Netherlands Spitsbergen Expedition 1968–1969

A winter with polar bears

Ko de Korte

Introduction

From August 1968 to September 1969 I was a member of the Netherlands Spitsbergen Expedition which stayed on Kapp Lee, Edgeøya, to the east of Spitsbergen carrying out research on polar bears for international conservation organizations IUCN and WWF. Our group comprised four people:

   Eric Flipse (23 years old, a biology student and the initiator of the expedition), Paul de Groot (21 years old, a forestry student), Ko de Korte (25 years old, a biology student) and Piet Oosterveld (29 years old, also a biology student). Our closest neighbours were the four members of a Norwegian polar bear expedition on Andreetangen, south Edgeøya (80km away), two polar bear hunters on Ryke Yseøyane, east of Edgeøya (100 km) and the inhabitants of Longyearbyen (120 km). A Foundation had been set up to make our expedition possible and each of us was taking part on a voluntary basis. While we were building the station in August, we were assisted by three members of a summer team. At that stage there was also a two-man television crew staying with us to make a documentary.

Social aspects

Discussions about the social aspects of the project began many months before the expedition set out. At an early stage it was decided to send four people as two would not be enough to do the work which was planned. Four people would be able to work in two two-man teams. Four was therefore the minimum number, and because of limited financial resources and various practical considerations this number was also the maximum.

   Discussions about the type of person who would be best suited to the job were short, since there was little choice: it was difficult enough to find four people who were willing to spend fourteen months in such conditions. Eric and Ko had known each other for more than a year and had been on a preparatory expedition to Spitsbergen the year before. Piet and Paul joined the group three months and one month respectively before its departure.
They both had had fieldwork experience in northern Scandinavia. A few weeks before our departure we had medical examinations, fortunately without any psychological tests – imagine if all four of us had been declared unfit on psychological grounds!

Discussions about the type of station we needed lasted a little longer than those concerning the volunteers, and focused on the problems which might be expected to arise from, on the one hand, emotional isolation, and, on the other, overcrowding in an isolated place. The isolation would be relieved to a certain extent by direct radio contact with people at home, by mail drops, and by listening individually to favorite music. The problem of overcrowding would be alleviated if we could have a large and relatively comfortable station (a 110 m² Nissen hut) as privacy could then be guaranteed by giving everyone a small room (6 m²) of their own. But not everything could be planned and ad hoc solutions were found for problems as they arose.

There were no clear guidelines on leadership or tasks, though we did agree on a few points. Eric was to be in charge of organization and technical...
affairs; Ko was to keep an eye on provisions and be the "doctor"; while Piet would be in charge of the scientific equipment. Ko and Piet wanted to do scientific work of their own – Ko on seabirds and Piet on vegetation – in addition to the polar bear research. Paul's help would be useful in all sorts of situations.

Preparations
Originally we had planned to winter on Halvmaaneøya, a little to the south of Edgeøya, because in the winter and spring many polar bears go there as there is often open water where they can catch ringed seals. However, our ship, the sealer Signalhorn, was unable to cope with the sea ice which appeared from the east in mid-August. During our struggle in the ice Halvmaaneøya disappeared from view, and we were forced to another site to spend the winter. We decided to try Kapp Lee because we thought the sea ice situation would probably be better there, and because we would be near a strait (Freemansundet) which would probably also remain open during the winter and thus attract polar bears. A side effect of our abandoned attempt to sail south of Edgeøya was that two bear hunters who had been on Ryke Iseøyane for a year could not be picked up and were forced to spend a second winter there. During that second winter one of them disappeared without a trace.

At Kapp Lee we were able to take our 50 tons of equipment – our station, dozens of drums of oil, petrol and kerosene, radio masts, enough food for two years, a zodiac etc. – ashore easily by boat, finding an ice-free bay, a beautiful spot. On the tundra, near an old walrus slaughtering site, with a mountain in the background, we marked out the site for our station. It was an old Nissen hut which we had to erect and insulate, and then do paneling and other work on the interior. Making everything fit together again kept us busy for many weeks. During this period Eric was with a Norwegian expedition on another sealer, the Polstjerna, in the pack ice, learning skills such as how to use a tranquillizer gun to anaesthetize polar bears with an LSD derivative, and how to tag them.

The winter
At the beginning of September the summer team of assistants left in the Polstjerna, which was sailing to Norway. As they waved goodbye, they called out, 'See you in a year's time'. Right into December – deep into the winter and the polar night – we were still finishing off the interior of the station.
While doing this we were also trying to find our individual roles, which tended to change every so often. After a while, specializations emerged and, by agreement, each of us took charge of certain aspects of the work. Until mid-October there was still a short period of daylight during which we could take the zodiac out on to the gradually freezing sea to collect driftwood from nearby shores. Back at the station we sawed the driftwood up and burnt it in our stoves. After the polar night, which at this latitude lasts four months, had begun in the second half of October, we were visited by two members of the Norwegian polar bear expedition, who had reached us from south Edgeøya by dog sled. To our joy, they brought letters for us which had been left with them a month earlier by an expedition ship. Our discussions with them about the work were both refreshing and inspiring.

During the polar night we looked forward to the periods of full moon, because then we could make moonlit skiing trips to catch polar bears and to study reindeer, and also enjoy the light of the moon and the Aurora Borealis. But sometimes it was impossible to ski, because there were hurricane-force winds which lasted for days on end. At these times the only way to control your movements and avoid being blown away was to crawl along on hands and knees. The pebbles, driven through the air by the wind, hammered against the station and were a danger to anyone outside. Because of these frequent gales, the little snow there was around the station was often blown away altogether. If new snow did not fall soon after, we would have to carry
our skis across the bare patches of ground until we found enough snow to use them. Sometimes the drift snow we found was so hard that it was easier to walk across it than to ski.

In this period of constant darkness we started to lose our communal sense of day and night, so that there was always someone who wanted to sleep while someone else was doing something in the house. Since this threatened to become a source of irritation, we introduced a rule that meals would be served at fixed times, and that no meals would be eaten outside those times. This meant that there were at least a few fixed points during the day, although the cook was often the only one to eat breakfast, because he had to serve it at a fixed time. Occasionally there would be an argument about how big a snack between meals could be. A biscuit was allowed, but a slice of currant bread might exceed the limits of what could be tolerated.

We took weekly turns doing household chores, which included collecting ice for drinking water from a dam we had made in August, and preparing meals. This meant that we had a different cook each week, which provided variety in the menu, but also meant that because of the different menus we looked forward to some people's turn more than others'. This rotation worked very satisfactorily until a good way into spring, when an increase in outdoor activities led to a change in the situation. During the polar night in Spitsbergen we spent considerably more time in bed each day than in the Netherlands, varying from 36% (Piet) to 45% (Ko) of the time. The polar night was actually a quiet time in which not much exciting happened. There was little external stimulation: an exception was the night when the station threatened to burn down. This certainly caused some agitation: we had sore throats and sore eyes for several days because of the smoke.

We were often withdrawn, feeling strong ties with those close to us at home. Apart from the polar bear research, the reindeer and bird studies, and the weekly household chores, we were all occupied with different things. Eric did a lot of work on technical equipment, Ko read books and analyzed bird specimens collected in summer. Piet worked on a botanic collection from Iceland, while Paul read and did various jobs for the expedition. Although there were seldom open conflicts, there was some tension. The untidiness of one person could lead to a conflict with another. A third person might feel he was not taken seriously. Piet preferred to stay alone, peering through his microscope.
In December we celebrated Christmas and New Year in a somewhat strained atmosphere of cheer, as we did our birthdays. When we were inside the house we usually sat in our own rooms. Sometimes we enjoyed a game of Mah Jong and would then play for a long time. We also liked to poke fun at the silly and irrelevant (in our opinion) comments and questions of the organization in the Netherlands which was backing the expedition.

Radio contact did little to lessen our emotional isolation from our people in the Netherlands. The marine radio (at that time Scheveningen Radio was still on the air) could be heard by everyone in the world, including by the comrades in our station, and we did not use it for personal conversations. On the other hand, the marine radio let us share the intense emotions of people on the other side of the world, for instance a son trying to comfort his mother after her message that his father had died. A practical problem with the radio was that we could not use it any time we wanted to. In the winter in particular, technical problems meant that contact with Scheveningen Radio was limited and sometimes we could only make contact for an hour during twilight in the Netherlands. If there was a gale at Kapp Lee – which there often was – we sometimes had no contact for a week. Sometimes when we were listening to Scheveningen Radio's traffic list we would hear our code (Lima, Hotel, Five, Sierra) being read out, indicating that somebody wanted to speak to us. If we were then unable to make contact it was rather frustrating.

Writing letters was a good way of expressing our deeper feelings to others and was therefore very important for us. Even though it was sometimes a year before these letters could be posted, we kept on writing...
them in the hope that they would be read one day. A promised mail drop around Christmas was cancelled because of bad weather, which would have caused the mail to disappear into the polar night. The letters were delivered to Longyearbyen instead. Strangely, even though they were inaccessible to us, we were glad our mail was now at least in Spitsbergen.

In February the sun came back and we could go begin making skiing trips by daylight. However, this did not reduce the tensions. Two people were required to ski to Longyearbyen to pick up a snow scooter which we considered essential for catching polar bears. We had arguments about who would go and what they would take with them, but eventually Eric and Ko set out on a journey which was to take eleven days through weather which included a hurricane and temperatures as low as –40 to –50 C. The two were forced to stay in Longyearbyen for more than a month, because each time they tried out the new snow scooter something broke down and because a sled also had to be made. During this time Piet and Paul, who had remained at the station, enjoyed more freedom to do as they pleased. Two members of the Norwegian expedition arrived at the station during Eric and Ko's absence, waiting for their return as they were bringing their mail too. Piet and Paul found this visit refreshing and inspiring. The Norwegians took Paul on several dog sled trips in the surrounding area; we did not have a team of dogs ourselves. When they left Kapp Lee after a month, tired of waiting, Piet felt ashamed that they had waited so long in vain for the other two to return from Longyearbyen when there was no convincing reason why they had to stay away for so long. After Eric and Ko had finally returned by snow scooter and sled to Kapp Lee in mid-April, with the mail, Eric made another trip with Paul to the dentist in Longyearbyen, and then another trip with Piet. On both occasions the two who stayed behind enjoyed the extra freedom the reduced number offered, though they always really looked forward to the return of the others because they would bring the mail, and because the snow scooter was needed to catch polar bears. All four of us went to Longyearbyen at times, but no one was really happy to be there as each was eager to get back to the station on Edgeøya, where we had our own 'house', and to continue with our work with the bears. So although the reason we had bought a snow scooter had been to catch more bears, in the long run it was used mainly for all sorts of logistical purposes which had little to do with the catching the bears.
In the spring Piet and Ko did their fieldwork on reindeer and seabirds with increasing intensity, assisted by Paul. Eric made frequent trips on the snow scooter over the rapidly deteriorating sea ice to catch bears, a job he preferred to do alone. The technical skills required were not shared equally by everyone, partly because little effort was made to teach the others. We blamed each other for this undesirable situation, but little changed. During this period we took turns at living alone in a hut on Barentszøya, 20 km from the station and separated by it by a sound (Freemansundet), for a few weeks at a time. Paul even made preparations to spend the rest of the season with the Norwegian expedition on the south side of Edgeøya. We later heard from those same Norwegians that they occasionally had similar compulsions; there were four of them too.

In the summer we were visited by geological expeditions with ships and helicopters. This was fine for a day or two, but in general we preferred to be left alone to do our work undisturbed. During one of these visits Piet for instance preferred to be sailed to an island to further his vegetation research. However, for all of us the most important thing about these visits was the opportunity they provided to receive and send mail. Ko and Paul went on a surveying trip in the north of Edgeøya for a few weeks, during which time the two who stayed behind felt a greater freedom, just as they had in the winter. Then, in August, we got ready to go home, although each of us wanted to extend our stay for as long as possible. We had a few opportunities to join a passing expedition ship and leave sooner, but we did not take them. Ko and Paul wanted to stay another year, but the organization in the Netherlands would not permit this, even though we had brought enough provisions for a two-year stay in case severe ice conditions had prevented us from being picked up. In mid-September we were all picked up by the Norwegian sealer Norvarg. We had been put ashore more than a year before with 50 tons of equipment; we returned to the Netherlands with just three tons.

In the Netherlands, led by Piet, we continued to work together for several years to complete the expedition's work, to pay off its debts, to publish the scientific results, and to prepare new enterprises in the Arctic. We had a certain feeling of solidarity because of what we had been through together – something we shared with each other and with no – one else. But that feeling was rather vague, as was illustrated at the ceremony at which each of us received the Visser-Neerlandia prize in 1970. It was as if we were four solitary individuals, each of whom had experienced his own expedition.
Motives and experience

Why did we go to the polar region for such a long period and what were our expectations? Coming from the industrialized and densely populated Netherlands, we all loved untouched wilderness which we had already had a taste of. The adventure of a winter spent in the Arctic, compared with everyday life in the Netherlands, appealed to us. The idealistic aim of protecting the polar bears and the desire to do research in the undisturbed Arctic ecosystem also played a part.

Although we were deprived of direct intimate contacts during the winter, we were not often homesick and were not particularly keen to go home, because we were well aware of the downsides of life in the Netherlands in comparison with life in the Arctic. In Spitsbergen we experienced the sort of freedom which was impossible to find in the civilized world. We could do as we pleased and we enjoyed the Arctic landscape. Catching polar bears provided welcome excitement and sensation during the expedition, which sometimes seemed to consist of little more than routine. We gained a greater appreciation of the basic needs of life, such as food, shelter, warmth and affection. We believe that the results of our expedition might have been better if we had been better able to work together. The lack of a leader and of clear working agreements tended to lead to some disorganization. We all suffered from this situation, but were unable to change it. Piet, being the oldest with the most experience in research had an authority which was accepted by the others, but he concentrated mostly on his own studies. If there had been an opportunity for the same group to go back to Spitsbergen shortly after our return to the Netherlands, all four of us would have been willing to do so, but only on certain conditions.

Samenvatting

Van augustus 1968 tot september 1969 verbleven we als Nederlandse Spitsbergen Expeditie op Kapp Lee, Edgeøya, Oost Spitsbergen, om een bijdrage te leveren aan ijsberenonderzoek in het kader van internationale natuurbescherming (IUCN en WWF). Onze groep bestond uit vier man, Eric Flipse (23 jaar), Paul de Groot (21 jaar), Ko de Korte (25 jaar) en Piet Oosterveld (29 jaar). Onze dichtstbijzijnde buren waren de vier leden van een Noorse ijsberenexpeditie op Andreetangen (80 km) en de bewoners van Longyearbyen (120 km).

De discussie over het type persoon dat geschikt zou zijn voor dit werk duurde kort, omdat er weinig keus was. Het was al moeilijk genoeg om vier
personen te vinden die 14 maanden onder deze omstandigheden wilden overwintener. De discussie over het type station duurde langer en had betrekking op de problemen van emotionele isolatie, en van overbevolking op een geïsoleerde plaats. De isolatie zou verlicht kunnen worden door direct radiocontact met de mensen thuis, en door postdroppings, de overbevolking zou dragelijk gemaakt kunnen worden door ons een comfortabel station (nissenhut) van 110 m² te geven. Privacy kon verkregen worden door ieder in zijn eigen kamer (6 m²) te laten wonen.

Eerst wilden we overwinteren op Halvmaanøya, ten zuiden van Edgeøya, omdat in de winter hier veel ijsberen voorkwamen, maar vanwege zwaar zee- ijs konden we daar niet landen. Daarop voeren we naar Kapp Lee, omdat de ijsomstandigheden daar gunstiger waren. Daar konden we onze uitrusting van 50 ton, waaronder ons station, vrij gemakkelijk aan land brengen in een ijsvrije baai, een prachtige plek. Op de toendra, bouwden we ons station, een oude nissenhut, die we moesten, isoleren en van binnen betimmeren. Tot midden oktober was er nog een korte periode met daglicht en konden we met de rubberboot op de dichtvriezende zee varen om drijfhout van de kusten naar huis te slepen, om dat later te verzagen, en in onze houtkachels te verbranden. Gedurende de Poolnacht, van eind oktober tot begin februari gingen we bij maanlicht naar buiten op ski's om ijsberen te vangen met het verdovingsgeweer en ze te merken, en om rendieren te bestuderen. Vaak was dit echter niet mogelijk, omdat het dagenlang stormde met orkaankracht. Door de stormen werd de geringe sneeuw in de buurt van het station vaak helemaal weggeblazen.

In de periode van continue duisternis begonnen we het gemeenschappelijke dag- en nachtritme te verliezen, waardoor er altijd wel iemand wilde slapen terwijl iemand anders in het huis bezig was. We stelden toen de regel in, dat de maaltijden op vaste tijden geserveerd zouden worden, buiten die tijden mochten geen maaltijden gebruikt worden. Bij toerbeurt had elk van ons gedurende een week de taak om het huishouden te doen, zoals het halen van ijs uit een door ons aangelegd stuwmeertje voor drinkwater, en het klaarmaken van het eten. De Poolnacht was een rustige tijd, waarin niet veel opwindends gebeurde, behalve bijvoorbeeld in een nacht waarin het station dreigde af te branden, dat gaf nogal wat consternatie. We waren veel op onszelf en voelden ons meer verbonden met onze mensen in Nederland dan met elkaar. Buiten het ijsberenonderzoek en het onderzoek aan rendieren en vogels, en de wekelijkse corvee, was ieder met zijn eigen zaken bezig. In december werden de feestdagen in een ietwat
vrolijke sfeer gevierd, zo ook de verjaardagen. Wanneer we in huis waren zaten we meestal in onze eigen kamertjes. Soms vonden we het leuk om met elkaar Mah Yong te spelen en we hielden er ook van om met elkaar plezier te maken over de, in onze ogen, irrelevante opmerkingen van de organisatie die in Nederland achter de expeditie stond. Radiocontact betekende weinig voor het verminderen van het emotionele isolement waarin we ons bevonden ten opzichte van onze mensen in Nederland. De scheepsradio (Scheveningen Radio in die tijd) kon door iedereen over de gehele wereld en in ons station beluisterd worden en werd door ons niet gebruikt voor persoonlijke gesprekken. Vooral in de winter waren de mogelijkheden om contact te maken met Scheveningen Radio beperkt. We konden dan alleen verbinding maken gedurende een uur tijdens de schemering in Nederland en slechts als het niet stormde op Kapp Lee. Het schrijven van brieven was een goede manier om onze gevoelens te uiten aan anderen. Hoewel deze brieven misschien in geen jaar gepost konden worden, bleven we schrijven in het vertrouwen dat ze ooit gelezen zouden worden.

In februari kwam de zon weer terug waardoor we weer lange skitochten bij daglicht konden maken. Eric en Ko gingen op ski’s naar Longyearbyen om een sneeuwscooter op te halen, die onmisbaar leek te zijn voor het vangen van ijsberen. De twee bleven meer dan een maand weg, omdat de sneeuwscooter steeds kapot ging, en er ook nog een slede gebouwd moest worden. Piet en Paul, die op het station waren gebleven vonden het prettig om vrijer hun gang te kunnen gaan. Twee man van de Noorse expeditie kwamen in die periode ook naar ons station en wachtten op de terugkeer van Eric en Ko, die ook hun post, uit Longyearbyen zouden meebrengen. Toen na een maand de Noren Kapp Lee weer verlieten voelde Piet zich beschaamd dat zij zolang tevergeefs op de twee uit Longyearbyen hadden gewacht. Nadat midden april de twee op de sneeuwscooter waren teruggekeerd naar Kapp Lee, maakte Eric nog een keer een tocht met Paul naar de tandarts in Longyearbyen, en daarna nog een keer met Piet. Degenen van ons die naar Longyearbyen gingen waren niet echt blij om daar te zijn, maar wilden snel terug naar het station op Edgeøya, waar we ons werk konden doen in de wildernis, en waar we ons thuis voelden. In het voorjaar voerden Piet en Ko met toenemende intensiteit hun veldwerk uit aan respectievelijk rendieren (Oosterveld, 1973) en zeevogels (de Korte, 1972), daarbij geassisteerd door Paul. In deze periode zaten we bij
toerbeurt ook af en toe enkele weken aan één stuk, op ons eentje in een hut op Barentszøya, op 20 km afstand van het station.

In de zomer kregen we bezoek van grote expedities van geologen met schepen en helikopters. Gedurende een dag of wat vonden we dat leuk, maar over het algemeen werden we liever met rust gelaten om ongestoord ons werk te kunnen doen. Het belangrijkste van deze bezoeken bleef voor ons het kunnen ontvangen en versturen van post. In augustus maakten we ons klaar om naar huis terug te keren en midden september werden we allen opgehaald door de Noorse “Norvarg”.

In Nederland bleven we een aantal jaren samenwerken om, onder leiding van Piet, de expeditie af te ronden, de schulden van de expeditie te betalen, de wetenschappelijke resultaten te publiceren, en nieuwe ondernemingen in het Poolgebied voor te bereiden. Daarbij hadden we een soort gevoel van solidariteit om iets wat we samen hadden meegemaakt.

Waarom gingen we voor zo’n lange periode naar het poolgebied? Het avontuur van een overwintering vergeleken met het dagelijkse leven in Nederland trok ons aan. Idealisme om ijsberen te beschermen en de wens om onderzoek te doen in het niet verstoorde arctisch ecosysteem speelden ook een rol.

Hoewel we tijdens de overwintering van veel verstoken waren, hadden we weinig heimwee, omdat we ons bewust waren van de nadelen van het leven in Nederland vergeleken met het leven in de Arctis. We konden gaan en staan waar we wilden en genoten van het arctische landschap. Het vangen van ijsberen gaf een prettige spanning en sensatie naast het soms sleurvolle expeditieleven. Indien kort na terugkeer in Nederland er een gelegenheid zou zijn geweest om met dezelfde groep weer terug te gaan, zouden we alle vier onder bepaalde voorwaarden daartoe bereid zijn geweest.

References
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