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**Résumé of the trade in polar bear hides in Canada, 1977-78**

by Pauline A. Smith\*

**Abstract**

The number of hides handled and the number sold by the auction houses handling Canadian polar bear hides in 1977-78 increased by 15% and 44% respectively over the numbers in 1976-77. There was a 20% increase in the number of new hides shipped to the auction houses in 1977-78. The prices paid at the auction houses increased by about 48%, halting a slight decline in prices which had begun in late 1976. The Japanese remain the main buyers.

There was a 16% increase in the known average price paid to the native hunters. Four settlements offered a sport-hunt and five of a possible 11 bears were taken. A summary of the polar bear kills and quotas by jurisdiction is given.

**Introduction**

This progress note summarizes the market statistics and the trade in polar bear hides during 1977-78. Similar annual summaries have been published for 1972-73 to 1976-77 (Smith and Jonkel 1975a, 1975b; Smith and Stirling 1976; Smith 1977, 1978).

Because polar bear hides are classed as novelty furs, demand and prices fluctuate in response to economic conditions. During the early 1970's the market values of polar bear hides rose rapidly to reach a peak in late 1973 and early 1974, when the average price per hide at the auction houses was almost \$1400. The maximum price paid for one untanned hide was \$3600 in December 1973 (Smith and Jonkel 1975b). During 1975, prices decreased markedly with an average hide bringing only \$585. Average prices remained in the order of \$600-\$700 for the next two years. In 1978, the average price rose markedly to \$907.

**The supply**

The auction houses handling Canadian polar bear hides and the suppliers of these hides were the same as in previous years (Smith 1977). Hides sent to the Edmonton Fur Auction Sales were sold at Dominion Soudack Fur Auction Sales in Winnipeg. The Manitoba government did not hold its sale by sealed tender in spring 1978 due to the small number of hides on hand. The three hides taken in 1978 were held over and may be sold in spring 1979 along with four hides taken during the fall of 1978. All hides taken by Ontario Indians were sold through the Ontario Trappers' Association in North Bay. The percentages taken as commission by the auction houses also remained the same (Western Canadian Raw Fur Auction Sales in Vancouver, 6%; Hudson's Bay Company in Montreal, and Dominion Soudack, 7%; Ontario Trappers' Association, 5%).

\*CWS, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H3.

**The market**

During 1977-78, the auction houses handled a total of 489 hides (Table 1), an increase of almost 15% over the 427 hides handled during 1976-77. Of the 1977-78 total, 145 hides were held over from the previous season and 344 hides were shipped to the auction houses during the season. The number of new hides represented a 20% increase (58 hides) over the 286 hides received in the previous year. Of the 489 hides handled, 405 (83%) were sold.

**Table 1**

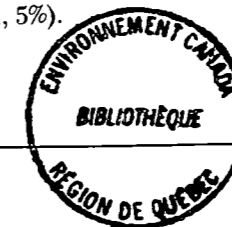
Numbers of Canadian polar bear hides handled by auction houses, 1977-78, including hides held over from 1976-77 and new arrivals

Auction house	Hides handled	1976-77 hides	New hides
Western Canadian	206	14	192
Hudson's Bay Company	246	127	119
Dominion Soudack	8	1	7
Ontario Trappers' Assoc.	23	0	23
Manitoba Government	3	0	3
Hudson's Bay and Annings	3	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>489</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>344</b>

Ninety-two per cent (446/489 hides) were handled by the Hudson's Bay (246 hides) and Western Canadian (206 hides). The balance (37/489 hides) was handled by the four other auction houses. Although the Hudson's Bay handled over 50% of the hides, 127 had been held over from the previous season. Of the new hides sent to the auction houses during 1977-78, Western Canadian received 56% (192/344 hides), while the Hudson's Bay received only 35% (119/344). The shipments of new hides received by the other four auction houses during 1977-78 were as follows: Dominion Soudack 7 hides, Ontario Trappers 23, Manitoba government 3, Hudson's Bay and Annings in London, England 0.

The number of hides sold and the prices paid for the polar bear hides at the auction houses during the 1977-78 season are given in Table 2. (For this résumé, the season is taken to extend from 1 October to 30 September the following year). During the year, the overall market was much improved over the previous three years and most of the better quality hides sold quickly. However, most of the hides (74% or 299) were sold by private treaty. Only 26% (106) of the hides were sold through public auction, compared to 52% (148/282) the previous year. The Hudson's Bay sold 74% (182/246) of its stock, which was a marked increase over 1976-77, when only 42% (91/218) was sold. Polar bear hides were not offered at their December 1977 and January/February 1978 auctions, and the entire catalog for their March sale was withdrawn.

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**Table 2**

Numbers of polar bear skins offered and sold, and prices paid (\$) at auctions, 1977-78. Numbers of skins put up for auction are in parentheses

Auction house	Type of sale	Date	No. skins sold	Price range	Av. price
Western Canadian, Vancouver	Auction	Jan. 1978	13	375-1525	1008
		Mar.	18	450-1725	992
		May	19	275-1750	1001
		-	-	-	-
Sub-total			50	275-1750	1000
	Private treaty	1 Oct. 1977-30 Sept. 1978	140	275-1700	918
Total			190	275-1750	939
Hudson's Bay Co., Montreal	Auction	Dec. 1977	-	-	-
		Jan./Feb. 1978	-	-	-
		Mar.	0 (176)	-	-
		June	3 (135)	700-1000	833
		Sept.	23 (104)	550-1550	1174
		Sub-total			26
	Private treaty	1 Oct. 1977-30 Sept. 1978	156	150-1550	891
Total			182	150-1550	926
Dominion Soudack, Winnipeg		Dec. 1977	-	-	-
		Feb. 1978	0 (1)	-	-
		April	5 (5)	500-1080	738
		June	2 (2)	500-630	565
		Sept.	1 (1)	-	1100
Total			8	500-1100	761
Ontario Trappers' Assoc., North Bay	Auction	Dec. 1977	4 (4)	35-820	411
		Jan. 1978	4 (4)	150-550	338
		Feb.	4 (4)	350-1000	644
		April	6 (6)	400-1330	708
		June	4 (4)	600-1120	744
Total			22 (22)	35-1330	581
Manitoba Govt., Winnipeg	Sealed tender		No auction held in 1978		
Hudson's Bay & Annings, London, England	Private treaty	Oct. 1977	3	468-522	486
Royal Greenland, Copenhagen, Denmark	Auction	Dec. 1977	36	?-1508	874
Total no. Canadian hides sold		1977-78	405	35-1750	907

due to the lack of competitive interest. Only three of the 135 hides put up for auction at their June sale and 23 of the 104 hides at their September sale were sold. Interest was only slightly higher at the Western Canadian auction sales, where 13 hides were sold at their January 1978 sale, 18 in March, and 19 in May. The number of hides moved at the auction sales represented only 14% (26/182) of the hides sold by the Hudson's Bay Company and 26% (50/190) by Western Canadian. The balance (156 hides at the Hudson's Bay, 140 at Western Canadian) was sold by private treaty. Hides which are not sold at an auction sale are held over until the next sale or are sold privately. As in the previous year, Western Canadian handled fewer hides than the Hudson's Bay but sold more. Consequently Western Canadian's turnover rate was higher (190/206 or 92%). Dominion Soudack and Ontario Trappers offered all their hides at public auction sales, and all hides put up for sale were sold. The Hudson's Bay and Annings sold its remaining three hides by private treaty in October 1977.

At the end of September 1978, the auction houses had the following inventories: Hudson's Bay 64 hides, Western Canadian 16, Dominion Soudack 0, Ontario Trappers 1, Manitoba Government 3, and Hudson's Bay and Annings 0. As in the previous two years, no hides were forwarded from the Hudson's Bay in Montreal to the Hudson's Bay and Annings in London, England. The three hides that the London company had on hand at the end of the previous season were sold in October 1977.

The December 1977 sale by the Royal Greenland Trade Department in Copenhagen, Denmark, the largest handlers of polar bear hides outside Canada, is included for comparison (Table 2). Only 36 hides were auctioned and all were sold. During the past few years, there has been a gradual decline in the number of hides handled by the Copenhagen auction house. However, apart from the hides which are used by the hunters or are sold locally, all hides taken by Greenland hunters are marketed through the Royal Greenland Trade Department. On average, the prices were 71% higher than those obtained in the December 1976 sale, and were only slightly lower (< 4%) than for Canadian hides: \$874 compared to \$907 for Canadian hides (Table 2). The limited number of hides available apparently stimulated keen bidding and the higher prices obtained.

The average prices paid for polar bear hides at the four Canadian auction houses and also at the Royal Greenland Trade Department all showed marked increases from the previous year (Table 3). The greatest increases were registered by two of the smaller dealers, the Ontario Trappers' Association and the Royal Greenland Trade Department. All increases appear to reflect an increase in demand which may have been encouraged by a weakened Canadian dollar. The increase shown by the Ontario Trappers illustrates the marked increase in prices paid for poorer quality hides. Most of the hides handled by the Ontario company are taken in the summer and fall and are generally not in prime condition. The lowest increase was registered by the Hudson's Bay. Because of the increased demand, it has been possible to sell some of the poorer quality hides which the company was unable to move in previous years. The Hudson's Bay's in-

**Table 3**

Comparison of average prices (\$) paid for polar bear hides at auctions, 1976-77 and 1977-78. Numbers of hides sold are in parentheses

Auction house	1976-77	1977-78	% increase
Western Canadian	662 (113)	939 (190)	42
Hudson's Bay Co.	800 (91)	926 (182)	16
Dominion Soudack	475 (24)	761 (8)	60
Ontario Trappers' Assoc.	286 (21)	581 (22)	103
Royal Greenland Trade Dept.	512 (68)	874 (36)	71
Av. (all auction houses handling Canadian hides)	612 (282)	907 (405)	48

ventory at the end of 1977-78 was much reduced from the previous year: 64 hides in October 1978 compared to 127 in 1977. The purchasing and marketing patterns of the Hudson's Bay allow them to hold hides, particularly the poorer quality hides, until the market improves. Although all the auction houses in Canada receive hides directly from the hunters or through the NWT Fur Marketing Service or native co-ops, the Hudson's Bay, in addition, receives hides from its northern stores. These latter hides are paid for in full, and consequently the hunter receives his money immediately, allowing the Hudson's Bay to decide when to sell them. Except for these hides, payment in full is not made until the hide is actually sold by the auction houses. Therefore, the auction houses are obligated to sell the hides as quickly as possible and for the best prices, otherwise hunters may withdraw their hides and try to sell them elsewhere.

The highest price paid for a hide was \$1750, a 17% increase over 1976-77 (\$1500) and was recorded by Western Canadian (Table 2). The lowest price (\$35) was paid for the hides of two cubs sold by the Ontario Trappers. The highest average (\$939) was recorded by Western Canadian.

As in past years, the hides which were in prime condition and had been carefully skinned, prepared and packed for shipping brought the highest prices and sold easily. Most of the skins held over at the end of the season were poor quality hides. The majority of the hides handled by the Ontario Trappers were classified as stained or damaged, which partly explains the lower average price paid for hides there.

The Japanese continued to be the main buyers at the auction houses. About 95% of the hides sold by Western Canadian were to Japanese buyers. Most of the hides sold by the Hudson's Bay were bought by Japanese buyers, either directly or indirectly through Canadian agents. Some hides went to West German buyers.

A list of known average prices paid to native hunters by settlement in 1977-78 is given in Table 4, along with comparable data for 1976-77. The table is based on data collected by NWT Wildlife Officers and the Quebec Department of Tourism, Hunting and Fishing. There was a marked increase

**Table 4**  
Average known prices (\$) paid to hunters for polar bear hides, 1976-77 and 1977-78. Numbers of skins are in parentheses

Settlement	1976-77	1977-78	% change
Arctic Bay, NWT	717 (3)	929 (7)	+30
Broughton Island, NWT	644 (16)	686 (22)	+7
Cape Dorset, NWT	600 (2)	1000 (7)	+67
Clyde River, NWT	592 (34)	672 (37)	+14
Coral Harbour, NWT	557 (51)	553 (61)	-1
Eskimo Point, NWT	475 (12)	783 (14)	+65
Frobisher Bay, NWT	500 (1)	791 (13)	+58
Hall Beach, NWT	-	821 (6)	-
Igloolik, NWT	498 (8)	600 (4)	+21
Lake Harbour, NWT	761 (9)	964 (5)	+27
Pangnirtung, NWT	677 (13)	589 (13)	-13
Pond Inlet, NWT	855 (10)	1081 (18)	+26
Port Burwell, NWT	300 (1)	750 (2)	+150
Repulse Bay, NWT	736 (11)	496 (13)	-33
Resolute, NWT	247 (5)	413 (2)	+67
Sanikiluaq, NWT	597 (16)	889 (20)	+49
Spence Bay, NWT	-	633 (13)	-
Tuktoyaktuk, NWT	881 (18)	843 (14)	-4
Whale Cove, NWT	-	979 (7)	-
Melville Island, NWT	-	1075 (3)	-
Quebec	491 (17)	367 (3)	-25
Av. (all settlements)	624 (262)	723 (274)	+16

in the average price paid in 1977-78 compared to the previous year, although the per-cent increase was lower in 1977-78 (16% compared to 27% in 1976-77). The average prices obtained for polar bear hides varied widely between settlements. The hunters in most settlements experienced an increase over last year's prices, but the hunters in five settlements (including Quebec) registered a decline in their average price. The lack of complete data on prices paid, the size and condition of the hides precludes any definite conclusions, but marketing methods used by the hunters may partially explain some of the variation. As in the past, the prices paid at the auction houses have a direct effect on the prices paid to native hunters. The effect is immediate when hunters sell directly to the auction houses. Hence, hunters who sold to the auction houses during 1977-78 experienced, on average, a price increase of about 48% for those hides. The highest prices paid for hides taken by Pond Inlet and Cape Dorset hunters (the settlements with the highest averages in 1977-78 (Table 4)) were for hides that were sold either directly, or indirectly via the NWT Fur Marketing Service, through the auction houses. Through the NWT Fur Marketing Service, the NWT government advances up to 75% of the estimated value of the hide. The effect of prices paid at the auction houses is much delayed when hunters sell locally or privately. Consequently, in 1977-78, these hunters received prices comparable to those gained at the auction houses during 1976-77. The lowest prices at Pond Inlet and Cape

Dorset were obtained for hides sold to the local Hudson's Bay store or native co-op. All of the 13 hides for which price data are available, from Repulse Bay, which received one of the lowest averages in 1977-78, were sold locally to the Naujut Co-op and the Hudson's Bay Store. The situation has reversed since 1976-77, when the highest prices were recorded by hunters in settlements where most of the hides were sold locally. It is interesting to note that prices paid at the auction houses had declined 8% between 1975-76 and 1976-77.

The known polar bear harvest was slightly less in 1977-78 than in the previous four years. Of the 558 bears known killed, 528 were taken by native hunters as part of their quota (Table 5). The balance of the harvest (30 bears) in-

**Table 5**  
Known polar bear kill data and recommended quotas in Canada, 1976-78

Jurisdiction	1976-77		1977-78	
	Rec. quota	Kill	Rec. quota	Kill
Manitoba	35	24	35	15
Newfoundland	0	0	0	1
NWT	516	479	530	503
Ontario	30	33	30	14
Quebec	42	45	42	25
Yukon	6	0	6	0
Norway	5*	0	5*	0
Total	634	581	648	558

\*Allowed to Norway for protection of life under the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (1973).

cludes bears killed in self-defence, from drug-overdoses, or as problem bears. The hides of these bears are marketed by the territorial and provincial governments. No settlements recorded any overkills during 1977-78. Apparently because of poor ice conditions, three of the Western Arctic settlements were unable to fill their quotas. A shortened hunting season (1 January to 31 May) was introduced in December, 1977 for several southeastern Baffin Island settlements, and will be extended to more NWT settlements in the future. Since November 1976, the hunting season in the Tuktoyaktuk area has been limited to 1 December to 31 May the following year. This modification is designed to protect pregnant females in the fall prior to denning, but it also means the bears are being killed when their hides are most valuable. In the rest of the NWT and the Yukon, the polar bear hunting season extends from 1 October to 31 May the following year. Similar legislation exists in Quebec but the problem of enforcement remains. Residual problems in the hide tagging programs in Quebec and Ontario preclude any accurate estimation of the kill. However, solutions to the problems are currently being worked on. Records are kept of the nuisance bears killed in northern Manitoba each

summer and fall. However, no record is maintained of the number of bears, if any, killed by Manitoba Indians, who are allowed to kill polar bears for their own use, but not to sell or barter the hide.

Even though the prices for polar bear hides have risen considerably since 1976-77, hunters should be encouraged to take hides from larger bears, in the spring because they are more valuable (Table 6). The auction houses still complain

**Table 6**  
Prices paid (\$) for various-sized hides at Hudson's Bay Company Fur Sales during 1977-78

Size*	No. hides	Price range	Av. price
XXXL (>405 cm)	30	450-1550	1317
XXL (345-405 cm)	84	150-1450	980
XL (290-345 cm)	64	360-1250	708
L (255-290 cm)	4	200-550	363
All hides	182	150-1550	926

\*Size of hide = length + width.

about the lack of sufficient good quality hides and for this reason would like to see the hunting season restricted to the spring period to ensure a larger proportion of hides in prime condition. Hides in prime condition are sold almost as soon as they reach the auction houses. There is little demand for poorer quality hides, many of which can only be used for fly tying.

#### Inuit-guided sport-hunt

The sport-hunt in the NWT continued in 1978 with a limited number of hunts being offered by four Western Arctic settlements (Table 7). Cambridge Bay operated its hunt from a camp based at Parry Island, whilst Tuktoyaktuk operated

**Table 7**  
Numbers of sport-hunters by settlements, 1977-78

Settlement	No. tags allotted	Sport-hunters	
		No.	Successful
Cambridge Bay (Parry Island)	1	-	1
Holman	4	-	3
Tuktoyaktuk (North Star Harbour)	1	-	1
Paulatuk	5	-	0
Total	11	19	5

from North Star Harbour. Of the possible 11 bears, five were taken. Under the 1968 NWT Game Ordinance, these Inuit-guided sport-hunts, using traditional hunting methods, have been allowed since January 1970. Tags used for the sport-hunt must be allotted from the settlement quotas. Tags allotted to unsuccessful hunts cannot be used later. In 1978 the cost remained unchanged at \$4000, which did not include travel expenses to the settlement or the cost of a licence.

As in previous years, the number of applicants for the sport-hunt has been greater than the number of tags made available by the settlements. To some extent, this situation has arisen because the use of snowmobiles has replaced dog teams in many areas of the Canadian Arctic. According to the Canadian Declaration attached to the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (1973), dog teams are an integral part of the sport-hunt. Consequently, the NWT will not license sport-hunts if suitable dogs are not available in the settlements. In addition, many Inuit hunters are unwilling to give up their polar bear tags in return for the sport-hunting fee. Recent marked increases in prices paid for polar bear hides may, in the future, discourage Inuit hunters from offering a sport-hunt. Cultural differences between Inuit guides and sport-hunters sometimes cause misunderstanding. Complaints have been received from sport-hunters about the quality of the accommodation and poor guiding. The NWT is continuing to assist and encourage the Hunters' and Trappers' Associations in the settlement to improve the quality of the hunt. Eventually it is hoped that settlements will be able to operate the hunts without the assistance of the NWT government.

In 1978, three of the sport-hunters were from Canada, three from the USA, three from Western Europe and two from Japan. Under a June 1977 interpretation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, a US citizen can now partake in a sport-hunt in Canada without requiring a permit from the Marine Mammal Commission. However, the hunt probably still has limited attractions for US citizens because the importation of polar bear hides into the USA is still barred through the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

#### Legislation

With Canada's ratification of the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (1973) in December 1974, the provinces and territories were obligated to amend their legislation to meet the terms of the agreement. The terms specify that management practices, including the number of polar bears harvested each year, should be based on available biological knowledge from ongoing research programs. The regulations controlling the number of polar bears harvested in Canada during 1977-78 are summarized in Stirling and Smith (in press). During 1977-78, the quotas for three Baffin Island settlements were increased by a total of 14 bears. In return for these quota increases, the settlements agreed to delay the hunting season until 1 January.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (1973) has been in effect in Canada since July 1975. Since then, the federal government, through the issue of permits, has maintained a permanent

**Table 8**

Number of live polar bears and polar bear hides legally exported from Canada, 4 July 1975 to 31 December 1977 (from Heppes 1978a and b, Heppes and Robillard 1978)

	1975*	1976	1977	Total
Live polar bears**	2	4	4	10
Polar bear hides†	—	73	170	243
Total	2	77	174	253

\*4 July–31 December.

\*\*Mainly bred in captivity.

†Some hides with skulls.

record of all polar bears, hides or any other product legally exported or imported regardless of destination or origin (Table 8). The problem of illicit trade remains. Most of the legally exported hides (89%) were destined for Japan. The need for permits is having a marked effect on the numbers of hides being made available for sale by the Hudson's Bay and Annings. Since the convention came into effect no hides have been forwarded to the London company from the Hudson's Bay in Montreal. It seems unlikely that the situation will change in the near-future. The US market remains closed because of the regulations in the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972).

#### Comment

The recovery of the polar bear fur market during 1977–78 was in marked contrast to the small fluctuations recorded in the previous two years. All the reasons for the dramatic increase in the prices paid for hides at the auction houses are not known. However, the decline in the value of the Canadian dollar on the international money market may partially explain the continued and increased interest of foreigner buyers, who probably are now prepared to pay slightly higher prices. The auction houses may have helped by placing higher minimum bids on each hide. Although the auction houses expect the present situation to continue into the next season, problems which hinder price increases still exist. Good quality, large-sized hides are always in demand and raise the best prices. Unfortunately, such hides are in short supply and the auction houses at the end of each season are left with the poorer quality hides which have limited use and limited demand.

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