

## SLEDGING AND SLEDGE DOGS

### AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN

### ANTARCTIC BASE

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At present there are only a few bases on Antarctica which still use sledge dogs as a means of transport. Personal communication through radio schedules with expedition members at the Australian base, Mawson, revealed that they use two dog teams of seven each for doing small jobs near the base or for pleasure trips. Halley Bay, in the British territory, uses dogs for part of their work.

The huskies at SANAE are mainly crossbreds between Greenland and Labrador types. Bingham<sup>1</sup> notes that the East Greenland dogs, being smaller and less sturdy animals, are a poor lot compared with their brothers of West Greenland. According to Bingham the West Greenland husky is a magnificent animal, strong, heavy and stoutly built. The Labrador dogs are also big, strong animals of a slightly more 'rangy' build. The SANAE huskies at present include only one original East Greenland husky, the leader Jock. This dog is of tender build but is quite intelligent. The rest of the dogs can be grouped in two categories. One of the groups consists of the Belgian dogs which were brought from Roi Baudouin; they are mostly black and white coloured, but there are also a few grayish dogs among them. The second group, consisting of yellowish gray and brownish dogs, was bred from four to six years ago. In preventing inbreeding careful crossbreds were made between these two groups. The pups born from this breeding look very promising.

Four or five of the Belgian dogs turned out to be quite good sledge dogs so that they are already included in the main team or 'first' team, consisting of eleven dogs. At SANAE a geologist is in charge of the dogs which are used for geological field trips to the mountains far away from the base. Usually the dog team serves as secondary transport to a muskeg tractor which is used for pulling the heavier loads. Huskies do still, however, have several advantages over mechanical vehicles as a means of transport. While the mechanic struggles in the mornings to start the muskeg in the severe cold, the dogs are more than eager to begin the day's trip at the first shout of 'Trrrrrek

Brakkies'. Once on a track, one does not have to constantly check if they are going in the right direction. No, instead you can relax on the sledge and enjoy the trip only keeping check on the team occasionally. Furthermore, it is safer driving a dog team in a crevassed area than riding a muskeg. Near the hinge area where the floating ice shelf joins the continent, one must be alert to any signs of crevasses, but if a lead dog is good, he can sense a crevasse and may avoid it by turning the team in a different direction or by stopping in his tracks. The willing dogs are also lovely companions to have during a long and sometimes lonesome field season. They exercise a good psychological effect on man in the desolate, lonely Antarctic.

Arriving with the R.S.A. at the ice shelf 16 km. from SANAE one of the most beautiful sights which meets the eye is the team of lovely huskies lying and rolling in the snow after a sledge trip of two and a half hours. To prevent the dogs from fighting they have to be out spanned and fastened every time the team is left on their own for a while.

At the base the dogs are each fastened to separate poles with a six feet chain. Efficient clip hooks fitted with swivels are connected to these chains. The feeding times are usually 48 hours apart. Each dog receives 5 to 6 lbs. of whale meat. Alternatively this meat is replaced with seal meat. These seals are shot at the beginning of each year prior to the departure of the R.S.A. The frozen seals are chopped up during the first summer months. Sometimes the expedition members cannot manage to finish all the chopping before winter in which case they have a difficult time in doing this in temperatures well below minus 20 degrees Celsius. Apart from the uncomfortably cold conditions, the seals are as hard as a block of wood. It takes one person about three quarters of an hour to chop a seal into two pieces. As huskies are usually greedy, they swallow this 5 lb. piece of meat within two to three minutes and then still look for more. While on a field trip they each receive a one pound pemmican block of

concentrated, dehydrated meat and fat each day.

The dog laboratory in the base also serves as a storeroom for the dog gear. During the winter months old harnesses are repaired and new ones made. The sledge and other sledging equipment are repaired, etc. Then, during the late winter months, usually in August, the first exercises with the team are done near the base. At first much trouble is encountered, but after the third or fourth exercise, the routine begins to run smoothly.

The dog 'lab' is also used for the upbringing of the pups during the first few weeks. A few weeks prior to birth the pregnant bitch is brought down into the dog tunnel where she stays until just before giving birth. Hereafter, she is put into the dog 'lab' in a big box with straw, where she can stay with the pups until they are about three weeks old. The small huskies usually feed from their mother, but if she has a milk shortage, additional powdered milk, specially manufactured for pups, is given to them. From about this age, delicate rest food from the table can be fed to them. Small pieces of meat can also be added to their meal, which will definitely be increased amazingly in quantity. At first they are fed three times daily while only one meal per day is enough from two months of age. Depending on the time of the year the pups might be taken outside permanently from the age of two months. In the winter, however they must be kept inside until October, before being taken outside. Immediately after they are taken outside they start playing in the snow like little kittens. Training of the pups as sledge dogs must preferably not take place before they are one year old, otherwise this strenuous exercise at an early stage can restrict their growth.

The South Africans use the centre trace method of driving the dog team. We find this method the most convenient for our purposes although Bingham<sup>1</sup> reckons that it is unsatisfactory on sea ice and among crevasses.

Driving a team of dogs is not as easy and straightforward as it seems. It takes a long time, actually the best part of a year, before driver and team know each other well. Although a whip is used, it very seldom makes its appearance in a good driver's hand. At least two persons are always necessary during sledging, as one has to control the brake while the other directs the team with commands, which are shouted from the sledge. Frequently, though, the leader does not listen to the shouting, in which case the driver has to jump off and run alongside the team on the opposite side of the direction in which you want to go. Sometimes when a leader does not wish to go in a certain direction, the driver has to walk or run in front for a short distance and then the whole team will follow eagerly. While doing field work in the mountains, the leader usually follows a direction easily when he has a nunatak in front to sight on. A big advantage when sledging with a dog team is that you are always active and consequently your hands and feet stay warm.

Although huskies are lovable and kind to man they fight frequently with each other. The most probable time for a dog fight to start is in the morning while harnessing them just before sledging starts. At this time they are all in high spirits and cannot bear the slightest aggressive look from a teammate. Even a slight, suspicious movement between dogs which do not like each other can set them afire. If you allow one to get a good hold with their jaws on a soft part of another's body, it is very difficult to separate them. Worst of all is when a mob fight develops. In this case it is not unusual to struggle for half an hour before you succeed in breaking them up. I recall an incident when a friend and I struggled for two and a half hours to clear up a mob fight, which had taken place in complete darkness! This started when the small, clever Kerneels had broken loose and pulled all the others together. One good husky, Topaz, had been wounded so severely that he lay helpless in his own blood and it seemed at that time that he would die. Two days later, however, he was able to pull again.

In contradiction to their furious nature against each other, they are lovable towards man and even seek to be petted.

To work with huskies, giving them food, patting them and riding on the sledge under an icy, blue Antarctic sky while they are pulling, is one of the most exotic and romantic feelings you could imagine.

#### Reference:

- 1 BINGHAM, E.W., The Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, Polar Record, Vol. 5, No. 3, p.27-39. (1947).

