



Focus Group: Food Sovereignty and Self Governance – Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources¹

Eskimo Walrus Commission Focus Group Summary



Photo: Julie Raymond-Yakoubian

Food sovereignty is the right of [All] 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.²

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



Photo: Maasingah Nakak

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. 2017. Eskimo Walrus Commission Food Sovereignty Workshop: *Food Sovereignty and Self Governance - Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources*. Anchorage, Alaska.

The Focus Group meeting was facilitated by Carolina Behe, assisted by Shannon Williams. Report prepared by Carolina Behe and Shannon Williams.

Igamsiqanaghalek/Quyana!

Igamsiqanaghalek to Vera Metcalf for all of her hard work and assistance in organizing the Focus Group meeting!

About the Eskimo Walrus Commission Focus Group Meeting

On December 9, 2017, the Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska (ICC AK) facilitated a Focus Group meeting as part of the Inuit led project, *Food Sovereignty and Self Governance - Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources*. The meeting was held in Anchorage, Alaska.

The Focus Group participants included Indigenous Knowledge (IK) holders from the Eskimo Walrus Commission (EWC), the EWC Chair, and Executive Director. Through this workshop Indigenous Knowledge holders came together to explore the co-management structures, policies and decision making pathways surrounding the management of walrus (and other marine food sources), and ways of moving toward Inuit Food Sovereignty.

This report provides a summary of the information discussed during the Eskimo Walrus Commission Focus Group meeting.

Fourteen IK holders (referred to as participants within the report) attended the Focus Group meeting. In addition to Carolina and Shannon (ICC Alaska), Dylanne Nassuk attended as an assistant to the Natural Resources-Kawerak, Inc. and Julie Raymond-Yakoubian, with Kawerak, Inc. attended as an observer. Below is a list of the workshop participants:

Charles Brower – Barrow
Vera Metcaf – EWC Executive
Director / Savoonga
Mary Freytag - Unalakleet
William Igkurak - Kwigillingok
Kenneth Kingeekuk - Savoonga
Warren Lampe - Point Lay
Jacob Martin - Nome Eskimo
Community

Tommy Obruk - Shishmaref
Enoch Oktollik - Wainwright
Daniel T. Olrun, Sr. - Mekoryuk
Benjamin Payenna - King Island
Native Community
Andrew Seetook - Wales
Moses Toyukak, Sr. - Manokotak
Bruce Boolowan - Gambell

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 and improved 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 March 31, 2020.

Focus Group Structure

Through the FSSG project methodology development (developed in collaboration with the project partners), it was decided to hold the Focus Group meetings in conjunction with each partner's annual meeting. This approach is opportunistic and allows for the project team to observe the annual meeting in addition to meeting with the respective commissioners.

In line with the project methodology, this Focus Group meeting occurred in conjunction with the Eskimo Walrus Commission Annual meeting. Additional meetings, not associated with this project, also occurred in conjunction with the annual meeting.

This Focus Group meeting was successful and informative. However, we also recognized that participating in multiple back to back meetings is taxing and tiring. Keeping in line with our project Indigenous research methodologies we will adapt and have adapted the methodologies to ensure that discussions occur in a refreshed and comfortable environment.

Following the input from participants and in discussions with the project Advisory Committee, a second workshop was organized to ensure that participants had the time to focus only on the topics crucial to the discussion and to enlarge the group of participants. The follow-up workshop, *Inuit Past and Current Managers of Marine Resources Focus Group, report is being developed and will be accessible on the ICC AK website (iccalaska.org)*



Photo: Shannon Williams

The EWC Focus Group meeting was facilitated using 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.

Introduction

The below summary provides a general overview of the Focus Group meeting discussions and is not intended to be a complete review. This section is intended to provide a summary of some of the discussions that occurred during the Focus Group as opposed to a complete review. Though this section is broken into bolded headings, all headings are interrelated and interdependent. For example, when speaking about the need for adaptive management strategies, one must also consider traditional Inuit management practices.

Key Themes/Concepts Discussed

The meeting was facilitated using guiding questions under key themes/concepts:

- Personal Experiences in gathering food for you, your family, for your community
- Consultation processes as they relate to and impacts your 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, the waters, land, air, and Inuit

Key Workshop Findings

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:

- Impacts of management/regulations on the animals, culture, cultural sustainability, or overall ecosystem health
- Challenges associated with current co-management system
- Differences in management practices
- Conflict of interests

- Demoralization due to federal Law Enforcement actions
- Community based and Inuit lead management/rules/laws/practices
- Inuit laws/rules/practices
- Need for structural changes associated with government to government operations, dialogue and relationships
- Trust and respect
- Collectively working together and remaining united
- Lasting effects of broken governmental/legal agreements and the ignoring or diminishing Indigenous laws
- Cultural importance of harvesting
- Funding



Photo: Carolina Behe

Key Recommendations Raised

An objective of the Focus Group meeting was to consider ways in which existing governing frameworks could be modified to support our food sovereignty. Participants devoted time during the Focus Group to brainstorm and discuss ways that existing systems could be improved to better support Inuit food sovereignty. Throughout this discussion, participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of remaining united and working collectively. Central themes of this conversation included:

- Strong Inuit leadership
- Aspiring towards more community-based and Inuit-lead movements
- Develop our own national and international agreements
- Write down our own laws (i.e. rules, practices)
- Ensure our own distinct rights and that rights to cultural resources, such as walrus tusk, are not available to non-indigenous peoples
- Educate our youth on management systems and laws (i.e. our rules and practices, federal and state laws, and international instruments)
- Funding and processes to adequately support equitable involvement of Indigenous Knowledge within a co-management process
- Funding to support commissioner engagement with walrus hunters (i.e. community meetings, travel)
- Develop true co-management agreements with equitable decision making processes and veto power
- Review of broken agreements with the Federal government
- Need for adaptive management practices and policy that accounts for seasonality and abrupt changes
- Need for community driven research and monitoring programs
- Need for a review process of the management system
- Support tribal government management of infractions
- Federal government policies to support formal participation and equitable partnership with Tribal governments, upholding government-to-government agreements and recognizing Tribal sovereignty

On the Cultural Importance of Harvesting Arctic Marine Animals

Arctic marine animals play an integral role in our culture. Participants spent time highlighting the importance of walrus as a source of food, medicine, building materials, and art materials. One participant even commented that their entire community was based on walrus. However, participants made clear that Arctic marine animals have worth and cultural relevance far beyond their material value. The spiritual relationship held with the walrus and the rest of the environment is not something that can be replaced.

Participants explained that the act of harvesting marine resources, brings families and communities closer together. Many participants described their own experiences hunting walrus as children, and then their practice of passing knowledge and experiences on to their children and grandchildren. Through harvesting and preparing foods many core values are taught, such as sharing, responsibility, and the inter-generational importance of our foods for future generations – passing on Indigenous Knowledge. Participants also commented on the role that marine animals and the harvesting plays in bringing communities together and helps to create strong bonds between community members.



First photo - Walrus intestine used as a water proof material for Kavitaq (rain coats) and other clothing. Made by Edith Pinson. Second photo - Inupiaq doll with walrus intestine Kavitaq. Made by Edith Pinson. Photos: Vernae Ananabooak

General Challenges Associated with Current Co-Management

During the workshop, participants detailed some of the challenges and failings of current co-management systems in Alaska. Many examples were given on the disconnect and lack of understanding between Inuit and the governmental entities that are making management decisions.

Participants voiced frustration over a lack of decision-making power held by Inuit. Several participants noted that their communities have no say in management decisions that affect the food on which they depend - stating that "laws come already written: pieces of paper dictating how we must live." They explained that this system is problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the idea that policy makers do not fully understand the impacts that certain management decisions have on the animals, our culture, cultural sustainability, or overall ecosystem health.



Photo: Carolina Behe

Lack of adaptability, inadequate follow up, and need for long-term monitoring was also mentioned by participants as a management flaw. They noted that once regulations or quotas are put into place, populations of certain resources sometimes grow out of hand (resulting in an imbalance in the ecosystem). Additionally, several examples were given of

ways in which climate change and the shifting of seasonal availability have not been accounted for by policy makers.

Participants described recent experiences in which they felt they are not taken seriously, or shown trust and respect for their knowledge. Examples, were provided of their information, knowledge, first hand observations, and suggested actions being 'cherry picked' by some scientists and some managers. Additional concerns were expressed that there is no platform or process for their voices and knowledge. A number of participants indicated that some meetings felt illusory or as if they were just for show.

Participants pointed out that interpretation of policies by both national and international policies and regulating bodies often lack a situational

understanding and approach. For example, at times management decisions have conflicted with our knowledge and way of life, leading to negative impacts to the animals, and our culture and our traditional economies.

Examples were given of regulations that interfere with the livelihood of individuals, unfair economic and racial disparities that have manifested as a result of certain regulations, as well as inappropriate power displays by law enforcement which have contributed to tenuous relationships between management bodies and individuals and communities.

Laws which regulate how portions of an animal may be used (e.g. you must cut off the tip of a muskox horn) and conflict with our understanding to use every part of an animal or age old practices, such as where to discard parts of an animal to give back to the ocean. Participants explained that laws which dictate that one must destroy a portion of an animal, especially when that part of the animal has potential economic value, seem particularly invasive and discriminatory despite exemption specific to Inuit.

Throughout this conversation many of the points raised stress the need for Trust and Respect to be worked upon and further developed to support our food sovereignty. Trust and respect will need to be reflected in policies and practices that support equitable partnerships.



Photo: Frances Ozenna

On Changes and the Need for Adaptable Co-Management

During the meeting, participants discussed many of the changes they have observed recently and over the course of their lives. Many participants commented on climate change observations. Examples were given of unpredictable sea ice and the difficulties that this dynamic pose in harvesting and processing walrus, beluga, and other marine mammals.

Two participants commented on the role that the federal government and government restrictions play on influencing a sense of loss, stating that because of the imposition of restrictions and outside management practices, Inuit youth struggle to keep traditional customs alive and thriving.



Photo: Carolina Behe

With all of the changes occurring in the Arctic, there is an urgent need for management that is adaptable. Participants commented that management practices and regulations must be revised and adapted to remain current and relevant under the changing climate.

For example, several participants noted that in 2017, all animals “across the board were available slightly earlier than expected.” With animal migrations changing, unpredictable weather, and changes in temperatures, it is important to harvest when the animals and plants are available, accessible, and the weather supports preparing and storing the food. Participants expressed frustration that there is no effective way to change the regulatory seasons to accommodate availability and accessibility of resources through a timely and holistic approach.

On Funding

Participants agreed that a lack of funding is one of the biggest roadblocks to effective co-management. Discussion centered around the idea that a co-management system fails when only one of the managing bodies has the power to decide what is to be funded. Participants expressed frustration over the requirements that they must meet in order to receive funding, noting that requirements are formed without any consultation with them.

Additionally, only research, projects, and directives deemed necessary or important by the state or federal government are discussed or pursued. The Indigenous partners in the co-management structure are then forced to

comply or else receive no funding. In this way, there is no shared vision and no real co-management; federal and state governments are still managing and prescribing what Inuit can do and how they can do it. The result is a unilateral management system as oppose to a co-management system.

Participants went on to point out that it is extremely difficult for them to contest the current system of funding, because they cannot use government funding to fight governing bodies. This often leaves the Indigenous partners in a co-management structure with no financial means to bring these issues into the spotlight. Alternative routes to gaining greater equity of voice, such as lobbying or forming interest groups, are complicated by laws which prevent lobbying for groups that receive this funding.

On Competition / Conflict of Interests

Participants described the importance of using walrus ivory from both harvested walrus and also ivory from mammoth and mastodon. The ivory is an important source of material used in creating sculptures, jewelry, tools, and other items. The creation of this art is an important aspect of cultural expressions and relates directly to traditional practices that teach us to use all parts of the animals and to never waste.

Participants discussed how beach found walrus ivory regulations have interfered with the livelihood of Inuit individuals, especially those who sell walrus ivory art. They explained that competition for beach found ivory has widened a racial economic gap between Inuit and non-Native beach combers. Often, it is private pilots (both Inuit and non-Native, though overwhelmingly non-Native) who are able to most successfully scout for and salvage beach found tusks. Such competition makes it even more difficult for people living in a given Inuit community to salvage beach found tusks by boat or by foot. Participants indicated that there should be Inuit preference when it comes to the harvesting of beach found ivory (just as with the sale of ivory) due in part to the fact that ivory art is such an important economic asset for Inuit. It was felt that without having more control over walrus ivory, Inuit communities will not be able to benefit from the revenue associated with that cultural resource.

Participants also indicated that competition with non-Natives and the economic disparity between those living in Inuit communities and those travelling in from outside were factors impeding adequate moose and caribou harvests. Participants noted that anyone who is financially able to do so, can fly in and harvest moose from areas surrounding their communities. Those people often have easier access to the best hunting areas. In addition, each animal harvested by an “outsider” equals one less that is available to Inuit living in that community. Once a quota is filled, the season is over, regardless of how much of that resource stays in the community.

In addition to a competition for material, there is also a conflict of interest that arises due to competing interests or results from an entity using a single species approach within lobbying. For example, some environmental groups have lobbied for the up listing of Walrus under the Endangered Species Act. Participants shared that the argument to up list walrus is based on the loss of ice and an assumption that the walrus will not adapt.

In recent years, additional lobbying by some environmental groups, to stop the trade of elephant ivory, have included a desired ban on the sale of walrus and mammoth ivory within some states.

The lobbying to address walrus habitat loss and on the ban on sale of walrus and mammoth ivory by others takes a single species approach and does not consider that the harvesting of walrus is one of the strongest examples of Sustainable Harvesting by Inuit that the world could learn from.



Ring made of walrus and mammoth ivory.
Photo: Shannon Williams

On Relationship with Law Enforcement Officials

A number of participants described times when they felt demoralized or belittled by the law enforcement officials in charge of managing harvest regulations in their communities. They explained that in certain communities, law enforcement officials routinely wait on the beach to question and search hunters immediately as they exit their boats. This practice was described as

purposefully intimidating. A handful of Focus Group participants noted that law enforcement officials could be seen as threatening, employing such tactics as wearing their weapons in overtly visible locations.

Additionally, it was noted that the repercussions for infractions such as wasteful take (more commonly used word) can be particularly devastating to Inuit hunters who sometimes lose their boats or equipment due to fines or confiscation. One participant suggested that such infractions should be turned over to tribal governments first to be tried, rather than going directly to the federal government. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of educating those that are assigned to work within this important context (i.e. managers, law enforcement, scientists).



Photo: Carolina

On Traditional Inuit Laws and Practices

For thousands of years, Indigenous Knowledge alone was responsible for successful management of Arctic resources. And while we do not refer to our knowledge of how to live in harmony with the resources as “management,” we know that our Indigenous Knowledge is vital to the co-management and decision-making processes. Participants discussed many traditional laws, protocols, and practices during the Focus Group. Common themes in the discussion were:

- Harvest a resource when it is available
- Take no more than you need
- Sharing

Participants stressed the importance of being taught these practices from birth or as young children and of being taught by their parents,

grandparents, and uncles. Participants shared that Inuit practices/laws have been passed down by voice and oral record through families and enforced independently by communities forever and these practices continue even now when there are other laws being imposed. Participants agreed that their Inuit practices/laws are simple and effective and take into consideration Arctic environments in a more holistic way than laws coming from outside or external governing bodies.

On Community-Based and Inuit Lead Management/Rules/Laws/Practices

Indigenous laws were not traditionally written or recorded, but were passed down through families and communities. Indigenous laws are still followed by Inuit and continue to be handed down to the next generation. However, participants asserted that the lack of any formal records of these laws is a weakness because non-Inuit government entities simply do not recognize laws that are not in writing. A number of participants suggested that these laws as well as any inter-tribal agreements and tribal ordinances should be formally recorded.

Throughout the Focus Group, participants continually emphasized the value of walrus and other resources as tribal assets with important economic, social, cultural, political, and spiritual value. They noted that as state and federal governments have laid claim to these resources, sovereign rights and Indigenous management systems have too often been undervalued or ignored.

Participants agreed that more steps should be taken by Inuit to assert their sovereign rights. In this way, community-based action can lead to improvements in the equity of voice. One way of moving toward food sovereignty is through the collective observance of Indigenous Laws.

Participants highlighted recent successes in the establishment and re-establishment of Indigenous management systems in a handful of communities. Examples were given of self-imposed, voluntary quotas agreed upon within and between communities without any influence from outside governing entities such as Alaska Department of Fish and Game

or US Fish and Wildlife. Participants noted that these community-based regulations which are based on Indigenous Knowledge and Inuit understanding of the land and resources have successfully, sustainably, and efficiently managed resources.

One main example of Inuit management being put into practice comes from St. Lawrence Island. A participant explained that documents detailing St. Lawrence Island management practices were found at the Smithsonian and eventually returned to the island. These practices (ordinances) have been rigorously followed prior to writing them down and remained in practice to this day. When the document was returned to St. Lawrence Island, the people from the island formally adopted the written down ordinances and used the written document to demonstrate to federal officials that people from St. Lawrence Island hold their own practices/laws. The communities of Gambell and Savoonga determine the harvesting of walrus on their own terms.



Photo: Carolina Behe

On Suggested Structural Changes

Focus Group participants suggested changes and adjustments that could be made to current government to government operations and communications in order for them to be more effective and equitable. Such adjustments include:

- Utilizing regional corporations as governing bodies more often
- Gaining ownership of tribal lands and management authority of historical use areas (including coastal seas and water)
- Gaining veto power in decision making processes.

For example, one participant suggested relying more heavily on regional corporations as a platform for tribal agreements. It was suggested that this change would help to save money and facilitate more efficient cooperation between tribes. Additionally, it was suggested that tribal governments could leverage power through the Department of the Interior as they more fully recognize tribes already. Government to government agreements between tribes and the Department of the Interior could positively influence agreements between tribes and Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Using St. Lawrence Island as a model, participants further indicated that greater land ownership and private tribal property could increase equity of voice and place power back into the hands of village corporations.

Lastly, participants discussed the critical importance of attaining veto power in decision making. They commented that without veto power, there cannot be equity of voice. Veto power changes the power dynamic from one in which Indigenous partners in a co-management structure must choose between very limited options presented to them by the government into one in which they are able to equitably shape decisions. A co-management system in which the Indigenous partners have no veto power forces them to follow the direction of the government, thereby greatly decreasing equity of voice and ultimately results in a scheme far from “co-management”.

On Working Collectively and Remaining United

A central theme raised repeatedly throughout the Focus Group was the importance of remaining united and working collectively to achieve common goals. Participants commented that acting together would increase equity of voice and that presenting a united front creates focus and facilitates change. They asserted that governmental agencies and decision-making bodies have a harder time ignoring entities as they

become larger and more focused. An example was given of the differences observed between the power of Qayassiq Walrus Commission acting alone and Qayassiq Walrus Commission working together with Bristol Bay Marine Mammal Council; the two entities working together were more powerful and more easily able to achieve common goals.

Additionally, it was suggested that localized planning (having meetings in communities rather than urban hubs) would lead to better synthesis of their voices. Community input and involvement will lead to greater understanding and better outcomes.

Conclusion

The Eskimo Walrus Commission Focus Group on food sovereignty and self-governance facilitated greater understanding of the Inuit role in current co-management systems and the tools needed to achieve greater equity of voice. The Focus Group was the first of four and provided an important foundational block in the Food Sovereignty and Self Governance project.



King Island Dancers at the Inuit Circumpolar Council General Assembly 2018. Photo: Jacki Cleveland