



Muskox History

Muskox are one of the oldest surviving herbivores (plant eaters) on the planet. The ancestors of Yukon muskox roamed grasslands in Asia along with mammoths, woolly rhinoceros and caribou. Muskox evolved in these cold regions into their current ox-like form.

Muskox moved north into Siberia and then crossed the Bering land bridge into North America about 200 000 years ago. There they lived in glacial refuges, including Beringia and smaller refuges on Arctic Islands. At this time, they shared habitat with steppe lions, giant beaver, camel and steppe bison. Muskox are one of the few large animals, including caribou, moose and grizzly bear, that outlasted the cold climate of the ice ages and still survive today. When the glacial ice retreated, muskox remained in Alaska and northern Yukon, and spread through northern Canada to Greenland.



Muskox have an ancient connection to the people of the North. From prehistoric times, muskox provided northern peoples with meat, warm sleeping robes and horns used for making weapons and tools. Hunters used dogs to keep muskox from running away, then killed them with bows and spears. Along with caribou, fish, seal and other foods, muskox were part of the diet of Inuit and other aboriginal peoples. But the 18th Century and the arrival of Europeans and guns to Arctic North America changed the relationship between muskox and people, and pushed the muskox to the edge of extinction.

The arrival of Europeans changed the traditional ways of life for native peoples. They spent more time in settlements, trading for food and guns. When firearms were introduced to the Arctic, many hundreds of muskox were shot for food. As the populations of communities increased, more food was required, and people traveled further into muskox territory to hunt in prime muskox habitat. At the same time as indigenous peoples were becoming more dependent on muskox, whalers and explores also began to hunt muskox heavily for their meat.

Many muskox were also killed to provide meat for European explorers in the Arctic. Thousands more muskox were killed for their hides by trappers and hunters for the fur-trading companies. Their long, rich coats became popular in Europe and were used for rugs in sleighs. Between 1864 and 1916 over 15 000 hides were shipped away from northern Canada. The capture of muskox calves for zoological gardens was a particularly disturbing practice, which involved the killing of all the adults in a defensive formation and the removal of the calves.

Muskox are vulnerable to over-hunting. The main reason is that their group defense position, so effective against wolf packs, provides little protection from humans with guns. Muskox in a defense ring are easily shot. Furthermore, they generally remain in a home range and do not move over a large territory. They are often slow-moving and easy to stalk. As a result of all these factors, muskox disappeared from many areas of their former range, including the North Slope of Alaska.



By 1900, the spread of guns and increased demands for muskox meat and hides had led to serious declines in muskox populations in mainland Canada and Alaska. Severe weather may have also reduced muskox numbers on Arctic islands. In 1917, the Canadian Government passed the Northwest Game Act which put muskox under protection and prohibited trading in hides. By this time, the population in Canada was extremely low – by 1930, only about 500 muskox remained on the mainland, but a slow and steady recovery was beginning. Since then, muskox have made a comeback in the size of their populations and their range.

By 1967, muskox numbers had increased so much that hunting under a quota system was permitted in several Inuit communities in Alaska and the Northwest Territories. Muskox are still protected in some parts of the Canadian Arctic.

Muskox were found on the Yukon and Alaskan North Slope until the middle of the 1800's when they disappeared. Muskox were re-introduced to the North Slope in Alaska in 1969 with the transplant of 51 animals from Greenland to Nunivak Island. The population grew rapidly and began to spread to the west, east and south. Today there are estimated to be over 800 muskox in this population, ranging across the Yukon and Alaskan North Slopes and in adjacent areas. There are approximately 500 muskox on the Alaska North Slope, 190 on the Yukon North Slope, 110 in the NWT west of the Mackenzie River and an additional 30 muskox in the Yukon south towards Old Crow. *Ken Madsen photos*

For more information, visit the Wildlife Management Advisory Council (North Slope) web site on muskox of the Yukon and Alaska North Slope at www.taiga.net/wmac/species/muskox.