

## DIVING DEEPER

### *Environmental change through seal-human relations in South Greenland*

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## ABSTRACT

During my presentation at the SuMu Symposium, I talked about my fieldwork experience researching seal-human relations through specific practices, such as seal hunting, processing seal products and preparing seal skin in South Greenland. In my research experience, these practices emerged as a useful approach for addressing local observations of environmental changes and their impacts on people and communities. In addition, multispecies relations in seal-related activities are particularly interesting as they shed light on people's necessity to think with other species in the effort to find adaptation strategies to environmental disturbances. While retracing my own fieldwork experience, I reflected on the limitations of research methods centered on words when studying relations and knowledge grounded in feelings, senses, memories, direct participation and presence in the landscape. In this regard, I considered the opportunities and developments that come with including embodied and visual methods, such as guided and commented itineraries and filmmaking, drawing on my personal experience with these two methods.

## HUMAN-SEAL RELATIONS IN SOUTH GREENLAND

This PhD research project takes place in a wider and interdisciplinary research project which explores marine pollution and environmental change in the European Arctic, with the goal of co-developing resilience strategies with local and Indigenous communities. More specifically, my research project takes place in three communities in South Greenland, Qaqortoq, Narsaq and Nanortalik, and focuses on the impacts of and adaptation strategies to pollution and climate-derived changes on seal-human relations through specific practices, such as seal-hunting, processing and sharing seal products and preparing and sewing seal skin.

During my first fieldwork visit in South Greenland at the end of August 2024, I realized how seal-human relations offer an interesting perspective on environmental change. In South Greenland, as in other Inuit contexts, seals and seals-related practices are extremely important as they contribute to identities, social relations and a sense of belonging. Their relevance covers various areas, including personal, cultural, social and economic aspects (Peter et al., 2002). Moreover, human-seal relations develop and unfold through practices that require long-standing and close connection with the coast, fjords, islands and open sea. For this reason, seals represent a relevant topic that makes it possible to address environmental changes observed in the coastal environment and in the animals, and in return the impacts of these changes on people's lives, wellbeing, and relations with the landscape. Seal-human relations in seal-related practices also provide an opportunity to better understand how environmental change is locally made sense of, as well as the psychological and social impacts of it, topics on which some authors have identified the need for further research (Ayeb-Karlsson, Hoad & Trueba, 2024; Eriksen, 2020).

During my fieldwork, I could observe how people of different ages and genders take part in seal-human relations in different ways, and how women hold specific knowledge and observation of social and environmental changes through their experience with activities like processing of seals products, consumption and sharing of seal meat. Therefore, a focus on practices and activities connected to seals made it possible for me to address the importance of Inuit women's observations and knowledge on environmental change, including a gender dimension that is generally underrepresented in environmental change research, particularly in Inuit contexts (Dowsley et al., 2011; Rautio et al., 2021).

Lastly, these multispecies relations provide an interesting insight into more-than-human agency and perspectives, highlighting the necessity of recognizing the interconnections between humans, animals and the environment in climate change research (Cassidy, 2012). The hunters that participated in this research often reported paying particular attention to how seals respond to changes in their habitat, identifying understanding seal behavior as a necessary step for successful hunting. During my fieldwork in Qaqortoq, Narsaq and Nanortalik, I learned about the diverse roles that seals play in people's lives, as well as the Inuit vocabulary used to refer to them. Furthermore, I learned how the different locations of these towns along the coast of South Greenland influence and create different economies and practices related to seals.



**Figure 1**

*Nanortalik*

## RESEARCHING MULTISPECIES RELATIONS

The main activities that emerged from the conversations and interviews I conducted during my fieldwork were seal hunting, preparing seal skin, and processing seal products. These activities share some common elements, which contributed to influence the design and methods of my research. For instance, all these activities require a close collaboration with the landscape, being prepared for the unexpected, and relying on embodied and multisensory knowledge which is not easily expressed in words. As my research method has been mostly semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus groups and informal conversations, I soon became aware of the limitations of words in addressing relations and knowledge that are grounded in senses, memories, perceptions, and emotions. I felt the necessity of including methods that would allow me to dive deep into these multispecies relations, giving my participants the opportunity to take me with them in their own experiences of relating to seals. Two main methods helped me unveil some aspects that remained inaccessible or unsaid during the interviews: commented and guided itineraries and filmmaking.

The first method occurred naturally when I had the opportunity to join a hunter on a trip to learn about the processing of seal blubber fermentation, a process that the hunter carries out on the rocks near the ocean on the island of Kangerluttuseq, which lies a short distance from Qaqortoq. Fermented seal blubber is an important food in South Greenland, the preparation

of which relies on personal and place-based knowledge. During the trip, the hunter showed me the different stages and steps he follows to make this product, as well as the thorough cleaning of the area he does once the process is complete. The reference that I used for this method was the go-along interview (Carpiano, 2009), however, commented and guided walks or itineraries became a better way to describe this experience. Indeed, the conversation flowed freely and evolved not from questions that I asked but from elements of the environment, listening to the radio and informal conversations that gave us the opportunity to explore and discuss topics that I might have overlooked in my questions.

Through this experience, I was able to gain a better understanding of some of the elements that characterize the relations between hunters, seals, and the environment during seal-hunting, as I was able to observe and experience some of the things I had learned during face-to-face interviews or get to know aspects that remain unsaid. For example, I experienced the feeling of sailing out to sea and the sensation of the air getting colder as we moved further from the coast and passed icebergs and drift ice, that a hunter had described to me in an interview. Moreover, the importance of the collaboration between hunters became much more tangible to me out in the sea than in any interview when we were promptly rescued and towed back to land by other hunters after the engine of our boat broke.



**Figure 2**

*Seal fat fermenting on the island of Kengerluttuseq*

I also had the opportunity to employ the method of filmmaking when one of my participants agreed to the filming of her work of preparing seal skin. Preparing the skin is a necessary step that precedes and makes the sewing of the skin possible. This activity includes different processes, among which washing the skin and removing the remaining fat and water with a traditional Ulu knife are the ones I had the opportunity to observe. In this occasion, the use of the camera has opened many possibilities as well as interesting reflections on my own presence and positionality as a researcher. For example, the filming revealed the ability of the artisan to work with sealskin, which is a complex and delicate process that requires time, specific tools, patience, strength and the ability to attune with the seal skin, following and respecting its structure, in order to avoid ruining it. In addition, the awareness of the presence of the camera changed the way my participant approached her work. She took the time to show the specific steps and tools involved in preparing the sealskin, explaining their purpose to me. Despite my initial intention was to make myself and the camera as least invasive as possible, filming from a corner that would not disturb her while working, my participant refused to pretend that the camera and I were not there, and engaged me, not only by showing her work but also inviting me to participate in the activity of preparing the skin. Thanks to her attitude, the whole experience emerged as collaborative work, in which I was not only the one who filmed, I was filmed as well. The experience of filming was particularly successful for different reasons, the most important being that it amplified the involvement of my participant in the research and it gave us the possibility to create something together.

## CONCLUSION

In my presentation at the Sumu symposium, I outlined the topic of my research project and reflected on the complexities I encountered while researching seal-related activities in South Greenland. This presentation gave me the opportunity to share some of the lessons I learned during my last fieldwork experience and determine the next steps in my research. For instance, I became aware of the necessity to better organize my fieldwork visits around my participants' availability, acquiring more knowledge and information on the different activities that take place throughout the year. I also became much more aware of the need for a continuous reflection on my positionality as a non-Indigenous researcher throughout my research project, and of the effort to maintain a collaborative approach and define co-production of knowledge with my participants. Moreover, while the methods of commented itineraries and filmmaking have proven to be particularly useful to grasp embodied knowledge in seal-related practices, I realized that there were still limitations in the way I have employed them, especially the method of filmmaking. Indeed, while the use of the camera helped a lot to unveil the complexities of the process of preparing seal skin and increased the involvement and participation of the participant in the research, by keeping the camera in a corner and limiting its movements, I did not fully harness the possibilities that come with it. In the future, I want

to incorporate the camera into the heart of the activities, using it as an engaging tool that creates connections and transforms reality instead of just capturing it.

To conclude, I would like to reflect on the meaning of the title of my presentation, “diving deeper”. Based on hunters’ observations of seals’ behavior when hunted, “diving deeper” has become a meaningful analogy for my own experience of researching seal-human relations in South Greenland. Thanks to the methods that rely on the use of senses and perception, I was able to immerse myself into the practices and landscapes that constitute these multispecies relations, following and being guided by my participants. These methods have allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the various ways seals are present in people’s lives in South Greenland, as well as the specific connections people form with the coastal landscape through seal-related practices.

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