

The Greenlandic sledge dog

A visit to a settlement north of Kangerlussuaq in the central Greenland is characterized by often hundreds of dogs, whose howl sounds like a wolf. The sound and the cold climate have been the scene of many of my visits to the northern settlements. First a single dog begins to howl. Then the other dogs in the settlement show unity in an impressive jointed choir.

North of Kangerlussuaq no domestic dogs are allowed. Here lives only the Greenlandic dog, also called the Greenland dog. The reason is that the authorities do not want to mix the Greenlandic sledge dog with other breeds. The Greenlandic dog is believed to be descended from dogs that originally lived in the central Siberia in the Stone Age.

The Greenland dogs are working animals. It can tolerate hunger for a long time, and only the whip from the sledge driver can displace its original hunting instinct. Most of the time the sledge dogs are in chains. They are placed around the houses in the settlements. They are fed daily with waste from the fish or seal meat.

The dog sledge is still an important means of transportation in North and East Greenland. When the hunters went on hunting and fishing they use the dog sledge on the ice. A dog team includes 8-12 dogs. Each dog is connected to the slide with a single tow.

The dog team has a leading dog, but the hierarchy is tested constantly, and there may be violent fights now and then. A dog team usually consists of males and not more than one or two bitches.

As a passenger on a dog sledge, you have to ignore the dogs. Then they will ignore you. It's a great mode of transport on the ice of the fiords between icebergs in the skyscraper-size. However, you have to get used to the strong smell when the running dogs move the bowels.

A sledge dog will always try to lie down in a dry place, away from the cold rock. Even a stack of boards in the sun is luxury in relation to the cold ground.



A Greenlandic sledge dog sleeping in the sun, February 2009