

Steelandt Stéphanie, Bhiry Najat, Marguerie Dominique, Desbiens Caroline, Desrosiers Pierre
stephanie.steelandt.1@ulaval.ca

PhD supervised by :
Najat Bhiry, Centre d'Etudes Nordiques (CEN), Laval university (Québec)
Dominique Marguerie, UMR 6566 CreAAH, CNRS, University of Rennes 1 (France)



Abstract

Driftwood and shrubs are the primary wood resources available in Nunavik. Today, these are only used by the inhabitants as fuel for fires in the camps. Historically, this raw material was very important for the parents and ancestors of Inuit people living today. This study aims to document the traditional knowledge of the Inuit about the origin, availability, collection and exploitation of woods resources in this region of sub-arctic. To that end, semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour were conducted with 27 Inuit aged between 60 and 89 years old in the villages of Ivujivik, Akulivik, Inukjuak and Umiujaq. These villages are located on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay. Our qualitative data reveal, among other things, that: the woods from shrubs (i.e., birches and willows) were mainly harvested in autumn and used to make fire, mattresses, sleeping mats called "alliat" and other objects like brooms, pansies, toys, etc. Driftwood likely came from the south of Hudson Bay and James Bay and would have arrived on the beaches on the east coast of Nunavik at the end of the summer and in the fall. The local knowledge of Inuktitut names given to driftwood was very accurate and diversified because of the significant exposure to driftwood in the southern villages. The respondents indicated that they tended to collect driftwood in the summer with *umiat* (boats) and kayaks for the small woods (cf. in Ivujivik) and the fall and winter they would use dog sleds (cf. in the other villages). Finally, the Inuit noted the best collection points for driftwood and outlined their use by elders and their ancestors to build *umiat*, kayaks, sleds or hunting tools with the biggest woods. The smallest woods were used for everyday objects and for fire.

Introduction

"I think it's important that our grandchildren know how wood was used in Nunavik" Aibillie Echaloock (Inukjuak, July 2011)

Wood resources have had a special importance in the daily life of tundra inhabitants. They used it for heating, making tools or as transportation. Paradoxically, only a few studies have been carried out on the availability of this material and its exploitation by Arctic communities (Grønnow 1996; Alix 2004).

The objective of this study is to transcribe the knowledge of Inuit inhabitants in Nunavik on the availability of wood resources (driftwoods and shrubs) and their exploitation on the east shore of Hudson Bay. Our work will supplement some of the ongoing scientific researches project on this subject (Steelandt et al. 2011).

Indeed, with the settling of Inuit in the villages and changes to the education of youth in the schools, the traditional oral transmission of cultural knowledge has tended to get lost. Yet, some Inuit adults and elders who had lived according to a nomadic lifestyle during their childhood, still possess rich knowledge about the lifestyles of their ancestors. Accordingly, their knowledge about the availability and exploitation of wood resources results from a multitude of experiences and helps us to increase awareness of Inuit culture.

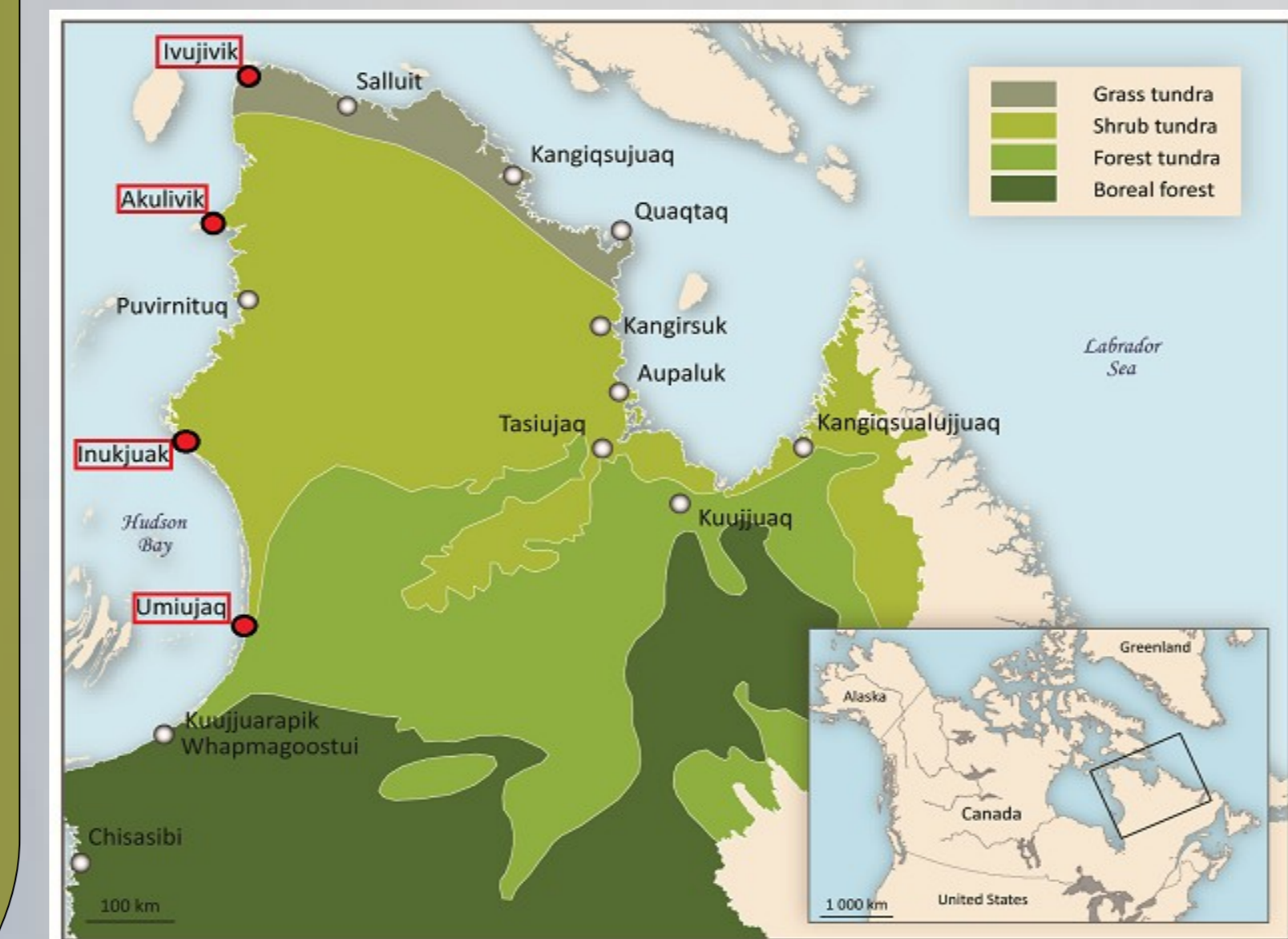


Fig.1: Localisation of the study areas on the west coast of Nunavik

Study regions and methods

During the summer of 2011, semi-directed one hour-long interviews with 27 Inuit aged between 60 and 89 years old were conducted in 4 villages located on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay: Ivujivik, Akulivik, Inukjuak and Umiujaq (Figure 1). The topics discussed was mainly related to the characteristics of wood resources (i.e. driftwood and shrubs) on the west coast of Nunavik and their availability, origin, collection and use.

This study was been improved through the assistance of the "Avataq cultural Institute" and the "Research Ethics Committee of Laval University" (project 2011-115/16-05-2011). Interviews were conducted with the aid of an "Inuktitut/English" or an "Inuktitut/French" translator when required. Audio and/or video recordings with a small digital recorder ("Philips DVT-600") and a digital camera ("Sony DCR-SR68") were used for each consenting participant to transcribe the information.

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods by combining common responses into categories and identifying links between the data.



Inuit Knowledge about shrubs and trees



Inuktitut vocabulary : The 2 main species of local shrubs used in Nunavik for their wood are named in Inuktitut "*avaalaqiat*" for the birch (*Betula sp*) and "*urpik*" for the willow (*Salix sp*).

Collection: Based on the answers of participants in the 4 villages, woods from shrubs (birches and willows) were mainly cut in autumn because they were leafless, dry and could be easily attached to bring them into the camps on foot or using a sled. In Inukjuak, everyone in the village noted how the collection wood used to be attached together using a sealskin rope and carried on their back. In Umiujaq, in the forest tundra, shrubs were rarely cut. Inuit people and their ancestors in this area used to cut trees (e.g., spruces and larches) with an axe during the winter and transport them using a dog sled. The best collection points for shrubs in every study region (as indicated by participants) are denoted by the green dots on the maps (Fig. 3, 4 and 5).



Use and exploitation: In the past, shrubs were mainly used to make the following: fire (using willow during the fall because it burned longer, but using birch during the summer because the willow was too wet), mattresses or sleeping mats called "*alliat*" (using birches), drills, small roofs, brooms, swatters to kill mosquitoes with smoke, toys (e.g., dolls, small boats) or to stir up the light in the "*qulliq*" (lamp) etc. In Umiujaq located in the forest tundra, trees were cut to make a great variety of things that people needed (e.g., kayak, boats, sleds, etc.)

Today, shrubs are rarely used, except occasionally to make a fire in the camps if there is no driftwood or to teach young people (i.e., kids and teenagers) their use. In Umiujaq, trees are still cut sometimes for trade.



Fig.3 : Map of Akulivik and its surroundings

Inuit Knowledge about driftwood

Inuktitut vocabulary: Inuit people in Nunavik give driftwood different names in Inuktitut according to its form, aspect, color, texture or other characteristics (ex: Ikkiq, Sijitjuaq). This knowledge about the names of wood seems to be more accurate and diversified in the villages located in the south such as Umiujaq because the relevant vegetation is more present there.

Origin: The best hypothesis given by all of the participants is that driftwood would come from the south of Hudson Bay and James Bay (e.g., La Grande or Kuujuarapik). This origin is strongly possible because the direction of the ocean currents back North on the east shore of Hudson Bay (Straneo and Saucier, 2008). The preliminary dendrochronological analyses conducted on driftwood around these villages reveal correlations with reference series of trees located in the south of Nunavik (Steelandt et al 2011).

Arrival time: The time at which driftwood arrives on the beaches was difficult for the Inuit to determine because it appears to have already been there. Nevertheless, 15 of 27 participants think that the driftwood would come at the end of the summer and more especially in the fall. This is very likely, given that the wind, currents and waves are strongest during this period.

Collection: The gathering of driftwood on the beaches tended to occur at any time of the year. However, because there is less wind, no ice and fewer waves in Hudson Bay during the summer, this season seemed to be favored by the inhabitants from the most northern village in Ivujivik. Indeed, because driftwood is relatively small in size there (Steelandt et al. 2011), people could go anywhere on the coast and islands with boats and kayaks to collect them during this period. This is different from other southern villages where driftwood can be much bigger. There, the best times for collecting them would have been during the fall and winter when the snow allowed the use of dog sleds. The best packs and collection points of driftwood in every study area quoted by the participants are indicated by the shaded areas on the maps (Fig. 2, 3, 4 and 5).

Use and exploitation: Several years ago, the inhabitants in Nunavik used the large driftwoods to make boats, kayaks, sleds or structures of semi-subterranean dwellings. These wood resources were also used as posts to hold the tent up, to make tools for hunting (e.g., harpoons and fox traps), or to make many everyday objects such as dryers, handles for knives, whips, fishing rods, bowls, paddles, drills, etc. Smaller and damaged woods were often used for the fire. In Ivujivik, some participants specified that manufactured wood such as old stranded wooden boxes from boats were more often used to make kayaks or objects. In Akulivik and in Inukjuak where large woods and whole trunks with roots could be found, respondents describe more precisely the parts selected (root, trunk) to make different objects (e.g., twisted part of trunk and root used for the edge of the seat or the front of the kayak). Finally, in Umiujaq, the participants revealed that the living trees that there were easily accessible in the region were preferentially used compared with driftwood to make boats, kayaks, sleds and objects. Today, Inuit use manufactured woods from the south. So, according to every respondents, driftwood is not really used anymore except to make a fire in the hunting camps, to moor the boats, or as posts to hold the tents.



Fig.5 : Map of Umiujaq and its surroundings



Fig.2 : Map of Ivujivik and its surroundings

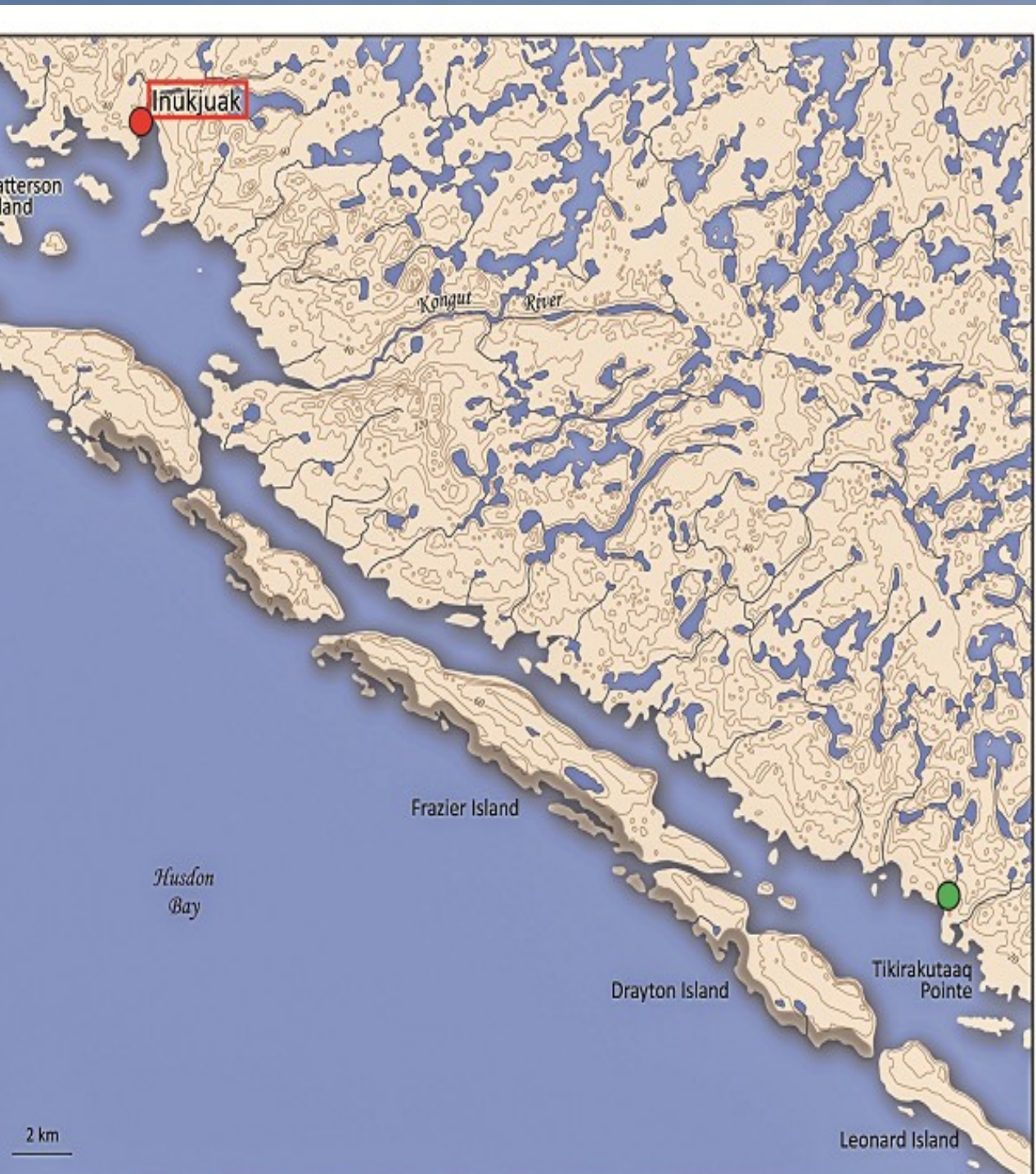


Fig.4 : Map of Inukjuak and its surroundings



Conclusion and prospects

Even though driftwoods and shrub woods are not really used anymore today in Nunavik except as fuel for fire on the camps, these rare wood resources in this region were very important in the daily lives of Inuit ancestors who used it for warmth, for transportation (*umiaq*, kayak, slide), to build their homes (semi-subterranean dwellings, tents) or to make hunting tools and other everyday objects. This study transcribes the traditional knowledge on the subject shared by the inhabitants of Ivujivik, Akulivik, Inukjuak and Umiujaq and especially by the last elders who lived according to the nomadic lifestyle of their ancestors. Therefore, the transcribed qualitative data concerning the availability, collection and exploitation of these wood resources provide a helpful supplement to some of the dendrochronology and archaeology studies currently underway in the region. This research also contributes to the dissemination and maintenance of Inuit culture.

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