

The Inuit People

The people of the Canadian Arctic are known as the Inuit. They used to be called Eskimos, which came from a Native American word for 'eater of raw meat'. Now the Arctic people are officially known as the Inuit, which means 'the people', or singularly, Inuk, which means 'the person'.

The typical materials for making homes such as wood and mud are hard to find in the frozen tundra of the Arctic. The Inuit learned to make warm homes out of snow and ice for the winter. During the summer they would make homes from animal skin stretched over a frame made from driftwood or whalebones. The Inuit word for home is "igloo".

The Inuit needed thick and warm clothing to survive the cold weather. They used animal skins and furs to stay warm. They made shirts, pants, boots, hats, and big jackets called anoraks from caribou and seal skin. They would line their clothes with furs from animals like polar bears, rabbits, and foxes.

The Inuit people were unable to farm and grow their own food in the harsh desert of the tundra. They mostly lived off of meat from hunting animals. They used harpoons to hunt seals, walruses, and the bowhead whale. They also ate fish and foraged for wild berries. A high percentage of their food was fatty, which gave them energy in the cold weather.

In order to hunt larger prey like walruses and whales, the Inuit hunters would gather in a large group. To hunt a whale, typically at least 20 hunters would gather on a large boat armed with a number of harpoons. They would attach a number of seal-skin balloons filled with air to the harpoons. This way the whale could not dive deep into the water when it was first speared. Each time that the whale would come to the surface for air, the hunters would harpoon it again. Once the whale died, they would tie it to the boat and tow it back to shore. It would sometimes take a number of men a long time to catch and kill a whale, but it was well worth it. The Inuit used all parts of the whale including the meat, blubber, skin, oil, and bones. A large whale could feed a small community for a year.

Despite the harsh landscape of the Arctic, the Inuit still found ways to travel long distances. On land and ice they used dogsleds called qamutik. They bred strong sled dogs from wolves and dogs to pull the sleds which were made from whale bones and wood. These dogs became the husky dog breed. On the water, the Inuit used different kinds of boats for different activities. For hunting they used small single-passenger boats called kayaks. They also built larger, faster boats called umiaqs that were used for transporting people, dogs, and goods.



Name _____

The Inuit People – Questions

1. Who are the Inuit people?
2. Why did the Inuit have to make their homes out of snow and ice?
3. What types of clothing did the Inuit wear and what was it made out of?
4. What foods did they eat? Why was fatty food important for them to eat?
5. Explain how the Inuit would catch a whale?
6. What parts of the whale were used?
7. How did the Inuit people travel on ice?
8. What types of dog were used for travel?
9. What types of boats were used for hunting?
10. What were umiaqs used for?