

# First atlas of Inuit Arctic trails launched

June 10 2014

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Example of an Inuit Arctic trail. Credit: Claudio Aporta

New digital resource brings together centuries of cultural knowledge for the first time, showing that networks of trails over snow and sea ice, seemingly unconnected to the untrained eye, in fact span a continent – and that the Inuit have long-occupied one of the most resource-rich and contested areas on the planet.

For centuries, indigenous peoples in the Arctic navigated the land, sea, and ice, using knowledge of trails that was passed down through the generations.

Now, researchers have mapped these ancient routes using archival and

published accounts of encounters with Inuit stretching back through the 19th and 20th centuries, and have released it online for the public as an interactive [atlas](#) – bringing together hundreds of years of accrued cultural knowledge for the first time.

The atlas, found at [paninuittrails.org](http://paninuittrails.org), is constructed from historical records, maps, trails and place names, and allows the first overview of the "pan-Inuit" world that is being fragmented as the annual [sea ice](#) diminishes and commercial mining and oil drilling encroaches.

Researchers say the atlas is important not just for cultural preservation but to show the geographical extent and connectedness of Inuit occupancy – illustrating their historic sovereignty and mobility over a resource-rich area with important trade routes that are opening up due to climate change.

"To the untutored eye, these trails may seem arbitrary and indistinguishable from surrounding landscapes. But for Inuit, the subtle features and contours are etched into their narratives and story-telling traditions with extraordinary precision," said Dr Michael Bravo from Cambridge University's Scott Polar Research Institute, who co-directed the research with colleagues Claudio Aporta from Dalhousie University, and Fraser Taylor from Carleton University in Canada.

"This atlas is a first step in making visible some of the most important tracks and trails spanning the North American continent from one end to the other."

Over the course of centuries, Arctic peoples established a network of trails – routes across the sea ice in the winter, and across open water in the summer, that stretched for hundreds of kilometres, allowing them to follow the seasonal movements of sea and land mammals on which their lives depended.



The intricate network of trails also connected Inuit groups with each other. The atlas shows that, when brought together, these connections span the continent from Greenland to Alaska. Understanding the trails is essential to appreciating Inuit history and occupancy of the Arctic, say the researchers, for which the new atlas is a vital step.

"Essentially the trails and the atlas reduce the topology of the Arctic, revealing it to be a smaller, richer, and more intimate world," Bravo said. "For all that the 19th century explorers had military equipment and scientific instruments, they lacked the very precise indigenous knowledge about the routes, patterns, and timing of animal movements. That mattered in a place where the margins of survival could be extremely narrow."

The documents that form the foundation of the new atlas consist of accounts – both published and unpublished – of encounters with Inuit by explorers, scientists, ethnographers and other visitors seeking access to the traditional indigenous knowledge to unlock the geographical secrets of the Arctic.

The material has been digitised and organised geo-spatially, with trails mapped out over satellite imagery using global positioning systems. It constitutes the first attempt to map the ancient hubs and networks that have long-existed in a part of the world frequently and wrongly depicted as 'empty': as though an unclaimed stretch of vacant space.

This notion of emptiness is one that benefits those governments and corporations whose investments in shipping routes into the northern archipelago conveniently downplay the presence of the people that have lived there for centuries.

The atlas provides evidence of the use and occupancy patterns of coastal and marine areas that intersect and overlap with significant parts of the Northwest Passage – the focus of recent mineral exploration and potentially a major shipping route. Historical printed sources like those found in the atlas are important for understanding the spatial extent of Inuit sovereignty, say the team, as these records reflect well-established Inuit networks.

In fact, because the maps are the product of encounters between Inuit and outsiders, the new resource also shows patterns of non-Inuit exploration – Western desires and ambitions to map and, at times, possess the Arctic.



Dr Michael Bravo in the Arctic

"Most of the Inuit trails and place names recorded by explorers and other Arctic visitors are still used by Inuit today. They passed this knowledge on for hundreds of years, indicating intensive and extensive use of land and marine areas across the North American Arctic," said co-director Claudio Aporta.

While much of the Arctic appears 'featureless' to outsiders, it's not – and the Inuit learned how to read the fine-grained details of this landscape. Knowledge of the trails was attained by remembering specific journeys they themselves had taken, or learning in detail instructions in the oral narratives passed on by others.

The Inuit were able to read the snow, the prevailing wind, the thickness of the ice, and the landscape as a whole. Over hundreds of years, their culture and way of life was, therefore, written into the landscape. The region became an intimate part of who they are.

"The [trails](#) are lived, remembered, and celebrated through the

connections that ultimately reflect the Inuit traditions of sharing life while travelling," said Bravo.

"The geographical range of the atlas is a testimony to the legacy of the Inuit people, their remarkable collective memory built on practices of detailed observation, and motivated by an enduring sense of curiosity, as well as a set of ethical obligations to the living world they inhabit," he said.

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: First atlas of Inuit Arctic trails launched (2014, June 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-06-atlas-inuit-arctic-trails.html>

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