



## **Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group Meeting Summary Report**

### **Food Sovereignty and Self Governance – Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources<sup>1</sup>**



Photo: Carolina Behe

**Food Sovereignty** is the right of Inuit to define their own hunting, gathering, fishing, land and water policies; the right to define what is sustainable, socially, economically and culturally appropriate for the distribution of food and to maintain ecological health; the right to obtain and maintain practices that ensure access to tools needed to obtain, process, store and consume traditional foods. Within the Alaskan Inuit Food Security Conceptual Framework, food sovereignty is a necessity for supporting and maintaining the six dimensions of food security.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Inuit Circumpolar Council – Alaska. 2015. Alaskan Inuit Food Security Conceptual Framework: How to Assess the Arctic From an Inuit Perspective. Technical Report. Anchorage, AK.

## **Citation**

This report reflects the knowledge and perspectives of Indigenous Knowledge holders attending the focus group meeting. The report should be cited as: Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska. 2018. Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group: *Food Sovereignty and Self Governance – Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources*. Anchorage, Alaska.

The focus group meeting was facilitated by Carolina Behe with assistance from Courtney Charlie. This report was prepared by Shannon Williams with support provided by Carolina Behe.

## **Quyanainni/Koana**

Quyanainni to Michelle Gruben for assisting with coordination and communication prior to the focus group and to Shayla Arey for providing the delicious food. Quyanainni to Courtney Charlie for providing assistance with the focus group meeting and subsequent individual interviews in the community of Aklavik. Quyanainni to the Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee for participating in the focus group, providing the meeting space, providing support, and for welcoming us to Aklavik. And quyanainni to the Inuvialuit Game Council staff for assisting in communications, logistics, and in setting up our visit to Aklavik.



Photo: Carolina Behe

## **About the Food Sovereignty and Self Governance – Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources (*FSSG project*)**

The FSSG project is a follow up to our 2015 report [How to Assess Food Security from an Inuit Perspective: Building a Conceptual Framework on How to Assess Food Security in the Alaskan Arctic](#). Through workshops, focus group meetings, research, and analysis associated with that project, a central theme emerged: that food security and food sovereignty were undeniably linked. It was concluded that without food sovereignty, we cannot realize food security. The key recommendation derived from that report is to analyze management and co-management structures within Inuit Nunaat and to understand how those governing frameworks need to be modified to achieve Inuit food sovereignty. The FSSG project aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of existing and emerging frameworks supporting Inuit self-governance by examining the current management and co-management of Arctic marine food resources. The three key objectives of the project are:

- Synthesize and evaluate existing frameworks for Inuit management and co-management of marine food resources presently reflected in law, policies, and legal authorities in the United States and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of Canada;
- Evaluate how existing Inuit self-governance is operationalized by examining four co-management case studies focused on marine resources that are aimed at ensuring food sovereignty, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social, political, and institutional parameters affecting implementation of key legal frameworks;
- Assess how Inuit self-governance supports food security by evaluating food sovereignty objectives against the existing legal and structural frameworks and their effective implementation and outcomes

The work is structured around four case studies – salmon and walrus in Alaska and char and beluga in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. These case studies are used as a pathway to a larger, interrelated discussion about management and food sovereignty.

The project is made up of a team that includes the Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska, The Inuit Circumpolar Council Chair, and the Environmental Law Institute. Other partners include the Association of Village Council Presidents, Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Eskimo Walrus Commission, Inuvialuit Game Council, and the Fisheries Joint Management Committee. The project is guided by an Advisory Committee made up of the project partners and further advised by the Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada.

The final report is scheduled for completion by May 1, 2020.

## About the Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group Meeting

On March 6, 2018, the Inuit Circumpolar Council – Alaska (ICC AK) facilitated a focus group meeting with the Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee (HTC) as part of the Inuit led project, *Food Sovereignty and Self Governance – Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources* (FSSG). The goal of the Aklavik HTC Focus Group was to bring together Inuit to explore current management and co-management structures and decision-making pathways with the ultimate goal of developing a comprehensive understanding of existing and emerging frameworks that support Inuit self-governance.



Photo: Carolina Behr

The Focus group participants included the appointed members of the Aklavik HTC as well as the Aklavik HTC resource person. Through this focus group, Indigenous Knowledge (IK) holders discussed co-management structures, policies and decision-making pathways surrounding the management of resources, and ways of moving toward Inuit food sovereignty. This report provides a summary of the information discussed during the Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group Meeting.

Five IK experts (referred to as participants within the report) attended the focus group. Carolina Behe (project lead for ICC –Alaska) facilitated the focus group meeting with research assistance provided by Courtney Charlie. Quyanainni to those who were able to attend:

Brandon McLeod  
Dean Arey  
Michelle Gruben

Patrick Gordon  
Renie Arey

## Meeting Structure

The focus group was structured around methodologies developed in conjunction with the project partners and FSSG Advisory Committee. Throughout the day, we promoted a flexible and relaxed environment. Focus was placed on exchange of information through deep discussion as a group. During the workshop, participants were encouraged to talk and express themselves in any way they felt they needed to.



Photo: Carolina Behe

## Report Summary

This report provides a brief summary and general overview of the focus group meeting discussions and is not intended to be a complete review. Though this report has been broken into sections, all sections are



interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible. For example, when speaking about the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, one must also consider youth education and involvement in co-management.

### **Key Themes/Concepts Discussed**

The Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group Meeting was facilitated using the guiding questions that were informed by the ICC – Alaska food security report, *How to Assess Food Security from an Inuit Perspective: Building a Conceptual Framework on How to Assess Food Security in the Alaskan Arctic*, and further refined by the FSSG Advisory Committee. The guiding questions revolved around the following key themes:

- Personal experiences in gathering food
- Consultation processes as they relate to or impact to food gathering activities
- Decision-making pathways
- Indigenous Knowledge and research questions
- Information accessibility and knowledge sharing
- Taking care of the Arctic and what tools are used
- Impacts of regulations on the wellbeing of animals, land and water, and Inuit

While the meeting was facilitated using guiding questions under key themes/concepts, the discussions were further focused and refined by the participants. Key themes/concepts and findings include:

- History and implementation of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA)
- Changes in the weather, climate, and ice
- Cost of living in ISR communities and associated issues
- Sharing
- Youth involvement
- Education
- Equity in management
- Inuit language
- A need for more adaptive and quicker management

### **On Personal Experiences on the Land**

During the focus group, participants discussed resources that are of central importance to Aklavik hunters and trappers. Animals such as moose, caribou, musk oxen, sheep, grizzly bears, polar bears, belugas, ringed seals, muskrats, geese, char, dolly varden, and arctic herring were listed as main resources as were many species of berries including blackberries, cranberries, akpiks (salmonberries), and blueberries. Participants indicated

people in the community harvest less fish than they used to, mainly because they no longer keep dog teams and therefore don't need as much fish to feed the dogs. They also noted that wild bird eggs, specifically sea gull eggs and the mature sea gulls themselves are resources that were important to past Aklavik-based harvesters but are no longer harvested by community members at this time.



Photo: Carolina Behre

Participants discussed the central importance of two main resources: belugas and caribou. Belugas are an important summer resource, harvested during June or July. Belugas are not only harvested for food, but for medicine as well. Participants shared some of the medical uses of beluga oil, noting that it can be used as an ointment to heal cuts or can be used to ease or cure ear aches.

It was noted that there are only a small number of community members who actively hunt beluga compared to the past. Participants recalled a time when almost all community members were involved in beluga hunting and processing. They indicated that it is more difficult to harvest whale because of factors associated with the changing social and environmental climate. They also described changes in beluga populations and behavior patterns. Participants commented that, overall, beluga populations are healthy, noting that many females and calves can be observed in shallow waters each year.

However, the males that hunters are looking for seem to be coming through much earlier. They indicated that hunters are just lucky to catch the few stragglers or the few that turn back. Additionally, participants commented that other nearby ISR communities such as Ulukhaktok and Sachs Harbour have, largely, not been successful in harvesting beluga in several years due to the fact that beluga pods are no longer travelling through their hunting areas.

In the fall and winter, and especially in August and September, caribou becomes a focus for many Aklavik hunters. The caribou that usually pass through Aklavik are part of the Porcupine Herd. Participants noted that while the Porcupine Herd is at record size, their migration patterns have become somewhat erratic and they can be difficult to harvest some years. Total harvest numbers have been different from year to year. Some harvesters have started relying more on moose due to the unpredictable caribou numbers. Participants also noted that the Blue Nose Caribou Herd—which travels through other ISR communities, such as Tuktoyaktuk and Inuvik—are on a decline and communities have had to instate a tag system. Additionally, one focus group participant drew attention to the fact that some traditional food preparation is being forgotten over time, including how to prepare and cook caribou stomach.

### **On Changes in the Weather and Climate**

Participants described changes that have been observed in weather and climate. Changes included the following:

- Recently, storms have been more severe and winters have been milder.
- Freeze up has been happening over a month late, in late October rather than September.
- Temperatures have been notably warmer in what used to be the coldest months: December, January, and February.
- Spring, and the breakup of ice, has been earlier.

The changes in the ice make coastal hunting and travelling on the ice more difficult and often times impossible. Ice formation has become unpredictable. Participants shared that there are places where people at one time would be able to travel 40 miles on the ice, where now there is no ice at all. Changing ice creates safety issues for hunters. Participants shared concern that some young hunters may not be able to adequately judge the quality of the ice. Falling through ice or getting stuck in slush is a regular concern.

One participant had observed additional changes in the natural world, including changes in the precise locations of sun sets; changes in positioning of the stars in the sky; changes in the color of meltwater; changes in the



quality and consistency of snow as well as the ice that forms on top of snow; changes in the characteristics of daylight and winter darkness. The participant commented that all of these changes in the weather, the seasons, the climate, and the natural world have left a wake of unpredictability and uncertainty.

### On the Cost of Living

During the focus group, participants stressed that cost of living in the ISR is an important factor in considering food sovereignty. The high costs associated with the shipping, groceries, fuel, and equipment create a high burden. It was noted that hunters and would-be hunters experience a lot of difficulties navigating through those high costs when attempting to hunt and collect food for their family and community. Participants noted that prices at the local grocery store are extremely high due in large part to the high cost of shipping groceries and supplies into the community. Shipping in country foods and sharing between other communities in ISR can also be cost prohibitive. While communities have come up with ideas to trade or share resources, there is rarely enough funding to cover the cost of shipping to and from the respective communities.

Participants discussed the complexity and difficulty in choosing between a hunting trip or a trip to the grocery store. While still expensive, a trip to the grocery store doesn't involve the risk of coming home empty handed. But it is not just the food that a hunter takes from a trip out on the land. Hunting, harvesting, and being out on the land is an experience, an opportunity to educate another generation of hunters, and a way to practice culture, rights, and skills.

Because of the difficulties and high costs associated with hunting and harvesting on the land, community organizations such as HTC and Community Corps have developed programs such as Inuvialuit Harvester Assistance Program (IHAT). Through IHAT and other programs, harvesters can receive some financial support to help cover the cost of gas or shells. Community hunts are further funded through the Community Corp and the HTC, providing hunters an opportunity to harvested foods with the community on a larger scale. Funds are also set aside so that resources that are difficult to harvest in the area, such as beluga, can be purchased from Inuvik and distributed around the community.

### On Sharing

The relevance of sharing was highlighted often and was incorporated into nearly

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*"That is what we do: we try to help one another. We're not one person, we always come together as a family and we always hunt for others and we share a lot of food."* -Meeting Participant

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every facet of the overall conversation. Participants called attention to the fact that sharing is, and has always been, central to Inuit culture. When food is shared so are the experiences of harvesting and processing foods. Participants commented that elders speak of the importance of working together for the future.

## On Youth Involvement

Participants agreed that youth engagement and involvement is an integral aspect of achieving food sovereignty and self governance. Participants pointed out some of the many obstacles that exist in ensuring that IK is not lost generationally. A few obstacles mentioned were residential schools and increased interest in new technologies, such as cell phones and video games.

Finding ways to teach IK to the youth is a focus of the whole community. Programs have been developed that aim to involve youth in activities such as muskrat trapping, bird hunting, moose hunting, caribou hunting, and beaver trapping. Hunters are able to bring harvested caribou to the school to be processed. Beyond hunters bringing their own children along with them, these programs give additional youth opportunities to get out on the land. One participant also commented on a recently developed class offered in Inuvik that aims to help educate youth or adults on country food processing.

Passing down food preparation and recipes was a recommendation made by another participant who noted that certain traditional preparation methods need to be shared.

Overall, participants expressed pride in the youth of Aklavik today, noting that the young people are learning the knowledge that is being passed down to them and are starting to get out onto the land more and more. Participants also commended the forming of an Inuit Youth Council as well as the involvement of young adults in baseline research taking place in the community.

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*"I think that residential school really got in the traditional knowledge's way, because they were brought up in a traditional lifestyle but when they went to school they might have forgot some of those things. But then the generation now, they are starting to go back out on the land and they are lucky to do those on the land programs and there are other people that will teach you those important values and culture for your future."*

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-Meeting Participant

## On The Inuvialuit Final Agreement and Co-Management Structure

The Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA, also known as the land claims) is a land claims agreement between the Inuvialuit people and the Federal Government of Canada. The IFA was negotiated throughout the 1970s and

finalized in 1984. Participants expressed gratitude for the negotiators who were willing to spend ten years countering government offers until the agreement reflected what they wanted. The negotiators intended for the IFA to help preserve Inuvialuit cultural identity and values by creating room for Inuvialuit to have an equal and meaningful voice in decision-making processes, including the management of natural resources.

Inuit have always managed their natural resources in ways that have not only served the needs of the people, but also conserved the resources and the environment. Participants shared examples of how traditional management has facilitated balance in the ecosystem and how Indigenous values, such as never taking more than is needed, have dictated decision-making since time immemorial. The IFA is meant to safeguard the rights of Inuvialuit to continue to make their own management decisions. The agreement further provides Inuvialuit with the power to influence decisions that are developed through co-management structures with the Canadian government.

Participants shared that in accordance with the IFA, consultation regularly takes place between the Canadian Government and Inuvialuit management bodies. The local HTC and the regional Inuvialuit Game Council (IGC) are the main co-management bodies which represent Inuvialuit perspectives in wildlife management. The HTC and the IGC regularly communicate with Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO). Community Corporations in each of the six communities in ISR and the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC) also exist to represent Inuvialuit perspectives in decision-making processes.

Participants explained that the consultation process gives Inuvialuit a chance to give recommendations, comments, or directives at a number of points in the decision-making process. This includes being involved in decisions regarding research or development taking place in the area.

### **On Direct Involvement in Resource Management Decisions**

Participants emphasized that their communities—through the HTCs— are responsible for making wildlife management decisions such as total allowable harvests or legal mesh size for fishing. Additionally, the HTCs have been able to reverse management decisions that have been in place since before the IFA. A main example given was the re-opening of the Big Fish River for harvesting. Participants explained that the Big Fish River, near Aklavik, was closed to harvesting before the land claims agreement was signed. The plan to re-open the river was led by an elder who sat on the HTC. In pointing out that the Inuvialuit people were never consulted in the river closure, the HTC was able to convince the DFO to re-open the river, despite initial resistance. Participants underlined the fact that under the IFA, Inuvialuit must be consulted in such management decisions. A monitoring program was put into

place that showed that population growth in the char population after the river was reopened.



Photos: Carolina Behre

### **On Management Plans Developed Through Co-Management**

Focus group participants explained that, for most resources, Inuvialuit don't have harvest limits. However, there are voluntary quotas for certain species. Participants provided the example of char, for which there are total allowable harvest numbers put in place for certain rivers. Participants indicated that community members are good about reporting numbers and pulling their nets when total allowable harvest numbers are reached because they know that the stock is healthier that way. Participants noted that voluntary management systems put in place for the Porcupine caribou herd over the past several years have helped the herd to reach record size.

Resource management plans are developed through co-management processes for all main food resources and all species that may need to be monitored for other reasons. If the numbers of a particular resource are low, the management plan is put into action to conserve that resource. There are just a few animals, including grizzly bear and polar bear, for which a stricter quota system is currently in place. For those animals, community members can subsistence harvest them if they obtain a tag, but tags are limited and the harvester is not permitted to sell the meat or fur.

Participants noted that IK is taken into account in the development of management systems. The management plans are developed in partnership with the HTC and harvest numbers are based not only on scientific counting methods, but also on IK. A number of participants commented on how the use of science and IK together can lead to more accurate estimates.

## On the Consultation Process

Overall, participants agreed that the consultation processes put in place by the IFA has greatly increased the equity in decision-making processes. Participants largely felt that the IFA creates and protects an equal space for Inuvialuit at the decision-making table.

They noted several times that their opinions and IK must be taken into account, so there is never a question of whether or not they will have an opportunity to be heard. Many participants expressed pride in the IFA and gratitude towards its negotiators, indicating that the IFA is seen by other Canadian Inuit as a benchmark of a uniquely successful agreement. Finally, they noted that over the course of the 30 years that have passed since the IFA was put into place, the level of inclusion and respect felt by Inuvialuit people who attend co-management meetings has increased and continues to increase.

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“Even at the [co-management] meetings they say ‘Inuvialuit, do you have anything to say?’ or ‘what are your thoughts?’ They give them the time to speak what might be valuable to them or important to them. They are given time to talk. The IFA is looked up to from other agreements in Canada. They look at the IFA one because it is a unique... the elders before us negotiated some good stuff. We can be proud to be Inuvialuit.” -Meeting Participant

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## On Language and culture connections to food sovereignty

A few participants commented on how the loss of language threatens not only Inuit culture, but also Inuit food sovereignty. The participants pointed out that the use of English in official co-management meetings can directly influence the management decisions that are made. The main example given by participants was regarding beluga whales. In Inuvialuktun, there are four or five words which describe the animals known simply as belugas in English. Participants noted that distinct words exist to describe whales at different stages of their lives. And because there are distinct management decisions to be made for those different kinds of whales, a conversation in English about beluga management does not fully capture the extent of Inuvialuit Indigenous knowledge or traditional management structures.

## On Barriers to Food Sovereignty

Although participants were generally happy with the consultation process as it is structured by the IFA, they identified parts of the process which could be improved. Barriers identified include the following

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of the IFA by outside entities;
- Limited decision-making power when it comes to selling processed country foods;



- Markedly slow decision-making process which can hinder adaptive management.

Participants shared stories of working on co-management tasks with governmental officials who did not fully understand the IFA, noting that some government employees they have worked with in the past barely had knowledge of the IFA's existence. This lack of knowledge and understanding of the IFA can slow down or halt processes and prevent Inuvialuit managers from being able to make headway during meetings.

Participants additionally noted that many of the leaders of co-management bodies are not Inuvialuit, which has sometimes caused Inuvialuit issues and concerns to take a back burner during decision-making. Participants have also noticed non-governmental entities, such as scientific researchers, struggling to understand the submission process for research studies or development projects. One participant recommended that Inuvialuit find a way to make the process clearer for outsiders, especially through online platforms.

A participant also noted that keeping an understanding of the IFA and how it works at the forefront of Inuvialuit minds through education is of utmost importance. Currently, there is a class offered in Inuvik called IFA 101.

Participants commented that the permitting processes that is now required for purchase or sale of country foods can prohibit Inuvialuit from sharing their food and from making processing decisions themselves. Participants would like to see country food become more readily available for purchase, sale, or use at large scale events. But the permitting process takes too long and can be cost prohibitive. However, as one participant commented "as Inuvialuit people, we know what is healthy."

Participants also commented that the co-management and consultation process tends to be long and drawn out. One example given was the changing of the lynx trapping season. What started as harvesters in Aklavik wanting to change the lynx trapping season turned into a year-long process of writing letters, and looping in all co-management bodies, waiting for commentary from the five other communities, etc. And while participants did not recommend changing the processes to speed things up, noting that things rarely need to change overnight, some participants did express concern over how the process would work if there was ever a management decision which needed more immediate attention. Participants listed, global warming and its effects on animals, erosions, landslides, and other changes in the terrain, and extreme weather as issues which could potentially require faster adaptive management.



Photo: Carolina Behr

## Recommendations

Throughout the meeting, five main recommendations or action items were identified by participants.

- Educate co-management bodies on the IFA
- Educate Inuit youth on the IFA
- Make the consultation process more clear and information more easily available
- Allow for quicker, more adaptable decision-making in response to an ever-changing environment
- Support the use of Inuit language in co-management settings

## Conclusion

During the Aklavik HTC Focus Group Meeting, Inuit co managers came together to have in depth discussions regarding what supports or impedes Inuit food sovereignty and exploring what the co-management system set in place by the IFA looks like in Aklavik. The meeting provided an important building block in the Food Sovereignty and Self Governance project.

This report provides a brief summary of the discussion that took place over the course of the day-long meeting. The knowledge, ideas, and

recommendations shared during this focus group as well as those shared in focus groups, meetings, workshops, and interviews that have helped to build the FSSG project will be shared in the final FSSG report. The final report is scheduled to be completed by May 1, 2020.