

Wearing Proper Winter Clothing

It is imperative that hunters and travelers are dressed properly for the winter. If not, they may suffer an early death due to the often frigid and unrelenting conditions caused by Mother Nature. Inuit have been known to survive in some of the harshest weather conditions the world has to offer by simply dressing with animal skins and fur.

Animals have, by far, the warmest fur! If animals can survive with their fur, so can humans by adapting the fur/skin for their personal use to hold warmth. Animal skin and fur is the best clothing people in the arctic can wear to protect themselves against the cold. Even the warmest store bought material will not be warm enough to wear in the North for a length of time. Any type of warm clothing is suitable for a while but for continuous outings you need clothing that will protect you from blizzards, wet conditions, snow, extreme cold, sun and wind. Hunters are known to be outdoors for many days at a time. Years ago, hunters use to be away hunting for a number of weeks or months.

There are two main types of skins used in the North for winter clothing. They are caribou and seal, depending on the availability of the animals. Some communities are fortunate enough to have both. Most northern communities may have seal but many do not have caribou readily available in their community to use for clothing or for food.

Caribou skins are very warm and light. The hair is hollow and floats on water. Caribou skin is very thin compared to sea mammals such as seals. Caribou skin can easily dry after being immersed in water simply by shaking it, wringing it, or slapping it against something to get rid of the excess water. Caribou skins are waterproof but they do not handle salt very well. Salt water deteriorates fur like immersing a tooth in a can of Coke over night. Animals from the land tend to have thinner skin. Snow does not accumulate on the caribou skins as it just bounces off. Caribou skins make good blankets and mattresses. Caribou skin will not freeze when it is dry, unlike artificial leather. Caribou is best for qulittaq (caribou skin parka) and tuktuqutiik (caribou wind-pants). Caribou clothing is great to use as clothing and in an emergency, for extreme hunger, the skins are edible! I know people who have survived solely on caribou skins for a few days. They lost a little weight but they survived!

Seal skins are more durable but heavier than caribou. An untouched seal skin will have fat, skin, and fur. After a skin is altered, it may be black or it may be white. It will be black if the fur has been removed. It will be white if the fur is removed with the black scraped off, then whitened by sitting outdoors for a period of time (weathered). The black skin is usually set aside for men as the skin is waterproof, heavier than white, thicker and darker. The white may not be waterproof as most of the fat is removed. White skin is more popular for women's clothing. For example, kamiik (boots made out of seal skin) for women are more often white over black or untouched skin.

Seal skin has many other uses. They can be made as pouches for hunters. Rope can be made out of strips of seal skin. Seal skins are also used to make food containers to store and preserve meat.

Other skins and fur are used for clothing-but some are not as popular. Polar bear, wolf, dog, wolverine, fox, musk-ox, square flipper seal and store bought material are used as well. However, their use is dependent on the availability of the animal or material in the community.

The clothing used by the Inuit identifies us and, culturally, helps to define who we are. Seal and caribou clothing are unique to the Arctic.

If you plan to be outside for an extended period of time, please wear proper winter clothing.

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