

Arctic Change – What’s Next?

Excellences, Colleagues, Friends.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak here in Rovaniemi, where seeds sown in the summer of 1991 grew into the Arctic Council.

The Inuit Circumpolar Council represents the Arctic’s coastal peoples, from the eastern tip of Chukotka, across the top of the North American continent, including the world’s largest island, Greenland. We number approximately 165,000.

I’m from Utqiagvik, the northernmost community in the United States, where the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas meet at Point Barrow. We are smack-dab in the middle of what people like to call Arctic change. We have it all: melting sea ice, thawing permafrost, stronger and more frequent storms causing erosion of our coastline. Today, it’s warmer and wetter, the Arctic climate has changed and the Arctic ecosystem is transforming before our eyes.

Arctic change creates problems for us and the biodiversity that adapted to the Arctic climate uncounted generations ago. Our culture and way of life is under assault. The animals, birds and fish that we rely on for cultural and nutritional survival are increasingly under stress. We are worried for our food security.

It’s time to set the record straight, there is global climate change and humans are responsible for much of it. That’s the plain truth, and we don’t understand those that would argue otherwise. We believe climate change will continue for the foreseeable future. We believe it’s time to stop bickering over whether there’s climate change or not, and start implementing strategies and actions to survive climate change. We believe it’s time to stop hiding from reality.

There are many topics that we could talk about under the over-arching theme of Arctic change. Let me mention two topics that are definitely in conflict with each other, conservation and development. It’s our observation both sides to this discussion continue to battle each other. Both sides have taken extreme positions with little room for compromise, there’s much exaggeration and lots of fake news flying around this debate.

We believe people should live within, and in collaboration with, nature. Our viewpoint conflicts with the perspective of the so-called dominant society that arrogantly assumes man can control nature. We can see where that approach has gotten us. That approach has been disastrous for the Arctic and the rest of our planet.

Unregulated run-amuck development is clearly not the answer, neither are conservation strategies that would turn the Arctic into some giant open-air nature park, suitable only for tourists. ICC believes it's time to get back to the original ideals of the Arctic Council which promised a balance, a real balance, between sustainable development and environmental protection.

There are people living in the Arctic. People desiring a healthy environment with safe food, air and water. People desiring economic opportunity to provide for their families. It comes down to maintaining a balance between development and conservation.

It's important to include ICC and the other Permanent Participants in these critical discussions on climate change, sustainable development and environmental protection. We have another perspective, a different viewpoint that could greatly benefit what the Arctic Council hopes to accomplish.

The Arctic Council has garnered positive publicity due to the fact that indigenous peoples are seated at the table. This is truly unique for modern international organizations. We would say inclusion of the Permanent Participants gives the Arctic Council credibility. Indigenous participation helps the Arctic Council do a better job.

Participation is one thing, having influence is another. What good is participation if no one listens and our concerns are not being paid the attention we think they should be? The current situation within the Arctic Council has become a concern for us. The term meaningful engagement has a different meaning for the Arctic states than it does for the Permanent Participants.

We would like to see the Arctic Council address some of the issues important to us: wildlife management and food security; the infrastructure and social services deficit; physical and environmental health issues, including the horror of suicide;

and culture and language protection. It's time to address the problems faced by Arctic indigenous communities. It's time to seriously listen to the solutions offered by ICC and the other Permanent Participants. It's time to use Indigenous Knowledge as called for at the beginning of the Arctic Council.

We wish to express our thanks to the Finnish team and their strong effort leading the organization during their chairmanship and we pledge our support to the Icelandic chairmanship and promise to work hard to ensure its success.

Finally, I want to thank Julie Gourley, the United States Senior Arctic Official, for her friendship and strong presence during her 14-year tenure. We will miss her.

Thank you.