



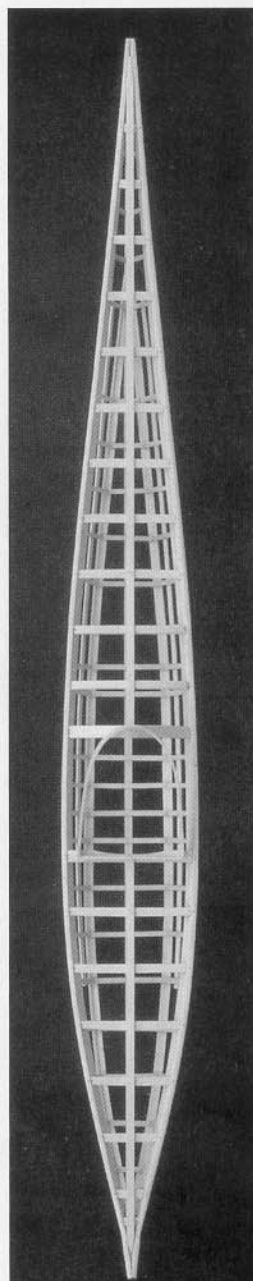
DO IT YOURSELF

THE EAST ARCTIC KAYAK

Text, photos and drawings
by David Zimmerly



Public Archives of Canada



The Inuit of the Canadian Eastern Arctic designed a stable, sturdy kayak, flat-bottomed, with flared sides, generous beam and length and a flat deck. They used it for hunting sea mammals, for transporting seals and walrus on deck, for fishing, and for moving camp. They traveled in rough waters and for long distances. The long, two-bladed paddle could be pivoted from side to side on the raised cockpit coaming to ease the strain. In rough conditions, or for sleeping at sea, two or more kayakers could lash together catamaran-style to avoid capsizing.

This style of kayak was used from the east coast of Hudson Bay, both sides of Hudson Strait, the east coast of Baffin Island, Labrador, and, later, the Thule area of northwestern Greenland.

The kayak's length varied, and records indicate that it increased over time. Examples as short as 13' and as long as 27' are recorded. The East Arctic kayak is a workhorse. Traditionally it was heavily built, weighing up to 140 pounds. Crude examples of the type do look boxy.

The kayak presented in this article is a hybrid of various East Arctic kayakers. This recreational version of the type weighs in at 62 pounds and has a length of 22' and a beam of 28". It is extremely stable, roomy, fast, and easy to paddle. It tracks beautifully, and can carry a high volume of gear. It accommodates a wide range of body types. My 200-pound son and my 145-

pound wife are equally comfortable paddling this kayak.

I selected an East Arctic type for this article as the most straightforward construction. I began building the design because I wanted to replace what had long ago been the favorite of my kayak fleet.

The result has remained my favorite of a fleet of various Arctic kayak types I've built subsequently. I constructed that first East Arctic reproduction in 1973. Suitably, its skeleton remains in Cape Dorset on Baffin Island, where my wife Helga and I sailed on the first leg of the world sailing cruise we began in 1986.

The directions in this article are aimed at the raw amateur kayak builder, but the techniques are those that have been used by the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic for centuries. The experienced builder can learn from them as well.

There is not a nail or screw used in the construction. All pieces are lashed together or pegged. Wood is lengthened by scarfing, bent using steam, and shaved to an eye-pleasing yet strong shape. Some techniques may be unfamiliar—kerfing as a method of bending, for example. All are explained in detail.

Eugene Arima, my predecessor as the Arctic Ethnologist of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, had done extensive studies of this kayak type as part of his fieldwork in Arctic Quebec. In building my reproduction I used a combination of Arima's measurements and my own modifi-



Sea Kayaker