

GREENLAND

u n s e e n ...

Carsten Egevang

CONTENTS

<i>preface ...</i>
<i>prologue ...</i>
<i>piniarneq ...</i>
<i>siku ...</i>
<i>nanoq ...</i>
<i>puisi ...</i>
<i>qimmeq ...</i>
<i>qilalugaq ...</i>
<i>timmiaq ...</i>
<i>appaliarsuk ...</i>
<i>aaveq ...</i>
<i>umimmak ...</i>
<i>aalisakkat ...</i>
<i>index ...</i>



Preface

Like most of my compatriots, I love my beautiful country dearly and feel a close connection to all living creatures there. To me, hunting and fishing are not merely treasured leisure time activities, but a symbol of our unique way of utilizing the living resources, and at the same time the very foundation of our cultural identity. Harvesting nature's gifts is an inherent and essential part of our world view, given to us from a very early age, built on knowledge passed down through generations from Greenland's distant past.

Greenland is facing a time of transition with increasing international attention to the country's geopolitical position, approaching independence, and a need for strengthening our economy. The choices we make today affect our future to an unprecedented degree, and we face a tough balancing act between financial progress, preservation of our culture, and protection of our natural assets. It is more important than ever before that we not only focus on short-term solutions, but ensure a sustainable use of Greenland's living resources, while at the same time attending to the interests of the hunting and fishing trades.

Each year, Greenland is visited by an ever-increasing number of photographers, who illustrate Greenland's natural wonders in their pictures. It is only a few of those, however, who manage to go beyond the superficial beauty and capture the very "soul of Greenland". Carsten Egevang is among those very few. I have followed Carsten's photographic endeavours for years, and it is obvious that his images are the result of serious and persistent work with long periods of time spent in the field. He has a rare ability to portray objects in their fascinating, natural habitats. At the same time, it is evident that Carsten has a genuine and respectful wish to communicate the relationship between humans and animals in Greenland.

With this book, Greenland and the rest of the world is an impressive work of photography richer. I sincerely hope that the book will enrich its audience with a better insight into Greenland's diversity and culture for many years hence.

Kim Kielsen
Prime Minister of Greenland, 2014 - 2021



prologue ...

This book is about Greenland, and the astonishing adaptations of the wildlife of Greenland to the Arctic environment. This book is about the people of Greenland, and their ability to navigate a breath-taking and picturesque, but also harsh and wild, landscape. This book is about unique connections, and the strong dependency between humans, animals, and the surrounding environment in Greenland.

This book is a visual tribute to Greenland, a result of my deep-rooted and enduring fascination with the country. The images and text constitute a pragmatic documentation of living conditions for animals and humans alike, in a world of ice and snow. It is also a photographic portrait of traditional hunting culture as it unfolds in present-day Greenland, and its deep cultural roots in a bygone age.

The fascination with Greenland

I use my photography to communicate my personal endless fascination with Greenland – a fascination that gripped me almost three decades ago. On these pages, I share the amazing experiences I have had in some of the most remote and wildest areas in the world. I also hope to communicate and facilitate insight into the unique relationships between humans and animals there, relationships that, after many years, I still only understand a fraction of. It is my hope that these photographs provide you with a multifaceted view of the complex role of subsistence hunting in Greenland society. At the same time, it is my mission to highlight the need for environmental protection and management of wild animal populations, while preserving the hunting traditions of Greenland.

Pristine wilderness, untouched by humans, is highly endangered. Globally, wild natural areas are reduced and fragmented as our demand for resources and their efficient exploitation increases. The world's last expanses of wilderness are primarily found at the poles, where few people live.

In Greenland, nature is vast. The landscapes are ferocious, compelling, and spellbinding, all at the same time. As a human being, feeling small and insignificant is unavoidable. The extent of the Greenland wilderness is difficult to comprehend. Endless tundra covered in heather, changing colours according to season, are broken up by massive fjords encircled by dramatic mountains. Ice is everywhere, and shapes the landscape in different ways. The gigantic Inland Ice sends out glacier tongues, and launches icebergs as big as cathedrals to the sea ice that each year blankets the ocean and changes the conditions significantly. In Greenland, the wilderness is not confined to separate areas, but rather constitutes endless expanses of untamed nature, as far as the eye can see.

The light in Greenland is also something very special. During the Arctic summer, there is 24 hours of day light. Any sense of time is imprecise, and circadian rhythms become blurred under the midnight sun. Spring and autumn usually mean more volatile weather, with storms and dramatic cloud formations. In winter, the sun disappears completely below the horizon, in some places for months at a time. But even in the deep darkness of winter, reflections from the snow-covered ground create a surprising amount of light and paint the sky in delicate rose-pink and light blue hues. In the dark polar nights, the aurora borealis dances across the firmament in greenish waves.

In the Arctic regions, conditions are extreme in every way. Only species that have succeeded in adapting to the severe climate, with its massive shifts from summer to winter, can survive here. The number of species in Greenland is low, compared to most other places on earth, and considering the country's vast size. This fact makes the Arctic species that do survive here, that are able to exploit resources within a short window of opportunity, even more fascinating in my mind.





Necessary images

Greenland's nature and landscapes are unquestionably of unique value, and when I began my Greenland career almost 30 years ago, I was exclusively interested in the pristine wilderness and the wildlife. It was not until several years later that I realized Greenland's uniqueness is not only found in the amazing natural world, but also in the people who inhabit the country.

I want to communicate how amazingly well Arctic animals have adapted to the extreme physical conditions. As our knowledge of the Arctic expands through new research, my fascination grows in equal measure. New results, from genetic research to ecosystem-level studies, confirm again and again how perfectly these animals are adapted to their environment. There is a very close correlation between animal behaviour and habitat, where timing is crucial. If survival and reproduction is to be possible in the Arctic regions, it is essential that animals are able to respond in the brief period when conditions are most favourable. This ability has been honed over many generations and cannot be quickly changed – this would probably take hundreds or even thousands of years. And this makes the impact of climate-driven changes occurring in these current decades even more alarming.

At the same time, I hope that my photography may contribute to a change in attitudes towards Greenland and the use of natural resources. My wish is that the outside world may achieve a better understanding of the local cultural importance of harvesting these resources. It is my clear view that people in Greenland often feel misunderstood and that their history, culture, and philosophy of life, are not truly respected. This is especially true in connection with iconic animals like the Polar Bear and whales, where hunting is highly controversial in the eyes of international animal welfare and environmental organizations. Hopefully, my photography will show that hunting in Greenland is not only a question of food on the table, but constitutes the very heart of a cultural self-perception and identity.

My images are portraits of the unique Greenland hunting tradition. It is not my intention to glorify the hunt, but merely to show it as it is. Even though Greenland hunters deserve the respect and status they have in Greenland society, and with me personally, they are not faultless. The romantic perception of Inuit who only hunt to feed their families and use every single part of a slain animal, making everything utterly sustainable, is sometimes at odds with present day reality. Technological progress – better boats and bigger engines, for example – combined with an increased human population has amplified pressure on resources. In Greenland, there are several instances of animal populations being exploited beyond their capacity. This is a lesson of the past that, unfortunately, is not always heeded in the present day.

The Greenland hunting tradition, as it is known today, almost certainly faces substantial changes in the near future. The general globalization, urbanization, and modernization in Greenland society has resulted in fewer people now making a living from subsistence hunting, and traditional knowledge and specialized methods soon disappear. Climate changes represent a new reality in which the old ways may no longer be valid. At the same time, Greenland hunters are subjected to an increasing number of restrictions, caused by declines in certain animal populations. Thus, at times, it has felt like a race against time for me to document the unique, traditional use of nature in Greenland – before it vanishes.

The pristine landscapes of Greenland are in every way fantastic, with a breath-taking beauty. But I have always found classic landscape photography to be rather monotonous and one-dimensional, unable to communicate the full backstory. Those pictures do not tell us anything beyond the fact that the landscape is beautiful. To me, photography makes the most sense when I am able to include a living subject in the spectacular surroundings. If a dog sled, a person, or an animal appear, the picture suddenly tells a greater story and depicts a relationship with the environment. At the same time, the image is given a sense of the sheer scale and magnificent dimensions of the Arctic landscape.

The selection of the images included in this book has been a long, but also very creative process. As the book's title indicates, I present images from Greenland that are different from the usual tourist brochure pictures. In the selection process, I have constantly had to force myself to choose images that were alternative, different from mainstream photos in terms of composition, cropping, or subject matter. But first and foremost, most photographs in this book were chosen based on their ability to tell a story. The images had to contain a narrative about the animals and humans who live and survive in Greenland, as well as reflections on my own experiences with the central importance of the country's hunting culture.

I have chosen to work with monochrome photography in this book. To me, black-and-white images represent a certain timelessness and purity that best express my personal experiences in Greenland. By opting out of the seductive effects implicit in the play of colours in the amazing Greenland scenery, I encourage us to concentrate on the subject matter and the composition of the image. At the same time, the lack of colours adds a roughness and rawness to the subjects, but also simplicity and honesty, and in many ways that is how I perceive Greenland.

It is my hope that the images in this book emphasize my fascination with Greenland and my admiration for the people who live there. I do not want to be seen as "yet another white man taking pictures of the noble savages". Instead, I hope that my work respectfully reflects the duality and complexity that I personally experience with regard to hunting animals in Greenland, something that has taken me many years to fully appreciate.







piniarneq ...

Greenland society is rife with contrast. There are distinct differences in the way of life and standard of living from region to region. From the Arctic metropolis and capital, Nuuk, where life does not differ significantly from any other small town in Europe, to the small, isolated settlements, where conditions have not changed much in the past hundred years. There is one thing, however, that is shared by the people of Greenland, in the modern towns and those in the outlying districts, and that is their relationship with the surrounding landscape and its animals.

Utilizing nature and harvesting the living resources is the very core of "Greenland identity" and enormously significant in Inuit self-perception – also in present-day Greenland. But things are changing rapidly in Greenland. Climate change, hunting regulations, globalization, urbanization, and modernization, mean that traditional hunting most likely will face substantial changes over a period of relatively few years.

People of the ice

Through the years, I have become particularly fascinated with Greenland hunters and their way of navigating in the Arctic environment. I am constantly impressed by the hunters' ability to be self-sufficient. When you are several days away from your settlement, or when purchasing spare parts is impossible, you only have your personal skills to rely on. Today, a hunter must be a competent mechanic and carpenter, when the boat engine, snowmobile, or dog sled needs repairs. They must be a talented dog trainer and an expert marksman. They also need to be able to "read" the weather, because in Greenland, nature is in charge, and an otherwise harmless situation can become potentially fatal in the blink of an eye.

A successful hunter must also have a comprehensive knowledge of animal behaviour and phenology – that is, when and where they appear at certain times of year. The extreme climate in Greenland is ferocious, inhospitable, and unforgiving, and to the uninitiated, survival here seems almost impossible. But for people with special insights, built up through generations, Greenland is comparable to a fruitful garden. The yield is there, but to get it, you must be able to decode nature and navigate in the vast Arctic landscape.

I am also fascinated by the hunters' quite unsentimental approach to new technology in combination with old methods. Traditional tools interact seamlessly with modern items, like smartphones and satellite data. It is not an issue of which tools and methods are 'traditional' or 'original', but rather what actually works on the sea ice, when temperatures drop below minus 30 degrees Celsius. When dog sleds, kayaks, harpoons, and fur clothes are still used in Greenland today, it is because these have stood the test of time and are still supremely functional.





The importance of hunting

By spending significant time with Greenland hunters, I have gradually come to realize just how important the very notion of "hunting" is, and how much it means to the people of Greenland. Subsistence hunting is about getting food on the table, but also about so much more. There are a number of elements connected to hunting with deep cultural roots in Greenland self-perception and identity.

My awareness of the importance of hunting first appeared during fieldwork as a young biology student; indeed, it should be evident to all visitors to the country. In my subsequent job as a research biologist, a large part of the work centred on trying to quantify this importance and advising the Greenland Government on the sustainable use of living resources. As a western researcher with a university degree, my worldview was clear and rather crude: hunting in Greenland affects animal populations negatively, therefore hunting must be regulated, or in certain instances even prohibited. My attitude was that the logic inherent in this fact had to be obvious to everybody, and it was hard for me to accept when Greenland politicians and their officials again and again chose to ignore scientific advice on the sustainable management of animal stocks.

Today, my perception of hunting in Greenland is rather more nuanced. I still think that regulation, protection, and quota systems are required – in some instances it is more relevant now than ever before. But I have achieved a deeper understanding of what is at stake, when regulations are introduced, and what the consequences are for the local population. It has taken me several years, and many journeys in the company of hunters, to gain just a glimmer of insight into the fundamental importance of hunting in Greenland.

Harvesting from the gifts of nature is an essential and ingrained activity, and is regarded in Greenland as a basic birth right. At the same time, it represents a direct link between past and present – a way of looking back in time and understanding your origins. Journeying out into the wilderness to pick berries, mussels, or bird eggs is often a family activity, where several generations set out together. That is why it is seen as a breach of fundamental rights when access to harvesting nature's gifts is hindered by initiatives, such as protection or quota systems.

Restrictions on hunting and fishing can have substantial local consequences in terms of income. In some places, it might even threaten the very existence of settlements. In earlier times, the purpose of hunting and fishing was primarily to feed the family and the sled dogs, and a wide variety of animals were hunted. Today, hunting is still important, but it has morphed into a more commercial activity. Expenses for dinghies, outboard engines, and other modern equipment have risen quite a lot. Income in a hunter's economy – that is, the resources that can be converted into hard currency – is typically based on a single or a couple of animal species. The possibility of switching to another income-generating resource are severely limited or even non-existing. This means that the pressure on "viable" animals and the risk of unsustainable exploitation increases, and this makes the hunting and fishing trade vulnerable when new restrictions are imposed.

A complex debate

Limited natural resources, and the consequences of over-exploitation, are not unique to Greenland – there are examples from all over the world. But, in Greenland, there is now an additional element in the ongoing debate over natural resources. Greenland was a Danish colony for 300 years, and the country's history has been characterized by a decision-making process, where Greenlanders themselves have been excluded from important decisions on societal organization and structure. Today, Greenland is an independent nation, and management of natural resources and values is handled autonomously by the Government. Even though the level of education in Greenland is rising, there is still a lack of qualified labour. As a result, biologist positions often are occupied by people with Danish or western European background, who then conduct animal population surveys and supply the authorities with scientific guidance on sustainable use. The message of necessary restrictions on resource use is thus delivered by "foreigners", which impacts the local inhabitants' reception. Essentially, Greenland's colonial history is never far from the surface in any debate.

Any discussion on the management of natural resources in Greenland has been polarized for decades. Despite the fact that nobody wants unsustainable use, the factions are rigidly opposed. One front consists of researchers and resource managers, typically highly educated, whose tools for assessing population statuses are specialized scientific methods, subject to strict international standards. The other front is made up of resource users, the fishermen and hunters, who have a financial interest in the matter, and operate in the environment daily, providing them with a unique, direct knowledge of the animals there. The users do not recognize – or understand – the researchers' methods, and argue that their local insights must be given as much weight as the scientific recommendations.

The debate on wildlife management in Greenland is, on the surface, a debate on concrete numbers – how many animals can be shot, and how many fish can be caught. But the debate goes much deeper than that; it is much more complex and covers a wide range of issues. There is a divergence between a "western" mindset and an "indigenous" mindset, and whether animals should be protected or harvested. At the same time, the debate concerns which type of knowledge should constitute the basis of wildlife management – scientific, evidence-based knowledge versus local user knowledge. Ultimately, the debate is also about Greenland's rights as an independent nation to manage its own resources, and if Greenland should continue to adhere to international environmental conventions, or go its own way and unilaterally define how to use the resources locally.









Photo: Dan Normann

Dr. Carsten Egevang (1969) is a researcher in Arctic biology, an award-winning photographer, and a visual communicator, who specializes in documenting the wildlife and culture in Greenland.

As a researcher, Egevang is employed by the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources in Nuuk (2002-2010) and is responsible for research on the seabirds of Greenland. As a student in biology, he first travelled to Greenland in 1995, participating in a long-term study on the Peregrine Falcon in southern Greenland. He concluded his master's degree in biology from the University of Copenhagen (1999) on the feeding ecology of the Little Auk in the Thule District of northern Greenland. In 2010, he was awarded a PhD-degree (University of Copenhagen) for his studies on Arctic Terns in Greenland. He was the leader of an international study, where the ground-breaking results documented the migration of the Arctic Tern from the Arctic to the Antarctic – the longest annual migration known.

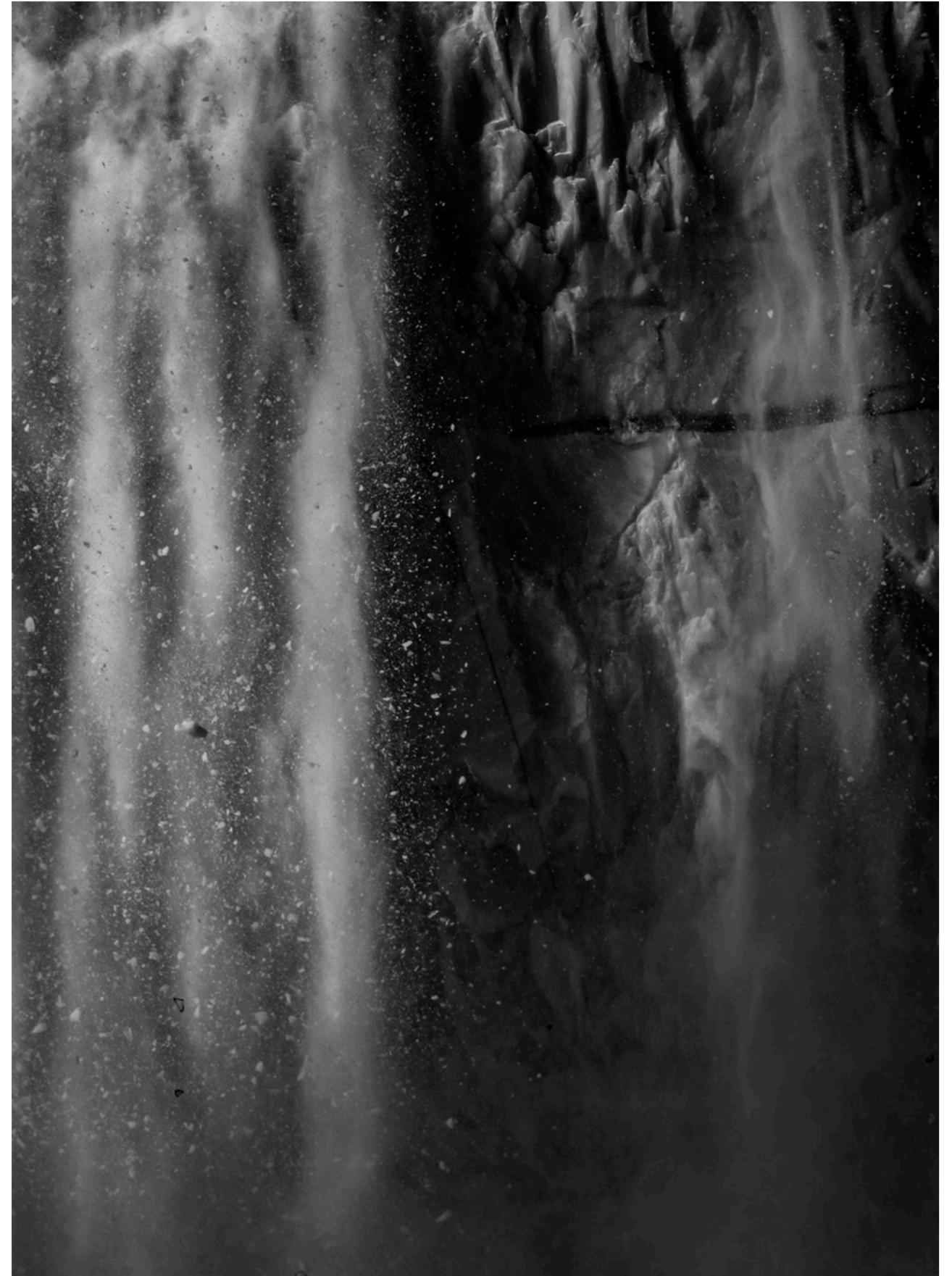
As a photographer, Carsten Egevang is internationally acclaimed, with awards in numerous photo competitions – including the prestigious Wildlife Photographer of the Year (2009). In 2012, he received the Environment and Nature Award from the Greenland Government, for his visual communication of research results. His work has been represented in numerous books, publications, and international curated exhibitions, from Abu Dhabi to Greenland. He is also a core member of the Arctic Arts Project, an international group of visual artists communicating the effects of climate change.

Books:

2020: QIMMEQ – The Greenland Sled Dog

2012: LIFE AT THE EDGE

2011: GREENLAND – Land of Animal and Man



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