's primary goal, however, is to benefit the Native knitters, which does not allow any extra qiviut for experimentation in different markets or forms.

Many of the ways that the Co-op operates today are a bit different from the original plans. In the beginning it was thought that eventually the knitters would be taught to handspin the qiviut in addition to using machine-spun yarn. This has not proved to be practical, because handspinning can be time-consuming and the Co-op would need to train the interested knitters to handspin. During the first several years of operation, the garments were individually dyed to various colors. Although the colored items were popular, this was discontinued in the mid-70s in favor of the natural color, because it created too much variety in the stock - customers always wanted this particular item in

that particular color. The style of items has changed little over the past 20 years: the stock is limited to scarves and stoles in various patterns, caps in several different styles, a tunic, and a popular hood-like item called an «Eskimo smoking». A few other items that did not do as well have come and gone. Most of these changes revolve around the shortage of qiviut: because the Musk Ox Farm produces a limited supply, the Co-op cannot experiment with its stock or its mode of production. There is enough yarn to keep the knitters busy, and very little left over.

## Discussion and evaluation

Over the years the Co-op has evolved to meet new challenges, but in general form and function has changed very little. The greatest change has been in the size of the membership

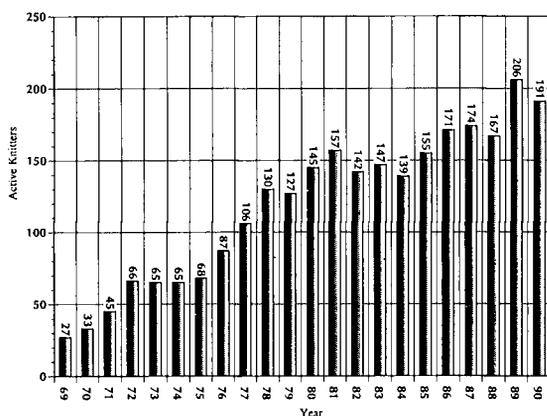


Fig. 2. Annual active membership. Active knitters are those who paid dues and knitted during the year.

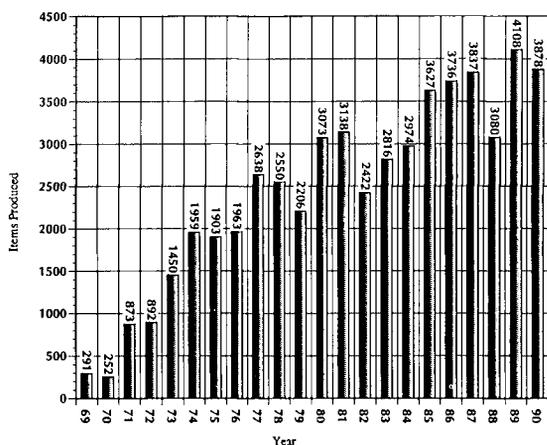


Fig. 3. Annual production of qiviut items.

and the number of items produced and sold every year (Figs. 2 & 3). Many factors contribute to changes in these numbers, but there has been a relatively steady increase in all over the years. Because the knitting is designed to «fit» into the patterns of nature and culture rather than interrupt them, the amount of knitting coming in is inevitably susceptible to changes. If a summer is unusually warm and sunny, this may be reflected in a drop in the production. Since the Co-op is intended as a monetary «stop-gap» rather than a major money provider, knitting can be greatly affected by changes in the village job market as well as changes in the success of subsistence. Knitters will earn money someplace else and come back to knitting when they need to. The Co-operative is really a delicate balance between three variables: the animals (and the amount of qiviut obtained from them), the knitters and the customers. «Managing the Co-op . . . is like balancing a triangle on a pencil point» (Holleman (quoting Sigrun Robertson), 1987).

More than 70 % of the knitters live in villages in rural Alaska, most in the Bethel and Wade Hampton Census Areas. That these areas can use assistance of some kind is obvious: according to recent data from the Alaska Department of Labor, the per capita income in these areas was \$11,845 and \$8,793 respectively, 71.7 % and 53.3 % of the average income of the United States (State of Alaska, November 1990). These two areas consistently have the lowest per capita income of the entire state. In addition, the cost of living in rural Alaska is higher than in the rest of the United States. In many villages the cost of food is 50 to 70 % higher than in Anchorage (which is higher than the United States at large) (State of Alaska, October 1990). Also, according to some figures more than 20 % of village income comes from government transfers (excluding Permanent Dividends) such as food stamps (United States, 1988). In the 1980 census, 45.7 % of Mekoryuk's population was classified as having «poverty status».

These conditions have not really changed since the Co-op's inception in 1969. This is the reason that this particular region was the focus of Teal's and the Co-op's efforts. According to a state economic analysis in 1968 (before the Co-op was started), this region «has no apparent base for economic growth. It has a rapidly

growing population, without local employment prospects, and generally without the cultural, educational, or skill prerequisites for successful outmigration . . . the future of the region appears exceptionally gloomy» (United States, 1968). In spite of the Co-op's relative success over the last 20 years, it probably has not made much of a dent in the many problems of the region.

However, the Co-op was created not to make great sweeping changes in the Native culture (thereby creating new problems), but to help with problems within the traditional mode of life. The greatest problem was created by the introduction of white culture: a need for cash – for ammunition, gasoline, clothing, even food – without the means of obtaining it. What is needed is a non-intrusive source of cash. Teal was emphatic on this point:

Whilst the qiviut industry will not provide an income sufficiently large to support more than a few families on a year-round basis, it will provide sufficient income for the late-winter crisis period for all families in which there are girls and women willing and able to learn to knit. (no date; as in Wilkinson and Teal, 1984).

While people might be tempted to criticize the Co-op's methods for not taking a large enough step, in actuality a small effect was Teal's intention:

It is not supposed that the introduction of the domesticated muskox industry will, in itself, serve as an attraction or inducement for skilled young people to stay in or return to their villages. However, insofar as it increases the resource base for the villages it will assist in making possible those developments and opportunities which will enable the villagers to fulfill their often expressed wish to «move into the 21st Century in terms of our own culture». This wish combines skill and modern outlook with love of place. (1975; as in Wilkinson and Teal, 1984).

By providing some extra income when it is needed, his hope was that people would then have the *choice* of staying in their village homes and maintaining a more traditional way of life, rather than being forced by economic necessity to leave the village and way of life.

## Conclusions

If we look at Teal's original goals for the Co-op and where the Co-op is today, we can see that it has indeed succeeded, at least to a certain

extent. His original aims combined dreams – which sometimes seemed impossibly huge – with a modest scale. He dreamed of a new «industry» of knitting and animals, but it was an industry that would provide a little necessary money rather than be a full-scale economic boom. If we look at the amount of money that the Co-op has injected into the village economy compared to the average per capita income, we can get a sense of the slight but definite impact that the additional money has had on the knitters. According to the 1980 census, Mekoryuk had a per capita income of \$3,324 in 1979. During that year, the Co-op paid the 53 Mekoryuk knitters \$19,531, or an average of \$368 each, approximately 11 % of the per capita income. In smaller villages the impact would be even greater.

The success of the Co-op can be judged in part by the fact that most knitters who join it stay in it. The average length of time that knitters have belonged is more than 10 years. Incredibly, 24 of the original 25 knitters still belong, and 37 knitters have been members for more than 20 years. «Many of the original knitters are still working for the cooperative, which is the best proof that knitting qiviut is indeed filling a need in Eskimo society and, more important, is filling it in a way that is culturally as well as economically satisfying!» (Wilkinson and Teal, 1984).

In trying to improve the economics of Native villages, one is walking a thin line: improve too much and the culture may be destroyed. On the flip side, the Co-operative may be not helping enough: knitting is hardly something that will someday allow a young Native Alaskan to get a job working with computers. Is a purposefully labor-intensive cottage industry really the way to improve people's chances for a better future? Not for everyone. The Musk Ox Producers' Co-operative, however, provides a way for many villagers to continue living in the way that they prefer, and makes it a little easier to survive.

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