



The Caribou and the Wolf are One

Inuit People – Canada, Alaska and Greenland

In the beginning there was a Woman and a Man, and nothing else walked or swam or flew in the world until one day the Woman dug a great hole in the ground and began fishing in it. One by one she pulled out all the animals, and the last one she pulled out of the hole was the caribou. Then Kaila, who is the God of the Sky, told the woman the caribou was the greatest gift of all, for the caribou would be the sustenance of man.

The Woman set the caribou free and ordered it to go out over the land and multiply, and the caribou did as the Woman said; and in time the land was filled with caribou, so the sons of the Woman hunted well, and they were fed and clothed and had good skin tents to live in, all from the caribou.

The sons of the Woman hunted only the big, fat caribou, for they had no wish to kill the weak and the small and the sick, since these were no good to eat nor were their skins much good. And, after a time, it happened that the sick and the weak came to outnumber the fat and the strong, and when the sons saw this they were dismayed and they complained to the Woman.

Then the Woman made a magic and spoke to Kaila and said: 'Your work is no good, for the caribou grow weak and sick, and if we eat them we must grow weak and sick also.'

Kaila hear, and he said 'My work is good. I shall tell Amarok [the spirit of the Wolf], and he shall tell his children, and they will eat the sick

and the weak and the small caribou, so that the land will be left for the fat and the good ones.'

And this is what happened, and this is why the caribou and the wolf are one; for the caribou feeds the wolf, but it is the wolf who keeps the caribou strong. □

Farley Mowat's paraphrase of the story of Ootek, an Inuit Shaman (1988).

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Comments

This is an ancestral lesson in interdependencies, joint evolution of species and balances in ecological complex systems. For, interestingly enough, the ancestral wisdom, based on the observation and intuitive knowledge of the Inuit shamans, was several centuries, perhaps millennia, ahead of the scientific discoveries of the 21st century, as we shall see below.

The Inuit creation myth we have above is conveyed by the Canadian naturalist and environmentalist Farley Mowat in his fictional autobiographical book, *Never Cry Wolf* (1963, 1988), of which Disney would make a film with the same title in 1983. Mowat met Ootek, 'a minor shaman, or magic priest, in his own tribe', in 1958, during a field study on the Arctic wolf that he conducted on behalf of the Canadian Wildlife Service. This Canadian government agency tasked him with obtaining evidence to support claims by trappers and traders that wolves had caused the caribou (reindeer) population to decline dangerously during their migrations, while demanded that the wolf population be «controlled».

Mowat conducted his research in the Nuelin Lake region of the Nunavut Territory in the far north of Canada, where only the Inuvialuit Inuit had their ancestral territories. Mowat (1988) tells about Ootek in one of his early conversations:

... he was too keenly interested in wolves, partly because his personal totem, or helping spirit, was Amarok, the Wolf Being. (...)

... he told me that as a child of about five years he had been taken to a wolf den by his father, a shaman of repute, and had been left there for twenty-four hours, during which time he made friends with and played on terms of equality with the wolf pups, and was sniffed at but otherwise unmolested by the adult wolves. (pp. 80-81)

During his long weeks of study of the Arctic wolves, Mowat received much information about the ecosystem balances of the area, including one that greatly surprised him and which, at first, he could not accept from his Western rationalist mindset: specifically, the explanation handed down for generations in the Inuit culture through the creation myth that you have read above. But Ootek added:

'It is as I told you,' Ootek said. 'The caribou feeds the wolf, but it is the wolf who keeps the caribou strong. We know that if it were not for the wolf there would soon be no caribou at all, for they would die as weakness spread among them.' (...) Ootek also stressed the fact that, once a kill had been made, the wolves did no more hunting until the supply of food was completely gone and they were forced by hunger to go back to work. (p. 134)

In the end, Mowat would end up agreeing with Ootek, as he later writes:

As the weeks wore on toward the summer's end, the validity of Ootek's thesis became more and more obvious. The vital importance played by the wolf in preserving rather than in destroying the caribou seemed irrefutable to me. (p. 137)

Mowat was criticised by other naturalists and zoologists for accepting such explanations, and many even doubted the veracity of what he said in his book. Behind such criticism was undoubtedly the modernist and excessively rationalist worldview of the natural scientists of the time, who could not accept as valid the explanations of supposedly 'primitive' peoples, which, moreover, did not fit in with the prevailing evolutionary thesis of the time, of the stark competition for survival. But perhaps many of the criticisms against Mowat could also come from the interests of certain groups for whom caribou represented a substantial source of income. This is because Mowat concluded his study by stating that the main reason for the caribou's population decline was human hunters, and not precisely Inuit hunters, but white hunters. He also noted that wolves fed mainly on small mammals and rodents, which were



much easier for them to hunt and carried less risk than hunting large, strong animals. On the other hand, he pointed out that, when wolves did hunt caribou, they targeted sick or weakened specimens, and that they never hunted more than they needed.

More than 50 years would still have to pass before research from the University of California at Santa Cruz would confirm the accuracy of the ancestral wisdom of the Inuit of the Nunavut region of Canada. This study (Wilmers *et al.*, 2020), conducted on elk and wolf populations in northern Yellowstone National Park during 20 winters of observation on 17 wolf packs, concluded that 25 years after the return of wolves to Yellowstone,

the predators that some feared would wipe out elk have instead proved to be more of a stabilizing force. ... research shows that by reducing populations and thinning out weak and sick animals, wolves are helping create more resilient elk herds. (Peterson, 2020)

Wilmers and his colleagues found that during years when the amount of rain and snowfall is average, wolves hunt older cow elk because they are the easiest to catch. However, in particularly dry years, when the elk do not find such abundant pasture, the wolves hunt mainly bull elk, as the latter are very weakened, especially after the rutting season, their fights with other males and mating, and because they provide on average about 300 pounds more meat than the females. In this way, females have a better chance of raising their calves and maintaining the elk population.

But, in addition, according to the study, the wolf population in the area – between 300 and 350 wolves –

could help elk herds weather the perils of a more volatile climate (...). For instance, elk herds that maintain consistent numbers, rather than yo-yoing up and down, can better withstand more frequent droughts—one impact of climate change that is already occurring in the region. (ibid.)

In short, as Ootek would have said from the ancient wisdom and science of his people: here too ‘The elk and the wolf are one’.

Let’s welcome the surprising universe of interdependencies. (On interdependencies in complex systems, I invite you to listen to episode 6



of my radio podcast *Midnight Sun*, which I broadcast in November 2023. See below, Cutanda, 2023.)

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 5c: Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 5a: Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.

Principle 6a: Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

