

Understanding Arctic Change through Inuit Knowledge

Inuit Knowledge as Foundation

Sila is boss. There is a saying in Inuktitut that sila is boss. It is very easy to accept and understand this concept as an Inuk, as a person who is from the arctic. In today's world, as an example, it does not matter how well one plans to have a successful meeting with participants from different communities, if the weather does not cooperate, the meeting takes place. Similarly, despite planning a hunting trip, if the weather does not cooperate the hunt will not occur. Very quickly we realize and we are continually reminded how much we are not in control and how we are just a small part of the bigger cosmos.

In the Inuit world, sila is an intricate part of our life and we are a part of sila. To better illustrate this, I want to share an excerpt from a piece written by Tommy Akulukjuk, an Inuk from Pangnirtung. Describing his father, he wrote:

“He had to learn the complicated weather system, how it behaves in different seasons, how much it affects snow and ice, what different cloud shapes and colours mean, and many various subjects about the weather. Not only that, he had to apply his knowledge to his hunting skills to feed my siblings and our extended family. Which means, he had to follow the seasons, not in terms of migrating to different places, but in terms of watching the environment closely; so that he would know when is the snow going to start melting? And when it does melt, what is the texture of the snow, and when and what kind of snow is safe to drink? When he travels on the ice, he has to know where the shoals are, to predict where the ice is going to be rough and where it might be

thin. Whenever he has to cross Cumberland Sound, he has to look far to the horizon to predict if it is going to be safe to boat.

He knows what the colour of the clouds mean and what kind of snow, rain or wind they might bring. He doesn't look at these things as if they are separate links, but as connected links: whenever something behaves this way, it might be that way over there. He has to know when the tide goes up and down, and how much. When he sees an animal, it is not just food, but it also tells you the state of the surrounding environment. How is that seal acting on top of the ice, sunbathing? And does the colour of the caribou skin seem different from the year before?

These observations are essential for survival, but they also give a person a glimpse of the connectedness of animals, humans and the environment to themselves. To my father, weather is life: it restricts him, but it also makes him excel in hunting when the weather is right. In certain seasons, the weather acts like this and that, and if the weather changes, it is going to affect the animals; so it is important to know and learn the weather, not through TV or other sources of communication, but to interact with it, be one with it."

Inuit Knowledge as Strength

Inuit knowledge and Inuit ways of understanding has great value and serves as our strength and as a foundation for adapting to change. Inuit knowledge has a foundation made up of relationships. Minnie Grey yesterday spoke eloquently to the important Inuit understanding of *ilagiingniq* that goes beyond the western understanding of family.

Self-Determination and Inuit Knowledge – The Arctic We Want

Inuit have always been adaptive and observant and continue to be resourceful. With the changing world and the changing instruments available to us, Inuit continue to rely on Inuit knowledge to strive to make life better for our fellow Inuit. Over the last couple of days, we have heard thought provoking and inspiring messages reiterated in different ways about how as Inuit we want to be in control of our own lives. We want to have the means, resources and support to be able to thrive. I have been grateful to be here with all of you in Utqiagvik. Thank you to ICC Alaska and the people of Utqiagvik who have been exceptionally welcoming. Qujanaqpak!

I am particularly grateful to hear some of the stories and commentaries of some of the Inuit visionaries who took part internationally to make life better for Inuit across Inuit Nunaat.

In Canada, it was this reaction to change, that played such a pivotal catalyst in the land claims movement. Inuit knew that they had to use the existing systems to protect and assert their lifestyle and maintain control of their lives.

In Canada, our political story stretches back about 50 years to the early 1970's when Inuit in what is now Nunavut began to organize politically as a way of asserting self determination. For 30 years, young Inuit who had a big bold audacious dream, fought with the federal government to create a set of rights and protections and most importantly to create the territory of Nunavut outlined in the Nunavut Agreement.

The creation of Nunavut was a monumental feat. Inuit are so capable! During the beginning of land claims discussions Inuit understanding of land was that the land belonged to everyone, yet belonged to nobody. Our understanding of how we fit into the world include concepts of

land, sea, ice, environment. We were and continue to be a part of the land.

When you hear anecdotes of Inuit negotiators who worked hard, sacrificing their family life and giving up their life to see the creation of Nunavut, you often hear about how concepts of land ownership had to be explained. Land ownership had not, until then needed to be defined, Inuit lived on stretches of land and sea as long as it was an area that adequately provided for the needs.

Just 9 days ago on July 9 Nunavummiut celebrated the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Nunavut Agreement.

Inuit Knowledge as Innovative

25 years after our rights were recognized, Nunavut Tunngavik continues to face challenges and work hard to ensure that the rights and protections of the Nunavut Agreement are upheld and honoured.

Policy development that incorporate Inuit knowledge continues to lag at a time of intense transition. Policies and laws that protect and maintain our culture and traditions can help us navigate this change in a way that promotes equity and sustainable development.

Inuit knowledge can be used to address changes in Inuit Nunaat in a self-affirming way. I will speak broadly about three areas.

Ilagiingniq – Yesterday, Byron and Piiyuuk spoke about how everyone had a role. They spoke about the role of women and the role of men. People need to know that their contributions are valued. They need to know that their behaviour and contribution has an impact on other people in their community. We are all interdependent on each other. If you are okay, I am okay. If I am okay, you are okay.

We are all aware that the drastic change from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary lifestyle has taken a toll and has weakened, in some cases, our family ties and social support. Strengthening our relationship network amongst Inuit will only be good.

We need to work together to mitigate the impacts and develop innovative policies to return to our strong family ties. I am pleased to know that there is an intention to host a Circumpolar Inuit Summit on Health and Well being. I see this as an opportunity to discuss and think more deeply about important issues in the context of Inuit understandings of relationships.

Our relationships are not limited to those relationships amongst us as Inuit. Relationships are also crucially important with everything around us. If sila is okay we are okay.

On April 1, 1999, when Nunavut actually became a territory, there were three Elders that spoke at the commemorative ceremony. I thought I would summarize the message of Elisapee Ottawa who was one of the Elders. I think it illustrates the importance of the relationships that we have with sila. She spoke about the sea mammals and the lake fish, the mammals of the land and the birds of the air and spoke about how we would not contaminate the water, the land and the air so that they would continue to be a food source and source of clothing and that the intention is that we continue to co-exist as long as the sun will set and the sun will rise.

Food Security – Ilagiingniq is crucially important. My late grandmother used to tell me that one of the roles of children was to be observant when they went into any dwelling they were visiting. They were to observe whether or not they had food and in the case that they were short of food they were to let their mother know. With this knowledge, then the mother could go over to visit with a little bit of food to share.

This would prevent people from feeling ashamed. Often, I think about how by strengthening our understandings of family relations we could also be providing positive social supports.

This would be important in a place like Nunavut, where we have data indicating that 7 out of 10 Inuit children go to bed hungry each day. We must nurture our tradition of sharing our harvest, because we know that this will help with the growing inequities that we face in our societies.

Partly in response to the food insecurity among young Inuit children, Nunavut Tunngavik reintroduced the Nunavut Harvesters Support Program last year. The Nunavut Harvesters Support Program or NHSP was established to support Inuit purchase hunting equipment to improve access to country food. This program is a central and significant piece to food security and food sovereignty.

Despite this support, we know that Inuit will continue to harvest. It is who we are. It is central to our identity.

Currently the federal government has a program that provides subsidies for store-bought processed foods, which are often less nutritional. For some time, I have been advocating that governments need to shift their thinking and start thinking more like Inuit and work towards supporting our hunters. Our hunters can then go out and hunt their own nutritious health foods and provide them for the community. Not only would that address food security issues but it would strengthen Inuit knowledge through the transference of hunting skills between the older generation and the younger generation and it would strengthen Inuit identity.

Nunavut Marine Monitoring Project – As outlined in the Nunavut Agreement, Inuit government structure relies on Inuit knowledge for its decision making processes. Five Institutions of Public Governments (IPGs) were created each with specific roles and focusses but as a whole, oversee how the land, water and wildlife are used and managed. Inuit share in considerable control by being represented on each of the five co-management bodies: Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB), the Nunavut Planning Commission (NPC), the Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB), the Nunavut Water Board (NWB), the Nunavut Surface Rights Tribunal (NSRT). They are entrusted with ensuring the future well-being of our land and wildlife – the wellbeing of our society and our culture as Inuit. We know that there is a lot of interest in the opening up of the northwest passage. There is a steady increase in the number of ships sailing in the waters within the Nunavut Settlement Area. Instead of relying on governments and companies to provide us with information, we have piloted a project that sees Inuit hunters who know the land to act as eyes and ears of our waterways by recording and monitoring ships going through our waters.

In more recent years with the diminishing ice levels due to climate change and growing interest from industry, tourism and research sectors have driven steady increases in ship traffic. Since 2006, shipping traffic in Nunavut has increased by 63%. This puts pressure on the marine environment, the fragile Arctic eco-system, and the Inuit way of life. Safe and efficient shipping is essential to the well being of strong monitoring and management efforts be undertaken to prevent serious impacts from shipping.

With this increase, NTI decided to develop a marine monitoring project. This project provides a foundation for Inuit participation in monitoring and management efforts on marine shipping traffic in Nunavut waters by using experienced Inuit hunters who are holders of Inuit knowledge.

This is a way in which we are using Inuit knowledge to address circumstances that we are facing today.

Like other regions, as our climate changes and technology advances, we require significant investments in infrastructure, training in search and rescue, as well as, emergency preparedness including the potential for oil-spills.

We are in need of marine related infrastructure by way of deep sea ports and small craft harbours. Not only to be able to respond to impact of increased shipping but to pursue our rights to access appropriate allocation of offshore resources.

Moving Forward to the Arctic We Want

As Inuit across Inuit Nunaat, we have strong ties. Ilagiiktugut. We need to use these forums to promote human, cultural, political and environmental rights and policies at the national and international levels. Using domestic and international legal instruments to assert Inuit rights and pursue our interests.

We must continue with important international cooperation to advance our shared vision of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Arctic.

In Canada, Inuit Nunangat faces a striking infrastructure deficit, in every imaginable area from housing to broadband to small craft harbours to roads etc.

We need to pursue more of our own development to contribute to our own well-being. I appreciate for example that our development corporations are partnering with other Inuit across the circumpolar arctic to increase and build connectivity by way of fiber-optics to improve broadband access. Regional-international linkages can

enhance our language. Cross-Arctic opportunities focused on our shared language are central to our Inuit centric foreign policy. Rather than translating from Inuktut to English and back to Kalaallisut, we must explore opportunities to be able to understand each other and omit English entirely.

What types of policy tools do we need to support this? Ultimately, how do we coordinate our efforts to ensure our Arctic region remains a place that reflects our Inuit culture and language?

Nunavut Tunngavik sees value in looking to our circumpolar neighbors for common solutions to common issues. We believe that trans-regional cooperation is key to our emancipation in a globalized world.

Today, we can use Instruments such as UNDRIP can be used to assert our self-determination so that we can continue to thrive with an Inuit cultural foundation.

Let us use every space and opportunity and tool that we have at our hands to assert who we are as Inuit. That is the Arctic that I want. An Arctic bursting with Inuit pride, speaking Inuit languages and contributing the richness of our knowledge amongst ourselves and with the world.

Alianait ullumi inuujugut!