

Lost?
Never!

Understanding Traditional

Before the storm began, I did not really know Tulurialik at all. It was my first winter trip “out on the land,” nearly 20 years ago now. He planned to check his trapline one last time before the season ended, and invited me to join him. Travelling by snowmobile over the trackless tundra — an area I was then familiar with only in summer, when its lines are much softer — I marvelled as time after time, he pulled up beside an insignificant hump in the snow, and thrust his snowknife beneath the crust to exhume a steel foxtrap. I was witnessing, for the first time, two amazing processes: an Inuk’s navigation over great distances of seemingly featureless terrain, and the acute visual perception that enabled him to recognize a precise spot on the snow.

It is not really surprising that Inuit exhibit superior visual acuity. They are traditional hunters, after all, dependent upon an ability to find their prey in a vast landscape. Only a few decades ago, the observation and retention of information about the land and its animals was fundamental to survival. From a young age, out on the land, Inuit are encouraged by their elders to watch the land around them. Tulurialik was raised as a hunter. Now in his fifties, like most men of his generation, hunting remains his central role in life.

Those observations were still whirling around in my head four days later, as we sat in our iglu patiently waiting out the blizzard that had begun late on that first day. For four days the wind blew fiercely. Swirling snow obscured visibility beyond a few metres. Confined to our tiny iglu, Tulurialik and I became good friends over innumerable mugs of tea. Finally, sensing that we had both been cooped up long enough, he suggested that we “go outside for some fresh air.”

We emerged from the relative calm of the iglu to face a raging blizzard. I took four steps into the wind, stopped and turned to look back. Already Tulurialik and the iglu were lost to sight. I retraced my steps downwind and found him calmly brushing accumulated snow from the snowmobile. Of one thing I was certain: if he was going somewhere on that machine, I was going with him. We got on, and tore away across the bumpy ridges of windswept snow. Without the clue of gravity, it would have been impossible to tell which way was up in the boil of wind and snow that surrounded us. Five minutes later, Tulurialik stopped our snowmobile, dismounted, and began walking into the storm. I followed hurriedly. When he halted, he turned to inform me that we were standing on the island where his wife was born nearly 50 years ago. Though I believed him, I had no way of identifying the spot as any different from the surrounding river.

On the return trip to our iglu Tulurialik again sped across the frozen river, this time for at least ten minutes before stopping. Even I sensed that we had missed the iglu, not at all difficult to forgive in such limited visibility. Tulurialik, however, was unperturbed. He joked about “being lost” — a state he understood in my terms but which was not real for him. He remained confident, driving on farther in the same straight line. In a few minutes, he stopped and pointed at a bare tip of rock protruding from the snow. “I remember that rock,” he assured me. Then he wheeled the snowmobile around and headed back at an acute angle to our last course. I did not see our iglu emerge from the total whiteout until we came to rest beside it.

At the time, I had little understanding of the extraordinary navigational ability I was actually witnessing.

A single Inuk fishing through the ice somewhere in the vast open space of the Arctic tundra.

Inuit Navigation

By David F. Pelly

In fact, I was just happy to be inside again, sitting on the comfortable bed of caribou skins, waiting for some water to boil. As we sipped our hot tea, Tularialik explained that he had kept going in a straight line even after we were “lost” because he was confident he would encounter some familiar landmark to give him his bearings. He had indeed noticed that small protruding rock as we passed it four days earlier, and he remembered it. If not the rock, there would have been something else. As he offered all this matter-of-factly, I realized that the process was as natural to him as the way I find a parking place in a big city was to me.

When we missed the iglu on the first pass, my immediate reaction was to turn back. His was different. It was some while before I understood why. Like most qallunaaq wilderness travellers, I carry a map and remain conscious of my location. I view the land around as an area, for the moment at least as my area. An Inuk travels differently. He naturally adopts a linear approach, rather than an areal one. To him it is a linear world.

One time more recently, travelling through the hills of Boothia Peninsula, Okpik directed his dogs to take us into a sinuous valley that climbed slowly higher and higher. The dogs twisted and turned and pulled until finally we were on top of a ridge. Okpik stood up high, looking for a familiar landmark. He declined my offer of the topographical map in my knapsack. He had a mental map in his head, essen-

tially a list of landmarks, joined together by a line, a trail. He pointed at another line, a distant range of hills, confident they must lie along the coast. When the landmarks no longer fit his mental image, he

admitted confusion, but still he continued on his linear path, looking for new clues. Finally he understood where he was, and reversed direction to regain the proper trail. That evening we built our iglu exactly where he had predicted we would be.

Dr. Robert Rundstrom, a geographer who has studied Inuit spatial concepts, ventured an explanation. “Given the nature of the barren-ground terrain itself, linear conceptualization of the territory may be the easiest way to bring a sense of order to an otherwise chaotic landscape, an order which allows human beings to think and act as a successful part of that landscape.”

Inuit are right, of course. If you could rise up above the barrenlands and look down, you would see a linear world, a landscape full of lines — rivers, eskers, and caribou paths — all running with some regularity in linear patterns across the tundra.

It follows that a hunter would not seek his prey by going back and forth over an area, but rather by travelling along a line, searching for another line —

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Tularialik digging out after the storm, 1983.

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tracks — that will lead him to his object. Similarly, if “lost,” the linear thinker would logically travel in a straight line until he intersects evidence of another, more familiar, line. In a linear world, it is inevitable that he will, in time, be rewarded.

Tulurialik was. He found a path leading to our iglu. To me, it was confoundingly impressive (areal thinker that I am). To him, it was entirely logical, though he followed this instinct without so much as a moment’s thought.

Many instincts are at work as an Inuk navigates his way across the open spaces of the Arctic, much of which appears desolate and empty, particularly in winter, without features that catch the unpractised eye. Often the land rolls on, mile after mile, toward a distant horizon where oftentimes the sky is indistinguishable from the snow-covered land. There is no perspective. Navigation is not easy. But for the traditional Inuit hunter, there are clues. Among the most important, any seasoned traveller in the North will tell you, are sastrugi, small ridges of hard snow running parallel to the almost ceaseless prevailing winds. So consistent are these ridges that, in whiteout conditions, when unable to see more than a few metres,

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Many times since that trip with Tulurialik I have spoken with other Inuit hunters about their next trip. “I will go over there,” he might say, pointing. He can visualize exactly where he intends to go, and the trail that leads there. But they remain distinct lines and places. He knows in his mind the place where he will go, and how long it will take. It exists at the end of a trail leading out from his base. He need carry no map. He knows the way. As he knows other trails, to other places, where he might go on other trips. They exist on his mental map of the space and time that define his reality. It remains confoundingly impressive. 

(Inset photo)
Tulurialik setting a
fox trap, 1983

Regular contributor David Pelly lives in Cambridge Bay where, he says, he’s still learning how to

navigate on the land. An expanded version of this essay by David Pelly will appear in Northern Wild — Best Contemporary Canadian Nature Writing, edited by David R. Boyd, to be published by GreyStone Books in June 2001.

One of the most important traditional clues used for navigation on the vast open spaces of the Arctic tundra is provided by the sastrugi, ridges of snow formed into a hard crust by the ceaseless prevailing wind.

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