



*Mackenzie Eskimo kayaks showing double and single bladed paddles; courtesy Public Archives of Canada*

## ARCTIC KAYAK PADDLES

BY DAVID ZIMMERLY

**I**n this article I will discuss and illustrate traditional Arctic kayak paddles of the Koryak, Chukchi, Aleut and Eskimo peoples. I will describe the different types and their measurements in some detail. How the various paddle types were used and how they can be constructed for use by today's recreational kayaker will also be covered.

Except for scattered areas in Alaska and Greenland, the use of traditional kayaks and paddles has passed into the realm of history. All that remain are museum specimens and historical descriptions. Most of the materials for this article were gathered between 1971 and 1982, during which time I was the Arctic Ethnologist for the National Museum of Man in Ottawa, Canada.

### **A Personal Bias**

Before beginning, I have to admit to a rather strong bias: I dislike feathered paddles. Arctic peoples never used them and,

in my opinion, they have no place in or on a sea kayak. They are a danger to a paddler's physical health (tendonitis), are unnatural in use, and foster bad sea kayaking paddling techniques.

Unfortunately, feathered paddles have been unwittingly foisted upon us by our whitewater cousins. I don't blame them; the aesthetically offensive feathered coal-shovel-shaped paddle of whitewater kayaking is very functional for moving slalom kayaks through and around slalom gates. Bracing with arms high in the air and using power strokes delivered close to the gunwales are all a necessary part of whitewater paddling, and, since many recent sea kayak devotees are whitewater converts, it is only natural that they brought both their paddles and kayaks with them.

In the first issue of SEA KAYAKER, John Dowd related how a bout of tendonitis was only finally cured by unfeathering his paddles. Another example is Englishman David R. Webb, who