

Alaskan Inuit Food Sovereignty Summit “Our Food Forever”

Aarigaa, Uvlaaluataq, Paġlagivsi....

Before I start my presentation, I want to draw your attention to the photograph of the three young boys on our program and banner. The photo is from ICC Alaska’s “I Am Inuit” project. The story that went with the photograph read:

“We are just getting back from duck hunting. We didn’t get anything today, but I have got 11 (ducks) this year.” (Taylor Kulukhon)

“I caught one the first time I went out with my new shotgun, it’s a 20 gauge. We are going to go change our clothes and then clean our guns now.” (Charlie Katchatag)

“Our favorite way to eat duck is duck soup. First, we pluck it, gut it, skin it and save the gizzard and clean it. You can roast it too, but duck soup is our favorite.” (Charlie Katchatag and Taylor Kulukhon)

From left to right the boys are: Charlie Katchatag, Taylor Kulukhon and Keenan Jackson, all from Shaktoolik. Unfortunately, young Charlie passed away two years ago. I would like us all to take a moment of silence to pay tribute to and honor the memory of this young hunter.

Good morning, and welcome to ICC Alaska’s ‘Food Sovereignty Summit’. I hope your travels here were pleasant and your accommodations are comfortable. Mostly I hope everyone is ready to have a serious discussion about food sovereignty.

Why are we here? We are here to develop the framework and the parameters for an Action Plan to secure access to, and meaningful management authority over, our traditional food resources. That’s why we are here, easy to say - hard to do. We all know this requires a strong political will and commitment. We must have solidarity and pull together collectively. We will have to be strong.

This is not a new issue, we have been discussing hunting and fishing rights around our dinner tables for the past fifty years. We have been discussing this issue since land claims. It's time to move forward, if we wait any longer it could be too late. Don't you think it's time we did something about our situation?

Hunting and fishing is the basis for our traditional culture and economy. It defines who we are as a people. Without guaranteed rights to access and manage our food resources, our culture and way of life are at jeopardy. It's that simple. It goes without saying that we will do everything in our power to make sure that doesn't happen. As the first inhabitants and stewards of the Arctic, we have the right and the responsibility to protect our environment and culture. We accept this responsibility on behalf of all humankind.

ICC Alaska completed its 'Food Security Project' in 2015. This project defined what Inuit food security is, identified 58 drivers of food security and insecurity, and provided a conceptual framework for our food security. The project linked a lack of decision-making authority to food insecurity and calls for exploring ways of building stronger wildlife co-management bodies in Alaska's Arctic. Through the Food Security Project report, we not only see a lack of decision-making power linked to food insecurity, it is also the leading driver of food insecurity.

The need for our people to have decision-making authority is even more evident today with the rapid change that is occurring. We are being inundated with reports and advice telling us how to adapt to this change. We have over a thousand years of experience living in the Arctic and we know best how to adapt on our own.

However, we are not able to manage our food resources using our knowledge and practices due to 'outside' imposed policies, regulations, and other intervening factors. Elements of our culture and way-of-life are being outlawed. Today we face uncertainties with a management system that's fragmented between international agreements and state and federal government. Further fragmentation occurs within the many government agencies concerned with different aspects of fish and game management. The management of our traditional food resources has become a political issue.

We are being harmed by policies and decisions often made without the benefit of consultation with our people. These decisions are often made solely on western

science and are not place-based or culture-based. This top down approach to fish and game management forces us to use different cultural standards while dismissing our way of life and Indigenous Knowledge. The framework where decisions are made is not transparent and our ways of managing are not considered. Current management policies and decisions are forcing our people and our ecosystem into a box that is not appropriate for survival in the Arctic and further threatens our cultural sustainability.

Current wildlife management systems tend to look at Arctic wildlife by individual species. One group interested in beluga, another in caribou, and yet another is concerned with ducks and geese. Within this way of thinking there is little room to consider the quality of the land, water, air and our culture and how it is all interconnected. The Arctic needs to be managed holistically, from the perspective of the whole ecosystem, including the people living in the ecosystem.

Bringing our knowledge, methods and culture to the table to inform decision-making will aid in active stewardship of the Arctic, allow for adaptive decision-making and an ecosystem-based approach. The result will be better for all concerned, including the wildlife. We have communicated this message for years, stressing the need for true co-management to be put into practice.

Despite the best efforts of our people and the government to create a true co-management system to manage our food resources, we remain at an impasse. That's because the government, state and federal, doesn't recognize our people as true partners in the co-management effort. We don't want the government and other outside influences telling us what's best for us. We don't want to continue down a path that minimizes our knowledge, our culture and doesn't bring us any closer to co-management. We want to be self-sufficient, able to take care of ourselves, especially when it comes to food security and feeding our families.

So, what's next? After decades of trying to communicate our desire for true co-management, we need to develop an Action Plan to settle this issue. Without permanent recognition of our rights we will be living from one election to another, at the whim of politics, while our food sovereignty slowly diminishes and dies. We will become food insecure, dependent on others for our food, and experience loss of our culture and way of life.

It's time for action. If this means changing federal legislation or the Alaska State Constitution, so be it. In the real-world change doesn't just happen, it takes hard work and commitment to make the changes we are talking about here. At this Summit, ICC is asking you to step-up and be responsible for this effort. Are you ready, are you ready to accept this challenge?

It's important to understand we are all in this together. ICC Alaska cannot complete this on its own. It will take a collective effort to implement this Initiative, to obtain food sovereignty for our people. ICC Alaska pledges its total support to move this Initiative forward. ICC is asking you to own this Initiative and to pledge your support. We can't put it any more simply than that.

In July 1983, ICC appointed Justice Thomas R. Berger to review the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. His report, titled 'Village Journey' contains some of the most powerful testimonies ever given by Alaska's native peoples. I would like to quote the late Edgar Ningeulook from Shishmaref, just up the coast from here.

"We are the only ones who can save ourselves. We keep looking to the outside world for someone to come and do it, and it's not going to happen.... I think our people ought to understand that it is possible to maintain their identity and their spirit and their language and their history and their values and still function in the twenty-first century. We know what we need to know, how to make decisions, how to analyze situations, how to speak many languages and understand technology." (Edgar Ningeulook)

So, let's have a positive and productive Summit with great input from all of us. We are all looking forward to the outcome.

Kiita!

Quyanaqpak...