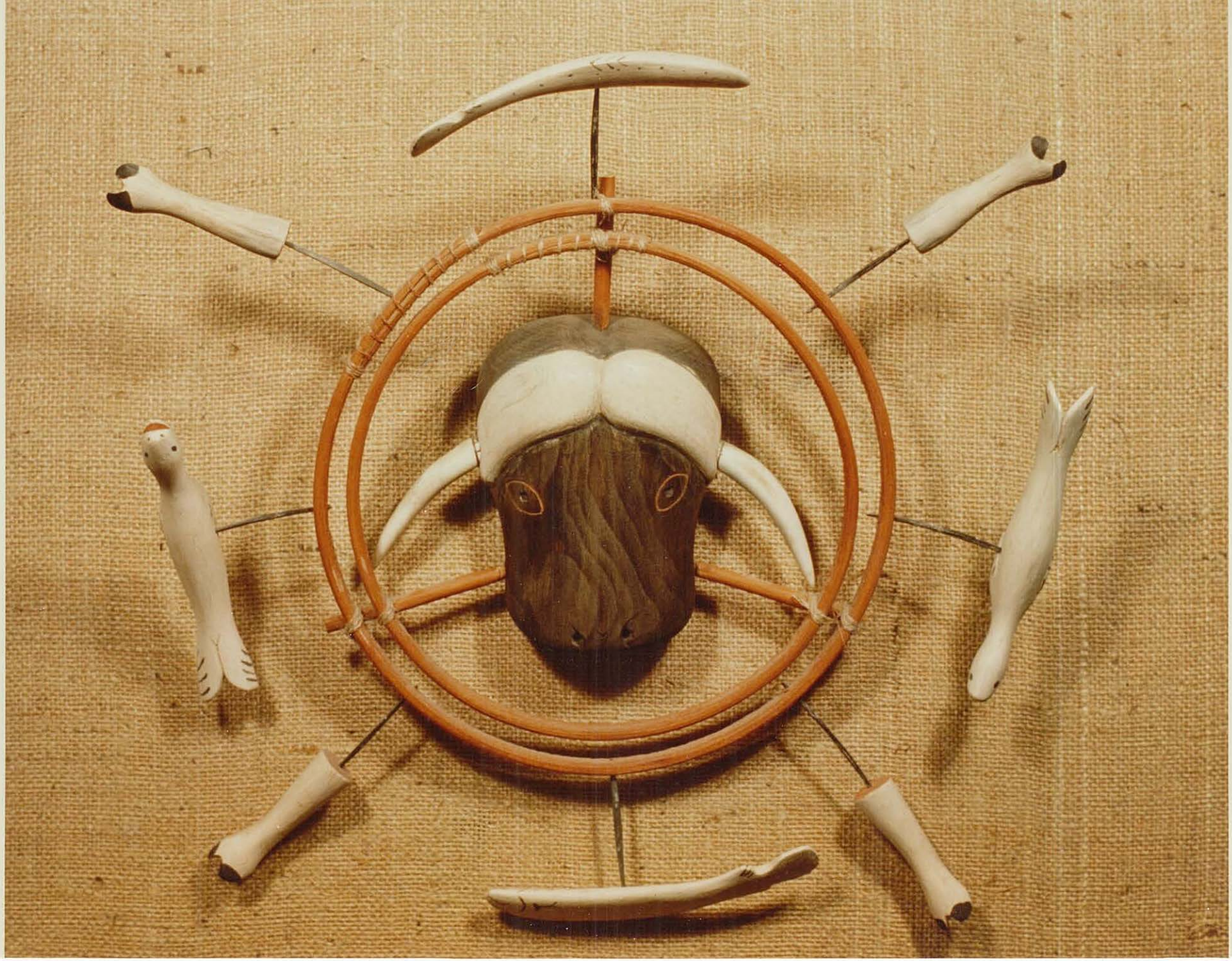
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U.S.-Soviet Muskox Transplant

–1975–



From Greenland to Alaska to Siberia. Muskox are gradually repopulating the arctic coast where they once thrived. Their latest move was from Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge off Alaska's west coast to Siberia's Wrangel Island and Taimyr Peninsula under a cooperative agreement between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Nunivak's herd of 750 has been growing from a nucleus of 34 animals shipped from Greenland to Alaska in 1930.

Adapted to all predators except man, muskox had vanished from Siberia almost 200 years ago. A formal agreement signed in May 1972 made arrangements for exchange of information and scientists on northern research and common environmental problems, including such topics as reindeer and muskox husbandry. The muskox transplanted as a result of this program will primarily be used for observation and research since the Soviets have no plans to domesticate or hunt the animals.

[*Frontispiece: Nunivak Mask by Andrew Noatak, courtesy of Evelyn Brown*]



In the fall of 1974 Dr. Savva Uspensky, right, of the Central Conservation Laboratory, Ministry of Agriculture of the U.S.S.R., visited Nunivak Island along with Soviet biologist Vadim Tarkov of Siberia. They came to observe Alaskan muskox on their ranges and firm up details of the spring transplant. Dr. Peter Lent, left, assistant leader of the Wildlife Cooperative Unit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, served as guide and liaison as did Dr. Calvin Lensink, muskox expert and refuge manager of Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Dr. Calvin J. Lensink*]



The Soviet biologists examined the range and impacts of muskox on Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge while on their visit in 1974. Uspensky and interpreter Dan St. John checked sand dune areas for signs of muskox use. During the summer and early fall forage is abundant over the entire island, allowing the muskox to roam unrestricted. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Dr. Calvin J. Lensink*]



Winter range is the critical factor in determining the number of animals the island can support. Deep and crusted snow confines muskox to limited areas along cliffs, sand dune areas, or mountain tops where winds sweep the vegetation free of snow. Dunes, however, are vulnerable to erosion when heavily trampled by foraging muskox. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Dr. Calvin J. Lensink*]



After months of planning, the time for the transplant was at hand. The two Soviet biologists flew to Alaska on March 25, 1975, via Washington, D.C., to oversee the roundup and shipment. They went again to Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge along with Dr. Lent; Jerry Hout, assistant refuge manager; Daniel St. John, interpreter from the University of Alaska; and Raisa Petroff, Department of the Interior interpreter. Marlin Perkins of "Wild Kingdom" was there with his camera crew to film the operations. In the village of Mekoryuk Dr. Uspensky, center, learned to handle the snowmachine he would use in the roundup. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Dr. Peter C. Lent*]



The residents of Mekoryuk were experts in muskox roundup techniques and quickly accomplished the mission. Their job was to travel over the island via the only means available—snowmachine—in search of muskox and then separate selected one- and two-year-olds from the herds. Older animals, not destined for transplant, were left alone. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Jerry L. Hout*]



Once a particular animal was separated from the herd, muscle power became important. The yearlings, weighing about 150 pounds and having horns less than six inches long, were wrestled to the ground, hobbled, and lifted onto sleds to be taken to the corral. Dr. Tarkov did not stand at the sideline. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Jerry L. Hout*]



The two-year-olds posed a different problem. Armed by that age with dangerous horns and weighing at least 250 pounds, these animals could not be wrestled. The Eskimos had solved the problem and mastered the technique of netting them, as they did seals. This was safer for both the animal and the man. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Jerry L. Hout*]



The roundup ended with all the animals in a corral at Mekoryuk. Nine of the 40 muskox to be shipped were two-year-olds, and 31 were yearlings. Of the yearlings, 21 were females and 10 were males. In the two-year-old category, seven were females and two were males. When each animal was herded into a crate, they would be ready for their journey to Siberia. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Jerry L. Hout*]



Due to continually drifting snow that shortened the usable runway at Mekoryuk, the Russian cargo plane would be unable to land. Instead, the crated muskox were loaded aboard a Wien Skyvan for an intermediate flight to Bethel, the nearest large airport. The Skyvan shuttled back and forth for three days to haul all the animals to Bethel by April 11. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Jerry L. Hout*]



Once in Bethel, the muskox were turned loose in a freight warehouse to await the final diplomatic clearance and arrival of the Russian plane. Refuge personnel hauled hay and snow blocks to provide food and moisture for the animals. The crates served as fences to separate the yearlings and two-year-old males and females. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



The Bethel warehouse became a Far North rodeo scene as Joe David, Lensink, and Lent wrestled the yearlings into their crates for the journey aboard Antonin 12 which landed about noon on April 12. The two-year-olds, equipped with dangerous horns were coaxed into entering their crates by squeeze play. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Craig L. Rieben*]



More than 500 persons, many of them school children, came to peer into the darkened warehouse to view the muskox. Even after the famous guests were crated and being taken by flatbed truck—in background—to the airport, the animals were the center of attention in Bethel. Meanwhile, the seven-man crew of the Antonin 12 was shown the sights of an Alaskan bush town. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



The Antonin 12, now parked at the Bethel airport, had flown east from Moscow with its own crew and three U.S. Air Force crewmen. When the plane crossed the International Dateline, the Americans took over navigation and communication with the ground. A blizzard on April 13 kept the plane grounded and not until the morning of April 14 were the muskox finally loaded on board. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



Squeezing 38 crates into the cargo hold of the Antonin 12 became a two-story operation. Shouts and directions flew in Yupik (the Eskimo dialect), English, and Russian as the crates were hoisted into place. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



Timothy hay, brought by the refuge staff, was added to the cargo of Antonin 12 as food for the muskox while enroute to their new home in Siberia. Chunks of snow were added to each crate for important moisture. Despite the strong wind and cold rain falling, loading activities proceeded without a hitch. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



With only inches to spare, the last of the muskox crates was wrestled into the airplane and the Russian crew prepared to cable their unique cargo securely for the trip. Meanwhile, the muskox stood placidly in their darkened cubicles. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



Dr. Calvin Lensink, center, and Dr. Peter Lent, right, bid farewell to Soviet scientist Dr. Savva Uspensky as the American portion of the transplant came to an end. These three men were instrumental in planning and executing this project—right down to the physical capturing or handling of the muskox now on board the plane. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]



In a gesture of good will and friendliness that typified the cooperative effort behind the muskox transplant, Dr. Savva Uspensky waved goodbye to the American participants in this historic exchange. Less than three hours later the muskox arrived safely at Cape Schmidt, Siberia, where they were divided— half the herd traveling further west to the Taimyr Peninsula and half bound for Wrangel Island to the north. Soviet biologists report both herds have adjusted well to their new environments. [*Fish & Wildlife Service photo by Elaine Rhode*]