Résumé of the trade in polar bear hides in Canada, 1974–75

by Pauline Smith and Ian Stirling

Abstract

In 1974–75, the six auction houses dealing in Canadian polar bear hides handled similar numbers of hides as in the past two years. There was a 46% decrease in the number of new hides shipped to the auction sales in 1974–75 because of the large number of unused hides remaining from the previous season. The Japanese were still the principal buyers. The average price received by the auction houses showed a 56% decrease from 1973–74 levels.

The average prices received by the native hunters did not decrease to the same extent which may be a reflection of the increase in local sales. Only two settlements offered a sport hunt and only two of a possible four bears were taken. A summary of the polar bear kills and quotas by jurisdiction is presented.

Introduction

This paper summarizes the trade in polar bear hides, regulations, and market statistics in Canada during 1974–75. Annual summaries of these data for 1972–73 and 1973–74 were published by Smith and Jonkel (1975a, 4).

The number of polar bear hides handled and sold by the fur auction companies in Canada in 1974–75 was approximately the same as during 1973–74. A downward trend in the prices paid for polar bear hides, which began in early 1974, continued through the year and into 1975.

The supply

Western Canadian Raw Fur Auction Sales in Vancouver is supplied by individual hunters, Inuit (Eskimo) co-operatives and the NWT Fur Marketing Service. In addition, the NWT government markets confiscated hides and the hides of the saiga animals there. The Hudson's Bay Company in Montreal obtains polar bear skins from its Northern Stores, Inuit co-operatives, and individual hunters. Hudson's Bay and Ammings in London, England is supplied through the Hudson's Bay Company in Montreal and for the past four years the shipments of hides have been as follows: 1972, 2 hides; 1973, 55; 1974, 26; and 1975, 21. Dominion Sooakark Fur Auction Sales in Winnipeg is supplied by Inuit co-operatives and individual hunters. The Royal Greenland Trade Department in Copenhagen, Denmark is supplied with hides taken by native hunters in Greenland.

In Manitoba, skins of saiga bears killed by game officers and BCP are Crown property and can only be sold by the Manitoba government through sealed tender. The proceeds from the auction go into the Manitoba General Revenue. Usually the sales are held annually. However, due to the small number of hides available no auction was held in spring 1974. Thus, the hides were held over and auctioned in spring 1975 along with the hides taken during 1974–75.

The Ontario Trappers Association in North Bay is the only official marketing outlet for hides taken by Ontario Indians.

Western Canadian Raw Fur Auction Sales takes a 5% commission, the Hudson's Bay Company and Dominion Sooakark take 7%, and the Ontario Trappers Association takes 5%.

After an auction by the Ontario Trappers Association, handling charges and the 5% commission are deducted and the balance is divided, 60% going to the Indian hunter and 40% to the Indian Band.

The market

Japanese interest in polar bear hides peaked in late 1975, when the maximum price paid was $3600 (Smith and Jonkel, 1975a). Although their interest is declining, they are still the principal buyers of the better quality hides, either directly from the fur auction companies as raw hides or through Canadian dealers who have already prepared the hides into rogs. The poorer quality and smaller-sized hides were mainly bought at lower prices by Canadian buyers for domestic use. The US market remained closed.

The lowered foreign demand has apparently significantly lowered prices paid for polar bear hides at the auction sales (Table 1) and, as a result, interest on the domestic market has been renewed. However, even though the prices were much reduced, hides were still being bought back from the auction sales following lack of interest and very low bidding. The market was extremely slow at the beginning of the year. In January 1975 only 13 hides (10%) were sold of the 136 hides put up for auction by the Western Canadian Raw Fur Auction Sales. By September, the market had improved, apparently due to the increased domestic sales and 62% of the 123 hides put up for auction were sold (Table 1). A similar situation existed in Montreal where only 27 (25%) of the 110 hides offered by the Hudson’s Bay Company were sold during 1975. The lack of foreign interest was particularly obvious at these sales. At the Hudson’s Bay and Ammings Limited only 20 (20%) of the 92 hides offered during 1975 were sold. At their June sale, all of the 83 hides offered were withdrawn. All hides handled at the London sales were from Canada. At the end of the season, Western Canadian Raw Fur Auction Sales, Hudson's Bay Company and Hudson's Bay and Ammings Limited, had inventories of 57, 71, and 65 small skins respectively. Although the turnover of hides for 1974–75 (291) is 60%, of the 464 hides handled were sold was 1

1OWS, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H3.
2OWS, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 1S6.
low, it was up slightly from the previous year (25%). These figures include hides harvested by the RCMP, NWT Fish and Wildlife, and Aungs. During 1974, no hides were sold by the London company although 44 hides were held over from 1973 and 44 hides were added. The fur auction season begins in December or January depending on the auction house (Table 1). The December 1974 sale by the Greenland Traders (Table 2) resulted in the auctioning of 26 polar bear skins outside Canada, is included for comparison (Table 1). In contrast to the previous 2 years, not all hides offered were sold. In 1974-75, 496 hides were sold, or 43% of the offer prices slightly lower than those gained on the Canadian market. Although the auction houses handled a similar quantity of hides in 1974-75 (484 hides) as in 1973-74 (496 hides), 241 of those handled in 1974-75 and 44 in 1973-74 had been stored, unsold from the previous season. Consequently, only 243 new hides were sent to the fur auction houses during 1974-75 compared to 454 hides during 1973-74. This represented a 46.5% decrease from the previous year. The decrease in number of polar bear skins was in part caused by a reduction in the availability of hides, as similar numbers of polar bear skins were harvested in 1974-75 and 1973-74 (Table 2). A more likely explanation is a change of preference in the marketing methods of the hunters. During 1973-74 many hunters had experienced considerable delays in payment for hides sent to auction houses, because so many hides remained unsold. Full remittance is not made until the hide is sold by the auction house. Because of increasing delays in payment and decreasing prices, many hunters have reacted by resorting to quicker, local sales. The average prices paid for hides during 1974-75 showed a marked upward trend as compared to a range of $400-700 recorded in 1973-74. The lowest ($500) and highest ($1500) prices were recorded for 1974-75. The high prices likely reflect the high quality and best condition of the hides. Hides sent to auction houses were probably at least partly responsible for the comparatively high average price ($995) paid by the buyers at auction. The average of the highest average prices harvested were sold through the NWT Fur Marketing Service. However, Gjoa Haven sent eight of the nine hides harvested through the Marketing Service to the auction houses. The average price paid for the nine hides plus one hide that was unsold from the previous season was $353—the lowest average for 1974-75; this may be a reflection of poorer quality. Hunters have reverted to local sales in some settlements (e.g. Tuktuyaktuk, Sachs Harbour, Southampton Island). The average range of prices paid to the native hunters was $400-700, lowest in 1973-74 to 1974-75. The greatest changes were shown in the highest average prices which decreased by almost $1000 between 1973-74 and 1974-75. Although reduced, the lowest prices did not show the same degree of change. The average price received by the native hunters has decreased since 1973-74 but not to the same degree as the auction house prices (cf. Table 3 and 4). The fact that the prices paid to the hunters in the settlements did not decrease as markedly as in the auction houses may reflect increased local sales and processing of the hides by individuals who were not involved in the auction system. The average of the lowest market value of a polar bear hide or of the variation in quality. This situation is likely transitory and the prices paid to the hunters in 1974-75 will probably increase as well. However, no real pattern is apparent yet due to lack of data. The reduced monetary return to the hunters during 1974-75 does not, to date, appear to have had much effect on the hunters' incentive to take polar bears. All but four settlements in the NWT participated in the hunting for making fish flies and consequently brought the lowest prices. Some of the poorer quality hides sent to auction houses were sold for making fish flies and consequently brought the lowest prices. A comparison of the mean prices paid for hides at the three major auction houses in 1974-75 and 1973-74 showed that they all experienced decreases of about 60%, with the highest decrease at the London market, which went from $500 ($1500) to $200, a 60% decrease. This decrease was due to the fact that they all experienced decreases of about 60%, with the highest decrease at the London market, which went from $500 ($1500) to $200, a 60% decrease. 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M. Soudack, Dominion Soudack Fur Auction Sales Ltd., and the numerous other fur auction, territorial, provincial, and federal personnel for being extremely helpful in supplying much of the information. We also wish to thank J.E. Bryant, Canadian Wildlife Service, for technical support during the writing of this report.

References

Table 1
Numbers of polar bear skins offered and sold, and the prices in dollars paid at the auctions during 1974–75. Numbers of skins put up for auction are in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Auction house</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. skins sold</th>
<th>Price range</th>
<th>Avg. price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Canadian, Vancouver</td>
<td>Jan. 1975</td>
<td>13 (156)</td>
<td>250–1000</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feb.</td>
<td>29 (130)</td>
<td>550–1200</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April</td>
<td>24 (105)</td>
<td>225–875</td>
<td>638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td>11 (94)</td>
<td>400–575</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sept.</td>
<td>66 (123)</td>
<td>400–550</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>143 (209)</td>
<td>225–1200</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson’s Bay Co., Montreal</td>
<td>Mar. 1975</td>
<td>31 (148)</td>
<td>50–1500</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77 (148)</td>
<td>50–1500</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>108</td>
<td>400–1000</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominion Soudack, Winnipeg</td>
<td>Jan. 1975</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>420–660</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feb.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>400–900</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mar.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>400–1000</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>400–1000</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario Trappers Assoc, North Bay</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>300–400</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba Govt., Winnipeg</td>
<td>April 1975</td>
<td>12 (12)</td>
<td>52–859</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson’s Bay and Annings,</td>
<td>Mar./Dec. 1975</td>
<td>26 (91)</td>
<td>497–594</td>
<td>581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London, England</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7–1544</td>
<td>456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total no. Can. hides sold</strong></td>
<td>1974–75</td>
<td>291 (404)</td>
<td>50–1500</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Known polar bear kill data in Canada 1973–75

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>1973–74</th>
<th>1974–75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rec. q.</td>
<td>K.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWT</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ont.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nfld.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yukon</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>568</td>
<td>568</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted quota as a result of overkills in 1973–74.
Table 3
Comparison of average prices (in dollars) paid for polar bear hides at auctions 1973–74 and 1974–75

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Auction house</th>
<th>1973–74</th>
<th>1974–75</th>
<th>% decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Canadian</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson’s Bay Co.</td>
<td>1570</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Greenland Trade Dept.</td>
<td>1224</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. (all auction houses handling Canadian hides)</td>
<td>1374</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Average known prices (in dollars) paid to hunters for polar bear hides 1973–74 and 1974–75. Numbers of skins are in parentheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>1973–74</th>
<th>1974–75</th>
<th>% decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arctic Bay, NWT</td>
<td>1686 (10)</td>
<td>959 (11)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broughton Island, NWT</td>
<td>1193 (15)</td>
<td>607 (14)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge Bay, NWT</td>
<td>691 (4)</td>
<td>506 (14)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Dorset, NWT</td>
<td>1083 (6)</td>
<td>675 (4)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chesterfield Inlet, NWT</td>
<td>1147 (37)</td>
<td>738 (37)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clyde River, NWT</td>
<td>55 (1)</td>
<td>33 (10)</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coppermine, NWT</td>
<td>1576 (58)</td>
<td>809 (64)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easko Point, NWT</td>
<td>953 (8)</td>
<td>579 (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frobisher Bay, NWT</td>
<td>1167 (3)</td>
<td>250 (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gjoa Haven, NWT</td>
<td>600 (4)</td>
<td>451 (8)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grise Fjord, NWT</td>
<td>700 (1)</td>
<td>700 (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Harbour, NWT</td>
<td>1450 (4)</td>
<td>357 (7)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pangnirtung, NWT</td>
<td>500 (6)</td>
<td>200 (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pond Inlet, NWT</td>
<td>1590 (5)</td>
<td>566 (11)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Harrison, Que.</td>
<td>530 (1)</td>
<td>273 (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rankin Inlet, NWT</td>
<td>472 (2)</td>
<td>388 (12)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repulse Bay, NWT</td>
<td>885 (13)</td>
<td>573 (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolute, NWT</td>
<td>1409 (16)</td>
<td>373 (7)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sachs Harbour, NWT</td>
<td>1420 (3)</td>
<td>620 (11)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sachs Harbour, NWT</td>
<td>1080 (17)</td>
<td>735 (10)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Prices in dollars paid for various-sized hides at Hudson’s Bay Company Fur Sales during 1974–75

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size* (cm)</th>
<th>No. hides</th>
<th>Price range</th>
<th>Ave. price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XXXL (&gt;405)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>$350–1500</td>
<td>$607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXL (345–405)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>$300–1300</td>
<td>$562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XL (290–345)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>$150–800</td>
<td>$438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L (255–290)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>$75–400</td>
<td>$258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LM (215–255)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$50–200</td>
<td>$108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All hides</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>$50–1500</td>
<td>$324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Size of hide = length * width.

Table 6
Numbers of sport-hunters by settlements 1974–75

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>No. tags allotted</th>
<th>Sport-hunters</th>
<th>Successful sport-hunters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paulatuk</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pond Inlet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Average known prices (in dollars) paid to hunters for polar bear hides 1971–75. Numbers of skins are in parentheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broughton Island</td>
<td>317 (16)</td>
<td>406 (11)</td>
<td>153 (15)</td>
<td>567 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clyde River</td>
<td>432 (40)</td>
<td>448 (23)</td>
<td>1147 (77)</td>
<td>735 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pangnirtung</td>
<td>413 (8)</td>
<td>844 (16)</td>
<td>1450 (4)</td>
<td>357 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuktuyaktuk</td>
<td>585 (17)</td>
<td>666 (17)</td>
<td>1850 (17)</td>
<td>735 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave.</td>
<td>440 (81)</td>
<td>574 (59)</td>
<td>1344 (73)</td>
<td>572 (60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6

7