



Sighting for seals at the floe edge in Hooper Bay.

The HOOPER BAY

For hundreds of years, the kayak was the cornerstone of Eskimo society in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area of Alaska's Bering Sea. Not only was it the means by which most biological needs of the people were satisfied, but also it was the basis among men for obtaining wealth and women. Wealth was a consequence of giving away goods, which depended on a man being a good hunter, which in turn depended on a man having a kayak and being a good kayaker. A man could not get a wife if he were unable to support her, and without a kayak, support was impossible.

The use of the traditional skin-covered kayak as a major subsistence tool in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area has declined almost to extinction. In her 1940 trip to Hooper Bay, anthropologist Margaret Lantis reported 63 kayaks in a population of 360 people. Today, with over twice that population, the number of usable kayaks has dwindled to less than a dozen, and all of these appear to have been made 10 to 20 years ago. As the last kayak-using community of any size in this area, Hooper Bay, Alaska, offered the opportunity for a last-chance live examination of some of the Eskimo subsistence techniques that depended on the kayak.

I first traveled to Hooper Bay in October 1976, as Arctic Ethnologist for the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. By interviewing, reading historical documents, and commissioning the construction of a full-size kayak for the

National Museums of Canada, I hoped to understand other features of the kayak-dependent culture as it existed in the past, and survives—barely—in the present.

An Arctic Culture, a Kayak to Serve Its Needs

Hooper Bay, with archaeological evidence of over 600 years of continuous occupation, is similar in many respects to the communities on nearby Nunivak Island, studied in the 1930s by photographer/historian Edward Curtis and in the '40s by anthropologist Margaret Lantis. Hooper Bay had a different dialect and slightly less complex ritual life than that of Nunivak Island, but the kayak complex was generally similar for all coastal Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Eskimo.

A look at the design features of Arctic kayaks reveals two basic types—those used inland for spearing caribou as they crossed lakes and rivers, and those used for pursuing marine mammals in the sea. For the seagoing kayaks, there were a number of inherent design constraints. First, the craft must be capable of the pursuit of sea mammals either by speed or by stealth. (Few Arctic kayaks were designed for speed, but all could be maneuvered silently.) Second, the kayak must be able to return with any game captured. This was done variously by towing, by carrying the unbutchered animal on the deck, or by stowing the cut-up carcass

inside the craft. The third important requirement was seaworthiness. This was achieved in the Bering Sea area by building a broad and deep hull—one with rounded bilges and a flattened, but not flat, bottom. A sharply ridged deck not only expanded the interior; it also helped to shed waves. The beam of about 30" gave the kayak excellent stability, and combined with a sealable waterproof gut-skin parka and one or two recovery techniques, made it very seaworthy. The wide cockpit facilitated storage of game and also allowed two people to ride back to back with ease. (The passenger, reported Margaret Lantis, could on occasion act as a bow-and-arrow-equipped "tail gunner" during a war raid.)

The 30" beam made this kayak the widest in the Arctic, while the average length of just over 15' made it almost the shortest of Eskimo kayaks. A Hooper Bay informant said that a kayak of this length handled better in heavy seas than a longer craft.

A small sled was an important kayak accessory, used to haul the kayak to the floe edge and over ice floes. When not in use, it was stowed on the afterdeck. The foredeck carried extra paddles, gaffs, and a great variety of specialized spears, darts, and harpoons for use against different seals and waterfowl.

The hunter wore a gut-skin parka cut full to allow the parka to be sealed with a tie around the cockpit coaming. Seal-skin formed the underarm part of