

**Arctic Futures 2050 Conference
4-6 September 2019
Washington, D.C.**

Indigenous Peoples and Arctic Environmental Change

*Dalee Sambo Dorough, PhD
Inuit Circumpolar Council*

Allow me to thank the conference organizers for the invitation to address the matter of Indigenous peoples and Arctic environmental change. I would like to provide a brief background on Inuit and our distinct rights; the importance of Indigenous knowledge; and the benefits of the co-production of knowledge, emphasizing the need for genuine partnerships aimed at advancing policy responsive to Inuit and other Arctic Indigenous peoples.

As our colleague, Kirk Johnson, has emphasized that the Arctic has gone from no human habitation to Inuit habitation. We have ingeniously adapted to this snow and ice-covered region that we refer to as Inuit Nunaat, our Arctic homeland, which stretches across Chukotka, Alaska, Canada and Greenland. Numbering approximately 180,000, we are a distinct peoples with inherent rights to our unique homelands and the Arctic. Established in 1977, the ICC is active as a UN ECOSOC non-governmental organization and as one of the original Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council.

On June 13th, 1977 in Utqiagvik, Alaska Eben Hopson, recognized as the founder of the ICC, welcomed our relations to the organizing meeting of the ICC and he stated

- 2 Our language contains the memory of four thousand years of human survival through the conservation and good managing of our Arctic wealth...Our language contains the intricate knowledge of the ice that we have seen no others demonstrate. Without our central involvement, there can be no safe and responsible Arctic resource development.

This quote is not merely a few sentences in English. These are powerful words and a powerful message. Hopson was speaking volumes about Inuit status, knowledge, intellectual property, land and territory, sustainable development, and above all, our need to play a central role in Arctic policy.

Another extraordinary Inuk present in 1977, Charles Etok Edwardsen, urging support for a resolution to defend the right of Inuit to maintain our cultural integrity and explicitly our relationship with the whale stated

- 3 ...the people who have called themselves conservationists have chosen not to conserve the Eskimos. We are further compelled to tell the world who we are...the total depth of our environment, and our association with the whale...is dependent upon the survival of both communities: the whale as a specie and Inuit as a specie.

A critical correlation is the fact that the health of the whale and the health of the hunter depend on each other...we are part of the overall ecosystem. Our collective health is interdependent. Therefore, when we speak of the Arctic, it is imperative to keep the distinct status, rights and holistic world perspectives of Inuit at the forefront of all considerations. “The total depth of our environment,” as Etok exclaimed, is what we consider to be central to Arctic policy and the safeguarding of Arctic biodiversity. Our original “principles and elements for a comprehensive Arctic Policy,” dating back to the mid-80s, affirmed that

- 4 Inuit are an integral part of Arctic ecosystems. For generations, Inuit subsistence activities have been and continue to be in harmony with, and an important part of, the dynamic processes of Arctic ecosystems. The profound relationship between Inuit and other living species of the natural world has economic, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. These perspectives of Inuit and ties with nature must be fully recognized and integrated in resource management and conservation strategies pertaining to the Arctic.

Regarding our distinct status and rights, I want to highlight the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* approved by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007. Its important to remind individuals that the General Assembly is comprised of nation-states – the UN member states are the ones that adopted this comprehensive international human rights instrument.

The *UN Declaration* is the longest discussed and negotiated human rights instrument in UN history. It also was the first time that the *subjects* of the instrument – in this case, Indigenous peoples –

participated extensively along with States in its formulation. This process set an important benchmark for Indigenous peoples' democratic participation in UN standard-setting. **

The vote in the UNGA was 144 in favour, 4 against, and 11 abstentions. The four opposing States – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and United States – have all since reversed their positions. Canada declared in its November 2010 endorsement: “We are now confident that Canada can interpret the principles expressed in the Declaration in a manner that is consistent with our Constitution and legal framework.”¹ On December 16, 2010, the last objecting State – the United States – reversed its position.² Thus, the *UN Declaration* is now a consensus international human rights instrument.

Though the rights affirmed in the UN Declaration are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible, I would like to draw attention to those that specifically reference Indigenous knowledge.

5 The UN Declaration preamble affirms that “*Recognizing* that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment”.

6 And, article 31 specifically affirms that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures..., knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, ... and that they also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.” More significantly, the article affirms that, “in conjunction with indigenous peoples, States shall take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of these rights.”

¹ Canada, “Canada’s Statement of Support on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”, 12 November 2010, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1309374239861>.

² United States (Barack Obama), “Remarks by the President at the White House Tribal Nations Conference”, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, D.C., 16 December 2010, online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/remarks-president-white-house-tribal-nations-conference>: “in April, we announced that we were reviewing our position on the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And today I can announce that the United States is lending its support to this declaration.”

For years, the ICC has been advancing Indigenous knowledge. In the articulation of our “principles and elements for a comprehensive Arctic Policy”, the ICC expressed the need for Inuit to be directly involved in research concerning our homelands and territory or those that impact our rights. Again, just over 35 years ago, the ICC Arctic policy included the following

- 7 Inuit traditional knowledge and scientific research are both valid systems of knowledge that should be integrated and harmonized within the context of cooperative research. In light of increased resource development and environmental degradation, resource managers must have access to the best possible information relating to terrestrial and marine ecosystems on which to base their decisions.

In our view, there is a need to utilize both sources of knowledge: Indigenous knowledge and science in Arctic research, to better inform decision-making. And, it is important that we achieve a consensus on what Indigenous knowledge is. In this regard, the ICC employs and offers the following definition

- 8 Indigenous knowledge is a systematic way of thinking applied to phenomena across biological, physical, cultural and spiritual systems. It includes insights based on evidence acquired through direct and long-term experiences and extensive and multigenerational observations, lessons and skills. It has developed over millennia and is still developing in a living process, including knowledge acquired today and in the future, and it is passed on from generation to generation.

I want to underscore the fact that the rights affirmed in the UN Declaration, and specifically Indigenous knowledge, are buttressed by several important legally binding treaties, including the Convention on Biological Diversity.³ The CBD provides that States shall respect,

- 9 preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous peoples and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge – this language is

³ Article 8(j) states “Each contracting Party shall, as far as possible and as appropriate: Subject to national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge innovations and practices.”

unequivocal. To inform greater understanding in various contexts, Indigenous knowledge must be respected, trusted, and used when consent is given by the Indigenous peoples concerned.

And, because the profound relationship that we have to our environment underpins the unique interdependence of all species throughout our homelands, including our survival, Inuit must play a direct role, as knowledge holders, in all matters that will impact our overall integrity, from food security to climate change to shipping to development. All these matters are interrelated and will ultimately have an impact on our way of life.

Therefore, the co-production of knowledge is crucial. Unfortunately, the need for a framework that ensures a process and mechanisms for real and meaningful partnerships between Inuit and others remains outstanding. A co-production of knowledge framework must be founded upon recognition of and respect for Indigenous knowledge and ultimately, the indivisible human rights and perspectives of the knowledge holders.

For example, a single specie study or a command and control approach to management of a specie doesn't consider the holistic or interrelated view of a knowledge holder when considering how to equitably bring together Indigenous Knowledge and science for the analysis of policy on a specie or a management system. As affirmed in the Ottawa Indigenous Knowledge Principles delivered to the Arctic Council by the Permanent Participants,

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Indigenous Knowledge and science are different yet complementary systems and sources of knowledge, and when appropriately used together may generate new knowledge and may inform decision making, policy development and the work of the Arctic Council.

To be sure, Indigenous knowledge holds its own methodologies as well as evaluation and validation processes and should never be forced into a scientific box or translated by science or scientists.

11 Furthermore, “[t]he co-production of knowledge requires creative and culturally appropriate methodologies and technologies that use both Indigenous knowledge and science applied across all processes of knowledge creation.”

12 This requires engagement of knowledge holders and Indigenous knowledge from the outset and throughout the entire process of study, research, and analysis – from initial planning to the reporting of results – essentially at every stage. A comprehensive framework, approach and co-production of knowledge mechanisms are ultimately beneficial to all.

We are at a place and time where colonized thinking and approaches must be dispensed with. Policy making must be inclusive of Indigenous knowledge. There is much to gain from real co-production of knowledge. This is undoubtedly the case throughout Inuit Nunaat – we are the knowledge holders of our homelands, whether it is in the area of climate change research, wildlife management systems, vessel traffic and shipping, fisheries, economic development, social sciences, health care – indeed, every facet of our lives in the Arctic.

In conclusion, through a dramatic slide away from colonial approaches toward recognition of Indigenous knowledge, regional Arctic individual and collective actions to guarantee co-production of knowledge will surely encourage policy that is more responsive to the global community and in favor of all humanity and especially Inuit.

13 Quyanaq.