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An inuksuk in Nunavut. Photo by Mike Beauregard

Ancient Guide

In the northern hemisphere it's the hottest part of summer, so I thought this week I'd chose a nice upbeat summer photo. It is a summer photo, taken the second of July 2009, I checked. This is an Inuksuk, a marker found in the arctic of Canada. It's easy to see the arctic as a desolate wasteland. A marker like this shows how different it could be. Physically it's a pile of rocks. It's probably a sturdy pile of rocks because any pile of rocks that isn't sturdy will be blown over rapidly by the arctic winds. Yet pile of rocks says very little about what it is. And from the way I'm rambling it should be obvious I don't know what it means. It could be a navigational guide, or a warning or simply a sign that other people were here.

There is a danger that Inuksuit (plural of Inuksuk) will become increasingly rare due to expansion of the mining and energy industries. On the one hand this isn't a physical problem. As Scott Heyes points out in his article Protecting the authenticity and integrity of Inuksuit within the arctic milieu, things like GPS are replacing traditional methods of navigation. Yet Inuksuit are not just about navigation to physical places. There's a cultural landscape as well as a physical landscape and so far this has not been replicated with GPS. Given that native shamans of the arctic would say that they were walking over the ice to the Moon, that could be quite a navigational feat to replicate.*

If Inuksuit say someone was here, is their removal an archaeologically traceable sign that someone was removed?

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*Walking to the moon is an interesting concept. This far north in the summer the Moon doesn't really leave the southern horizon, so for a while it's easy to conceive of the Moon touching the Earth. Also, the plural of shaman really is shamans. Shaman is a pop group not an anthropological term<.

