



Man's best friend, dogs, were companions and vital workers throughout the early history of exploration of Antarctica. Indeed much of the science and exploration would have been impossible without them. Sir Douglas Mawson had teams of huskies to assist the first Australian Antarctic Expedition in the transport of supplies.

Dogs and sleds are quick, flexible and able to traverse most of the terrain that Antarctica has to offer.

Left: Huskies at Mawson station | Photo: John Hogg

Dogs at the South Pole!

Roald Amundsen was the first man to reach the South Pole and his success was in part due to his use of dogs rather than the ponies used by Robert Scott. Scott's ponies' were no match for Amundsen's dogs as the ponies' small hooves and heavy weight caused them to sink into the snow. Their coats became soaked with perspiration necessitating the application of blankets to avoid hypothermia through evaporation. Dogs in contrast do not have sweat glands, they cool themselves via panting, making them less vulnerable to the cold.

The Greenland dogs used by Amundsen all returned in good condition having actually put weight on during their trip.

Eleven of the dogs that returned with Amundsen from the pole were given to Douglas Mawson in Hobart for use in the second year of the Australian Antarctic Expedition. These were taken down to Antarctica on the Aurora, as Mawson and most of his people were already in Antarctica.

Dogs used on the Australasian Antarctic Expedition.

Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz were selected by Mawson as the official dog handlers. The dogs were considered to be 'semi-wolves' but were well liked and the men often played with them. As working dogs they were the primary means of transport and facilitated much of the exploration, surveying and scientific expeditions into the interior and along the sea ice.

Among the huskies used by Mawson's men were: Basilisk, Betli, Blizzard, Caruso, Castor, Franklin, Fusilier, Gadget, George, Ginger, Ginger Bitch, Grandmother, Haldane, Jappy, John Bull, Johnson, Mary, Pavlova, Scott and Shackleton.



Amundsen's dogs | Photo: Riksarkivet



Tom Crean with some pups | Photo: Frank Hurley



Shackleton's use of Dogs in Antarctica

Ernest Shackleton's Trans-Antarctica expedition of 1914 - 1917 is one of the most incredible adventure stories of all time. It is remarkable even for an era and region that already has far more than its fair share of amazing tales of heroism and fortitude in the face of appalling hardships.

Ernest Shackleton, having learned the lessons from the use of ponies and dogs in Antarctica, had intended to cross the continent from coast to coast via the pole in his 1914-1917 expedition using dogs.

While his ship was beset by ice and later crushed and sunk, the dogs were valuably used in hauling men, lifeboats, equipment and stores across the ice of the Weddell Sea as the expedition tried to reach land and safety. Sadly for the dogs, they could not be taken in the lifeboats and were shot as the sea ice began to decay and open water was reached (along with the ship's cat).

How much can dogs pull?

A sledge load of 55 kg per dog is considered to be a fair maximum, which has been confirmed via strain gauges measuring the pull a dog can exert. Mawson's dogs regularly pulled 100 lbs (45kg) and at times up to 150 lbs (68kg).

A dog team would usually consist of nine dogs often led by a female. Lighter dogs went at the front and heavier workers to the rear. Dogs appear to enjoy the task of pulling sledges and being in the company of humans.

Are there still dogs in Antarctica?

The last dogs were taken from Antarctica on Feb 22nd 1994, a consequence of an environmental clause in the Antarctic Treaty that required non-native species to be removed. In the case of dogs, specifically because distemper (a disease of dogs) could potentially spread from the dogs to the native seals of Antarctica.

Activity:

- Compare the use of dogs and ponies for pulling sleds on snow and ice.
- Find out why Huskies are considered the best breed for the cold conditions in Antarctica.



Endurance final sinking November 1915 | Photo: Frank Hurley



Willie Kulikowski driving the dog team called the 'Kelly Gang', Mawson 1975 | Photo: Russel Marnock

Want to know more?

- <http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/history/transportation/ground-transportation/huskies>
- http://www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/wildlife/dogs_huskies.php
- http://www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/History/Shackleton-Endurance-Trans-Antarctic_expedition.php