

# Inuit are on the right track

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Inuit trails are more than merely means to get from A to B. In reality, they represent a complex social network spanning the Canadian Arctic and are a distinctive aspect of the Inuit cultural identity. And what is remarkable is that the Inuit's vast geographic knowledge has been passed through many generations by oral means, without the use of maps or any other written documentation. These findings, by Dr. Claudio Aporta from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, were just published in Springer's journal *Human Ecology*.

Using a combination of historical documents, ethnographic research, geographic tools including GPS, GIS and Google Earth, as well as a recent journey following Inuit along a traditional trail, Dr. Aporta shows the geographic extent of the Inuit's sophisticated network of routes. He describes how the Inuit have made use of the Arctic environment and how their trails represent significant channels of communication and exchange across the territory. To the Inuit, the Arctic is a network of trails, connecting communities to their distant neighbors, and to fishing lakes and hunting grounds in between.

What is remarkable is that although the trails are not permanent features of the landscape, their locations are remembered and transmitted orally and through the experience of travel. They do not use maps to travel or to represent geographic information. Rather the journey along the trail, or the story of the journey, becomes one of the main instruments for transmitting the information.

The memory of the trail is intertwined with individual and collective

memories of previous trips, as well as with relevant environmental information - the conditions of the snow and ice, the shape of snowdrifts, the direction of winds - and place names in the Inuktitut language. The trails are not permanent, but disappear when the sled tracks get covered after a blizzard and as the snow and ice melt at the end of each spring. Nevertheless, the spatial itinerary remains in people's memory and comes to life again when individuals make the next trip. The trails are 'lived' rather than simply travelled.

By mapping the trails with modern geographic tools, Dr. Aporta is able to show that complex and intricate knowledge can be precisely and accurately transmitted from generation to generation orally for centuries. He comments that "oral history should not be a priori dismissed as unreliable and inaccurate."

Reference: Aporta C (2009). The trail as home: Inuit and their pan-Arctic network of routes. Human Ecology. DOI 10.1007/s10745-009-9213-x

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