
This highly readable and useful review assembles and integrates, for the first time, data on the geographic, physical and biological characteristics of polynyas which are known to occur in the Canadian Arctic. The review is one of a series of high-quality technical reports produced, or edited, by scientists of the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada. It is organized into six sections, of which five have literature citations listed at the end.

The introduction begins with a quote which sets the tone for the remainder of the paper: "Editors' Note: The work referred to here, the Eastern Arctic Marine Ecosystems Research Program, ..." (p. 7). The quote serves to introduce the reader to the context within which the review is set. The introduction is followed by a brief overview of the importance of polynyas in the Arctic.

The introduction sets out the premise that while the distribution of recurring polynyas is limited, their importance is great. "It is ironic that as a result of Canadian government policy, which has been criticized by the scientific community in the north and in the south, the amount of data available to us is less than that available to scientists elsewhere. This is true both in terms of the quality and quantity of data. There is a need for more data, particularly in the area of polynyas."

The introduction highlights the importance of polynyas in the Arctic and the need for more data on their characteristics and effects. The introduction also states that the review will provide a valuable overview of the ecological significance of polynyas and the need for continued research.

The introduction concludes with a brief summary of the structure of the review. It is divided into six sections: distribution of polynyas, physical causes of polynyas, biological significance of polynyas, polynyas and the North Water polynya, and concluding remarks.

The first section (distribution of polynyas) is particularly useful in providing a broad context which recognizes the modern realities of non-renewable resource extraction, production and transportation. As some of the reviewed literature is from unpublished reports or derived from the work of private companies operating, or proposing to operate, in the region, the reader is provided with ready access to information which may be otherwise difficult to obtain. The truly significant and highly useful point about the review is that the authors integrate and interpret a broad range of studies and so describe the admittedly rather sparse information available to us.

The introduction also highlights the importance of the review in the context of current events. "The limited nature of the base of data available to the authors of the review is a recurrent theme throughout the six sections. In Canada, it has long been accepted that "impact studies" should precede industrial development in the Arctic. It is, unfortunately, also a fact that the importance of continuing studies or post-development assessments is often lost in the glare of publicity focussed on pressing issues."

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ATHAPASKAN CLOTHING AND RELATED OBJECTS IN THE COLLECTIONS OF FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

James VanStone has been comfortable with a number of anthropological subdisciplines throughout his scholarly career, including archaeology, ethnology and ethnohistory. He is also a student of material culture, and this publication is yet another of VanStone’s contributions to our understanding of northern Athapaskans in general and of their material culture in particular. His well-rounded intellectual perspective is apparent in what at first glance appears to be a rather typical museum catalogue.

The purpose of his book is to document and illustrate 31 items of northern Athapaskan clothing and related objects obtained in the Yukon Valley of Alaska near the end of the nineteenth century. These objects are contained in the collections of the Department of Anthropology at Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. This book exceeds the normal requirements of a museum catalogue in a number of respects, and in so doing touches upon a variety of northern anthropological interests.

VanStone begins with a discussion of the scarcity of traditional northern Athapaskan clothing in museum collections. Although a number of museums do have some items of northern Athapaskan clothing, these pieces remain for the most part undocumented and unpublished. There are exceptions to this unfortunate state of affairs, including the Kutchin material in the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. Perhaps the most notable exception is the very valuable collection of Alaska Athapaskan clothing at the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Leningrad. Appropriately, VanStone recently collaborated on the publication of this collection (Siebert, 1980).

The chapter describing the Field Museum’s collection is prefaced with observations on the ethnographic context of Athapaskan clothing, many of which are relevant for groups in both Alaska and Canada. Drawing on the extensive ethnographic research of Catharine McClellan, VanStone remarks on Athapaskan modesty and the intimate connection between individuals and their clothing in some Athapaskan societies. These comments make the subsequent descriptions of the specimens doubly rewarding. This section concludes with a description of aboriginal Athapaskan hide preparation and sewing, a description that all northern Athapaskan archaeologists would do well to read for its detail and clarity. VanStone includes observations on the bone and stone tools that would have been used prehistorically. It is interesting to note that this tool kit survives to this day basically unaltered among some Athapaskans in the Northwest Territories, except that metal has replaced the slate scraper blade.

The remainder of this chapter, which constitutes the bulk of the book’s text, is devoted to detailed descriptions of the clothing and related objects. Accompanying these descriptions are excellent black and white photographic plates of all the objects, as well as 18 high-quality line drawings of sewing patterns, illustrating how various specimens were put together. Also included are several plates taken from early historical sources depicting Athapaskans in their native garb. These latter illustrations are a thoughtful addition, as they enhance the reader’s sense of the historical ethnographic context.

The objects described include five tunics, six pairs of moccasin-trousers, one child’s costume, four hoods, one cap, one decorated strap, two wristlets, one pair of mittens, one pair of gloves, three pairs of moccasins, two quivers, and four pouches. All the descriptions are detailed, clear, easy to follow, and conclude with a discussion. VanStone compares these pieces with similar ones from other Alaskan groups observed by early explorers, described by ethnographers, or illustrated in published museum collections. This is a good example of his thoroughness.

There is much to hold the reader’s attention in these descriptive passages. For example, there is a discussion on the sex attributes of tunics, the book concurs on observations VanStone derived from “experimental ethnography.” This involved one of his female colleagues trying on a tunic, allowing various inferences concerning size to be made. I was also struck by the practical design of the child’s costume. The mittens are sewn to the sleeves of the hooded shirt, with slits provided for the hands. Anyone who takes care of children in a continental climate can appreciate the wisdom of this design, as the problems of lost mittens and freezing hands are eliminated. Such a glimpse of cultural adaptation is even more interesting because of its continued relevance.

Hoods are another item of clothing which offer further insight into northern Athapaskan culture. VanStone writes that, with the exception of children’s clothing, the attached hood was adopted after the coming of Europeans. It is thought that the attached hood, or parka hood, would have restricted seeing and hearing, an obvious disadvantage to forest hunters. One of the most interesting items in the collection is a detached hood, so heavily decorated with beading that it weighs 820 g (1 lb, 13 oz). It was undoubtedly a formidable object to wear.

Following the artifact descriptions and discussion, the book concludes with sections on ornamentation, clothing change, and attributions. These sections are rich in anthropological information and together form an appropriate conclusion. In discussing the decoration of clothing as the major artistic expression of northern Athapaskans, VanStone traces the changes in materials and motifs as a result of European contact in Alaska. He notes that following the general availability of beads among the Kutchin, only those persons who were regarded as poor used porcupine quills. Significantly, porcupine quill work is presently undergoing a revival among some northern Athapaskan groups in Canada.

The discussion of clothing change leaves the reader with certain questions. Although VanStone refers to rapid acceptance of European clothing among aboriginal Athapaskans, further observations by him indicate that the situation was much more complex. He writes that aboriginal clothing styles had virtually disappeared throughout much of the Yukon River Valley by the end of the nineteenth century, yet also notes that the relatively isolated Tanana were still wearing moccasin-trousers in the early 1930s. His use of a variety of ethnohistorical sources underscores the true complexity of contact situations, belying the existence of tidy, unidirectional change.

The book concludes with a thorough assessment of the collection’s provenience problems. Although the documentation is far from ideal, an approximate date and origin for the collection can be determined. No further precision beyond this is possible, however, as nineteenth-century collectors rarely bothered about specific documentation, and this collection is no exception. VanStone recognizes that exact cultural affiliations cannot be assigned and freely admits to the possible bias in attributing specimens to the Kutchin. Much more information is available on Kutchin clothing, both in the literature and in museum collections, making comparison much easier.

This book is noteworthy for VanStone’s command of the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature and the resulting fullness of the documentation. Since this is a documentation of the specimens in their broader anthropological context, thereby transcending the limitations of the inventory approach. His decades of research among northern Athapaskans are apparent in his almost casual thoroughness.