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Résumé of the trade in polar bear hides in Canada, 1976-77by P.A. Smith¹**Introduction**

This paper summarizes the regulations and market statistics, and the trade in polar bear hides during 1976-77. Similar annual summaries have been published for 1972-73 to 1975-76 (Smith and Jonkel 1975*a* and *b*, Smith and Stirling 1976, and Smith 1977).

The auction houses in Canada sold 427 hides in 1976-77, a small decrease from 451 hides in 1975-76. The slight recovery in prices paid for polar bear hides, which began in early 1976, was halted in 1976-77 with a price decline of about 8%. The known prices paid to the native hunters increased considerably and, for the first time since the annual summaries began in 1972, were slightly higher than those obtained by the auction houses.

The supply

The auction houses handling Canadian polar bear hides and the suppliers of these hides were the same in 1976-77 as in the previous years (Smith 1977). In 1977, the Manitoba government held its own spring sale through sealed tender. Due to the small number of hides available for auction, they did not have a sale in spring 1976, but held over the eight hides and auctioned them with hides taken during fall 1976. The Ontario Trappers Association in North Bay is at present the only outlet for hides taken by Ontario Indians.

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 in Winnipeg, 7%; Ontario Trappers Association, 5%).

The market

Of the 427 polar bear hides handled by the auction houses in 1976-77, 141 were held over from the previous season. The 286 new hides shipped to the auction houses represented an 18% increase (44 hides) over the number received in the previous year (242 hides). Eighty-one per cent of the hides (345/427) were handled by the Hudson's Bay Company (218/427) and Western Canadian Raw Fur Auction Sales (127/427). Although the Hudson's Bay Company handled 51% of the hides, 91 had been held over from the 1975-76 season. Shipments of new hides received in 1976-77 included: Hudson's Bay Company 117, Western Canadian 93, Dominion Soudack Fur Auction Sales 24, Ontario Trappers Association 21, and Manitoba government 23.

The number of hides sold and the prices paid for the polar bear hides at the auction houses during the 1976-77 season are given in Table 1. (For this résumé, the season is taken to extend from 1 October to 30 September the following year). As in 1975-76, the market was slow throughout the year and no marked trends were apparent. Many hides were bought back from the auction sales because of lack of interest and low bidding. Only 52% (148/282) of the hides sold by the auction houses were moved at the auction sales. The rest were sold privately. (Hides which are not sold at auction are held until the next sale or are sold privately.) Although the Hudson's Bay Company handled the largest number of hides, only 42% (91/218) of their stock was sold. Only 14 of the 158 hides offered at their March 1977 auction were sold. All the hides offered at their May and September sales were withdrawn. Seventy-seven hides were sold privately during the year. Western Canadian handled fewer hides than the Hudson's Bay Company, but sold more hides and consequently their turnover rate was higher (113/127 or 89%). Forty per cent (113/282) of the hides sold in 1976-77 were handled by Western Canadian. Of these 60% (68/113) were sold at their auction sales held in January, February, May, and June. The rest (45 hides) were sold privately. All but one of the hides handled by Dominion Soudack were sold. Thirteen hides were sold at their May-June and September auction sales. No hides were offered at their December 1976 or February or March 1977 auctions. Eleven hides were sold privately between February and June 1977. All hides handled by the Ontario Trappers Association were sold at public auction. Hudson's Bay and Annings offered five hides at their March auction, of which only one was sold. A second was sold privately.

At the end of September 1977, the Hudson's Bay Company, Western Canadian, and Dominion Soudack had inventories of 127, 14, and 1 hides respectively. No new hides were forwarded from the Hudson's Bay Company in Montreal to the Hudson's Bay and Annings in England. At the end of September the London company had three hides in stock, but these were sold privately during October. Because of new controls on the export and import of hides, the auction of polar bear hides by the London company is likely to be reduced in future.

The December 1976 sale by the Royal Greenland Trade Department, the largest handlers of polar bear hides outside Canada, is included here for comparison. Apart from hides which are used by the hunters or are sold locally, all hides taken by the Greenland Inuit are marketed through the Royal Greenland Trade Department. All the hides offered were sold by auction sale. As in previous years, their average price was lower: \$512 compared to \$612 obtained for Canadian hides (Table 1).

¹CWS, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H3.

Table 1
Numbers of polar bear skins offered and sold, and prices paid (\$) at auctions, 1976-77. Numbers of skins put up for auction are in parentheses

Auction house	Type of sale	Date	No. skins sold	Price range	Ave. price
Western Canadian, Vancouver	Auction	Jan. 1977	18 (53)	250-1200	694
		Feb.	10 (42)	400- 800	658
		May	12 (41)	475-1200	708
		June	28 (42)	275-1000	564
Sub-total			68	250-1200	638
	Private treaty	1 Oct. 1976-30 Sept. 1977	45	300-1200	698
Total			113	250-1200	662
Hudson's Bay Co., Montreal	Auction	Mar. 1977	14 (158)	180-1080	567
		May	0 (161)	-	-
		Sept.	0 (137)	-	-
Sub-total			14	180-1080	567
	Private treaty	1 Oct. 1976-30 Sept. 1977	77	60-1500	842
Total			91	60-1500	800
Dominion Soudack, Winnipeg	Auction	Dec. 1976	-	-	-
		Feb. 1977	-	-	-
		Mar.	-	-	-
		May-June	4 (9)	450- 650	588
		Sept.	9 (10)	50- 920	476
Sub-total			13	50- 920	510
	Private treaty	Feb.-June 1977	11	125- 950	434
Total			24	50- 950	475
Ontario Trappers Assoc., North Bay	Auction	Dec. 1976	2 (8)	250- 550	400
		Jan. 1977	6 (8)	100- 600	317
		Feb.	10 (10)	100- 400	233
		April	-	-	-
		June	3 (3)	205- 540	327
Total			21	100- 600	286
Manitoba Govt., Winnipeg	Sealed tender	April 1977	31 (31)*	10- 976.55	214
Hudson's Bay and Annings, London, England	Auction	Mar. 1977	1 (5)	442	442
	Private treaty	Mar.	1	552	552
Total			2	442- 552	497
Royal Greenland, Copenhagen, Denmark	Auction	Dec. 1976	68	?-1043	512
Total no. Canadian hides sold		1976-1977	282	10-1500	612

*These hides already tanned.

The average prices paid for polar bear hides at four Canadian auction houses and also for the Royal Greenland Trade Department all showed decreases from the previous year (Table 2). Although the overall decreases shown by all the auction houses handling Canadian hides was only 8%, the Hudson's Bay Company, Dominion Soudack, and Ontario Trappers Association registered greater decreases. The average price obtained by Western Canadian remained almost unchanged. The highest price paid (\$1500) was similar to those in the previous two years and was again recorded by the Hudson's Bay Company. The lowest price (\$10) was recorded by the Manitoba government. The highest average price (\$800) was again recorded by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Table 2
Comparison of average prices (\$) paid for polar bear hides at auctions 1975-76 and 1976-77

Auction house	1975-76	1976-77	% decrease
Western Canadian	670	662	1
Hudson's Bay Co.	910	800	12
Dominion Soudack	648	475	27
Ont. Trappers Assoc.	466	286	39
Royal Greenland Trade Dept.	528	512	3
Ave. (all auction houses handling Canadian hides)	668	612	8

The higher average prices recorded by the Hudson's Bay Company in the last two years may be partly explained by the different hide purchasing and selling patterns. Although all the auction houses in Canada receive hides directly from the hunters, or indirectly through the Northwest Territories (NWT) Fur Marketing Service or native co-ops, the Hudson's Bay Company, in addition, receives hides from their northern stores. In most cases, payment in full is not made to the hunter until the hide is sold by auction. The auction houses are therefore obligated to sell the hide as quickly as possible and for the best price. If delays in payment are too long, hunters can, and do, withdraw their hides and try to sell them elsewhere by other means. Purchase of hides in full by the Hudson's Bay Company through their northern stores allows the company to decide when to sell the hides. When the market is slow, as is the case at present, hides can be held over until the market improves. This probably explains the much larger hold-overs of hides recorded by the Hudson's Bay Company, compared to the other auction houses, during the last two seasons.

As in the past, the hides which were in prime condition and had been carefully skinned and prepared brought the highest prices and sold fairly easily. For some reason fewer better quality hides were received by the auction houses during the last season. Possibly the better quality hides were sold locally. For hunters selling their hides directly, or indirectly through the NWT Fur Marketing Service to the auction houses, full

remittance is not received until the skin is successfully auctioned. (Through the Fur Marketing Service, the NWT government advances up to 75% of the estimated value of the hides to the hunters.) Delays in payment have been common during the last few years, as a result of the poorer market. The low prices obtained by the Ontario Trappers Association are a direct reflection of the poor quality hides which are usually taken in summer and early fall, and are often poorly prepared. The low prices obtained by the Manitoba government are considered to be a result partly of poor advertisement of their sale. Although most of these hides were taken during the fall and were generally not in prime condition, all the hides sold were already tanned and all, but one, were in fair to good condition and should have brought higher prices.

The Japanese were still the main buyers, although the interest shown by Canadian buyers increased and was now a close second. Japanese interest remains with the better quality hides and buying is at the Western Canadian, Hudson's Bay Company, and Dominion Soudack auction houses. However, only 3 of the 24 hides sold at the latter house went to Japanese buyers. All sales by the Manitoba government and the Ontario Trappers Association were to Canadian buyers. The US market remained closed.

A list of known average prices paid to native hunters by settlement in 1976-77 is given in Table 3 along with comparable data for 1975-76. This information is based on data collected by NWT Fish and Wildlife officers and the Quebec Department of Tourism, Hunting and Fishing. The decline in

Table 3
Average known prices (\$) paid to hunters for polar bear hides 1975-76 and 1976-77. Numbers of skins are in parentheses

Settlement	1975-76	1976-77	% change
Arctic Bay, NWT	620 (5)	717 (3)	+ 16
Broughton Island, NWT	355 (2)	644 (16)	+ 81
Cambridge Bay, NWT	627 (11)	645 (10)	+ 3
Cape Dorset, NWT	620 (5)	600 (2)	- 3
Clyde River, NWT	363 (36)	592 (34)	+ 63
Coral Harbour, NWT	502 (32)	557 (51)	+ 11
Eskimo Point, NWT	394 (8)	475 (12)	+ 21
Frobisher Bay, NWT	400 (1)	500 (1)	+ 25
Holman Island, NWT	600 (2)	643 (10)	+ 7
Igloolik, NWT	378 (8)	498 (8)	+ 32
Lake Harbour, NWT	400 (1)	761 (9)	+ 90
Pangnirtung, NWT	443 (7)	677 (13)	+ 53
Pond Inlet, NWT	536 (9)	855 (10)	+ 60
Port Burwell, NWT	-	300 (1)	-
Repulse Bay, NWT	340 (5)	736 (11)	+116
Resolute, NWT	-	247 (5)	-
Sachs Harbour, NWT	691 (11)	707 (15)	+ 2
Sanikiluaq, NWT	576 (16)	597 (16)	+ 4
Tuktoyaktuk, NWT	832 (12)	881 (18)	+ 6
Quebec	470 (6)	491 (17)	+ 4
Ave. (all settlements)	493 (238)	624 (262)	+ 27

prices paid to hunters, which began in 1974-75 and continued through 1975-76 was halted in 1976-77. For all the settlements for which data are available, an overall 27% increase in prices was recorded. Only one settlement (Cape Dorset) recorded a decrease (3%). The price increases are probably a direct but delayed reflection of the higher prices paid at the auction houses during this and the previous seasons. The known average price paid to native hunters was slightly higher than the price recorded by the auction houses. This situation is probably partly a reflection of an increase in private sales for better prices. Tuktoyaktuk recorded the highest average price, and it is interesting to note that 16 of the 18 hides for which there are data were sold privately. As in past years, because of the lack of complete data on the size and condition of the hides, the prices and marketing methods, no definite patterns can be discerned.

The known polar bear harvest for 1976-77 was the same as for 1975-76 (Table 4), even though the quota for NWT hunters was increased. However, the number of polar bears taken by native hunters increased from 550 to 576. The balance of the harvest includes polar bears killed in self-defence, from drug-overdoses, or as problem bears, and in 1976-77 the number was much reduced. The hides of problem and overdosed bears are marketed by the territorial and provincial governments. Only one NWT settlement (Pond Inlet) registered an overkill. Some settlements now delay hunting until the spring because of better hunting conditions and the better quality hides at that time. A NWT Order was passed in November 1976 to limit the hunting of polar bears in the Tuktoyaktuk area to 1 December to 31 May the following year. Although the legislation was made to protect pregnant females in the fall, it also encourages hunters to take polar bears when their hides are more valuable. In future, a shortened season may be introduced throughout more of the NWT. At present, the polar bear hunting season both there and in the Yukon Territory extends from 1 October to 31 May the following year. Similar

Table 4
Known polar bear kill data and recommended quotas in Canada 1975-77

Jurisdiction	1975-76		1976-77	
	Rec. quota	Kill	Rec. quota	Kill
Manitoba	35	8	35	24
Newfoundland	0	0	0	0
NWT	501	519	516	479
Ontario	30	15	30	33
Quebec	42	37	42	45
Yukon	6	2	6	0
Norway	5*	0	5*	0
Total	619	581	634	581

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

legislation exists in Quebec but the problem of enforcing it remains. Residual problems in the hide-tagging programs both in Quebec and Ontario preclude any accurate estimation of the kill there. No record is maintained of the number of polar bears, if any, killed by Manitoba Indians, who are allowed to kill polar bears for their own use only. Records are kept of the number of nuisance bears killed in the Churchill area each fall.

As the prices paid for polar bear hides appear to have stabilized, the hunters should be encouraged to take larger bears in the spring. In general, the larger the hide the more valuable it is (Tables 5a and b). The auction houses have repeatedly stated that the better quality hides are easily sold. Although the taking of females and cubs of the year is prohibited throughout most of Canada, it is not illegal in Ontario and Manitoba. The taking of cubs, and bears during the summer and fall, results in small hides or hides of little value.

Table 5a
Prices paid (\$) for various-sized hides at Hudson's Bay Company Fur Sales during 1976-77

Size*	No. hides	Price range	Ave. price
XXXL (>405 cm)	28	850-1500	1134
XXL (345-405 cm)	34	270-1350	807
XL (290-345 cm)	19	360-900	588
L (255-290 cm)	6	90-425	302
LM (215-255 cm)	4	60-225	150
All hides	91	60-1500	800

*Size of hide = length + width.

Table 5b
Prices paid (\$) for various-sized hides at Dominion Soudack Fur Auction Sales Limited from February to September 1977

Size*	No. hides	Price range	Ave. price
>9 ft. (>275 cm)	6	450-920	678
8-8.9 ft. (245-275 cm)	5	450-950	656
7-7.9 ft. (215-245 cm)	9	155-550	371
>7 ft. (>215 cm)	4	50-350	181
All hides	24	50-950	475

*Size = length.

Inuit-guided sport-hunt

During 1976-77, three Western Arctic settlements (Holman, North Star Harbour, and Paulatuk) offered a sport-hunt. Of the possible 11 bears, seven were taken (Table 6) leaving four sport-hunters unsuccessful. Under the 1968 NWT Game Ordinance, a limited, Inuit-guided sport-hunt using traditional hunting techniques has been allowed since January 1970. Tags used for the sport-hunts must be allotted from the settlement quotas. The tags allotted to unsuccessful sport-hunters cannot be used later. The outfitting fee is \$4000 per sport-hunt and does not include the cost of transportation to and from the settlement or the purchase of a hunting licence. In 1977, five of the sport-hunters originated from North America, four from western Europe, and two from Japan. None was from Canada.

In recent years, there have been more applicants for the sport-hunt than the number of tags made available by the settlements. This situation has resulted partly because of the limited number of dogteams, which must be used in the sport-hunt, and the short time period (March-April) when sport-hunting can be carried out. With better organization, particularly in the settlements, and some publicity, the sport-hunt could be expanded, if this was desired.

Table 6
Numbers of sport-hunters by settlements 1976-77

Settlement	No. tags allotted	Sport-hunters	
		No.	Successful
Holman	4	4	2
North Star Harbour	2	2	1
Paulatuk	5	5	4
Total	11	11	7

Legislation affecting the trade in polar bear hides

With Canada's ratification of the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (1973) in December 1974, management practices in the provinces and territories had to be based on the best available biological data. The regulations controlling the number of polar bears harvested in Canada during 1976-77 are summarized in Stirling and Smith (in press). Few changes, apart from a quota increase of 15 bears divided between three NWT settlements, were made during 1976-77.

In April 1975, Canada ratified the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (1973), which came into effect on 1 July 1975. Since then the federal government has maintained a permanent record of all hides legally exported or imported. The federal legislation applies whether or not the polar bear hides are being exported to or imported from a nation not a party to the convention. The problem of illicit trade still exists.

Summary

Even though the prices paid for polar bear hides and also the number handled and sold declined slightly during 1976-77, the polar bear fur market has stabilized. Small fluctuations, such as the decline recorded during 1976-77 will probably be typical of the market in the next few years. The average price paid for a polar bear hide will probably remain in the order of \$600. The prices paid to the native hunters will probably remain about the same, which is close to those obtained at the auction houses. Until the present economic situation improves and creates an expanding market for novelty furs, such as polar bear, or until the quality of the hides improves, the situation will remain more or less as it is now. The auction houses are still faced with backlogs, a steady supply of new hides, and the problem of selling poorer quality hides. The potentially large market in the USA remains closed because of the regulations in the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972).

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