



**Olokhaktomiut 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 Behre

**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. Olokhaktomiut 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. This report was prepared by Shannon Williams and Carolina Behe.

## **Quyanainni/Koana**

Quyanainni to Bessie Inuktalik for assisting with coordination and communication prior to the focus group and to Donna Akhiatak for providing delicious food. Quyanainni to Lucy Ann Okheena for providing research assistances throughout our visit to Ulukhaktok. Quyanainni to the Olokhaktomiut Hunters and Trappers Committee for participating in the focus group, providing the meeting space, providing support, and for welcoming us to Ulukhaktok. And quyanainni to the Inuvialuit Game Council staff for assisting in communications, logistics, and in setting up our visit to Ulukhaktok.



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 Olokhaktomiut Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group Meeting

On Friday March 9, 2018, the Inuit Circumpolar Council – Alaska (ICC AK) facilitated a focus group meeting with the Olokhaktomiut 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 Olokhaktomiut 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.

The Focus group was held with the appointed members of the Olokhaktomiut HTC. 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 Olokhaktomiut Hunters and Trappers Committee Focus Group Meeting.



Photo: Carolina Behe

Five IK experts (referred to as participants within the report) attended the focus group. Carolina Behe of ICC Alaska, facilitated the discussion. Quyanainni to those who were able to attend:

Annie Goose  
John Alikamik

Gilbert Olifie Alikamik  
Adam Inuktalik

Joseph Haluksit

## Meeting Structure

The focus group was structured around methodologies developed in conjunction with the project partners and the 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.

## 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 traditional Inuit management of resources, one must also consider food processing.

## Key Themes/Concepts Discussed

The Olokhatomiut HTC 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
- IK 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:



- Changes in the animals, weather, sea ice, and the overall environment
- Changes in animal processing due to climate change
- Traditional Inuit management practices
- Co management structures that support Inuit food sovereignty
- Barriers in current co-management structures
- Cultural irrelevance in current subsidy programs
- The relationship between IK and western science

## On Changes in the Animals, Land, and Ice

During the focus group, participants identified animals often harvested for food by community members in Ulukhaktok and discussed the timing and associated activities related to harvesting.



Photo: Carolina Beha

The animals discussed included cod, char, ringed seal, beluga, bearded seal, and caribou. Beluga whales are harvested by the community whenever they are available, although participants shared that beluga whale availability tends to vary widely from year to year. For instance, during the 2018 season, only a few whales had been harvested at the time of the focus group meeting. But a few years prior, around 34 whales were harvested by the community as a whole. Participants shared that part of the reason for low harvest years is because beluga whales can be difficult to find in the clear, deep water which surrounds the community of Ulukhaktok.

Other animals and food sources discussed include the white fox, cranberries, and blueberries. Participants shared that new species, such as salmon are showing up in increasing numbers. Salmon are not native to the area and have never been seen in great numbers until the last several years; now there is an abundance of them throughout the summer and fall. Participants explained that, initially, all of the salmon that was caught by Ulukhaktok residents was shipped to friends and relatives in British Columbia, where it could be enjoyed by people who have always had a relationship with

salmon. In recent years, even though many residents still consider the taste of salmon to be foreign, some people have started to eat them.

Participants shared that many recent changes in harvested foods have been observed in recent years. For example, the stomach contents of beluga whales have revealed changes to their diet. Participants explained that beluga whales used to mainly eat cod, but more recently they have been eating smaller fish like sand lance or capelin. Participants also commented on the declining health of some seals - noting that they are too thin, have less fat on them, and at times have poor quality meat.

Participants shared that the timing of animal migrations are shifting. For example, char have been arriving to Ulukhaktok later than usual—into the middle of summer rather than in early summer. The char shift in timing was attributed to climate change. Participants shared that climate change has also affected the berries which have been unpredictable for several years. Participants described the 2017 season as the first time in ten years that berries have been found in any great abundance, mainly due to dry weather. Lastly, participants noted that red foxes and cross foxes are no longer found in the area and that only white foxes remain. Participants did not speculate on why that change has occurred.



Photo: Carolina Behe

During the focus group, participants commented on the rapid change in the quality, timing, and formation of ice in Ulukhaktok and the surrounding area. Participants shared the following key changes in ice:

- There is overall less ice
- The ice that does exist is of a different quality - not as thick, including on lakes and other standing bodies of water
- Ice is forming later in the season
- There has been a persistent problem with thin top layers or slush forming on the ice due to warm weather conditions and stronger sunlight

These rapid changes in ice formation and ice quality are affecting the community of Ulukhaktok in a variety of ways. Participants described ice cover that looks thick, but has holes and open spots. The holes are difficult to see during travel and can prove dangerous, even life threatening. Participants shared that overall, it has become harder for people to judge safe conditions, especially young people who have not been able to learn what safe conditions look like due to all of the rapid change and warm winters. Slush has also become an issue as many community members have become stuck in the slush. Additionally, changes in the ice timing of formation and quality also relates to hunting and fishing activities. Participants noted that in the previous spring (2017 season), the ice went out on the lake so fast that there was barely any time for ice fishing.

### **On Changes In Food Processing and a Changing Climate**

Along with the changes shared in the previous section and climate change participants shared that there have been changes in the way the harvested foods are prepared for storing and eating. Some of these changes are directly related to climate change. Participants shared, that recently, "hot weather" and a "stronger sun" can make preparations of some foods a challenge. For example, when hot temperatures can make drying fish difficult. Participants shared that the fish has to be watched closely and brought indoors, to a shady area, or covered with some sort of canvas, cardboard, or plywood to keep it out of direct sunlight. If the fish is left in direct sun, it runs the risk of cooking rather than drying. Additionally, participants commented that the warmer weather has changed the process of rendering and storing dipping oil from seals, noting that people have to be more careful about where they store the oil. They explained that, in general,



people are more nervous about bacteria growing during the aging process due to changes in the weather and the timing of the weather.



Photo: Carolina Behe

## On Traditional Inuit Management

During the focus group, participants described traditional Inuit management as a way of putting wildlife first to make sure that there is enough for the future. Participants shared that the community follows the “old time rules” and continues to practice traditional management, looking to elders for guidance just as they always have. Participants further stressed that they intended to continue following traditional management. As one participant commented: “We have always managed our wildlife regardless of what the feds or the territorial government have said. We always did what we thought was right for us.”



Photo: Carolina Behe

Participants explained that the community of Ulukhaktok has always worked towards the preservation of their resources, even outside of the requirements of federal management systems. Currently and in the past, there have been several voluntary moratoriums placed on resources which have led to eventual increased numbers. For instance, in the 90s, the community voluntarily “shut down” the main fishing lake for five years with the understanding that the closure would help rebuild fish stocks. Additionally, participants explained

that the community members no longer harvest caribou from the herd on the north side of Ulukhaktok River. The decision to stop harvesting from this area has been observed for about 20 years and was made independent of the federal government.



Photo: Carolina Behe

Participants stressed the deep importance of strong relationships held between Inuit communities. They emphasized that communication is one of the main factors in the success of traditional Inuit management. There have always been close bonds between communities, who share food, land, ice, and information with each other. As one participant commented: "All governments should know that Inuit are borderless. We are all brothers and sisters. So it doesn't matter if you are in Greenland or Alaska, we are all one. So we always have no problem talking to each other." Strong linguistic connections also help to unite Inuit. Participants noted that even though Inuit languages and dialects have many differences, it is usually possible to communicate across communities and across borders.



Photo: Carolina Behe

Participants shared that springtime gatherings, specifically, are central to traditional Inuit management. Those interactions not only strengthen bonds with neighbors, they also give people a chance to tell stories about the hunting season and allow for the circulation of important information regarding the animals, plants, water, ice, land - everything.

### **On Positive Improvements to Co-Management Structures**

Participants discussed the many improvements they have observed in the consultation processes with federal and territorial governments, industry, and researchers. The improvements are attributed to the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA), also called the land claims settlement or just land claims. The IFA gives Inuvialuit living in the ISR the legal right to equity in the co-

management process and calls for the inclusion of IK in decision-making processes. As one participant explains: "it states in our land claim that we have to be consulted, we have to be involved. So that is why the land claim is so important. They have no choice but to hear us out now."



Photo: Carolina Behe

Participants shared the large strides that have been made in terms of equity in the co-management process with the federal and territorial government since the approval of IFA. They explained that before the IFA, Inuvialuit rarely felt that their voices were heard, noting that the government agencies did not care about their input, ideas, or IK. Now, over 30

years after the signing of the IFA, participants are starting to observe real improvements. They indicated that efforts have been made by the government to understand Inuit practices and traditional management. The government is now obligated to include IK in co-management decisions and Inuvialuit are involved in the decision-making process at many different points along the decision-making path way.

The same goes for involvement in research that takes place in the ISR. The rules set forth in the IFA create a pathway for more frequent and more meaningful dialogue with researchers. Participants explained that Inuvialuit are able to shape the research studies in their area, providing input in deciding what the research questions should be, what information is needed, and what the priorities of the project should be. Inuvialuit also have the ability to reject research proposals that they do not feel will benefit the community, the resources, or the land.



Photo: Carolina Behe

Participants also noted that because of the IFA, oil and mining companies (as well as other industries which use the land), must consult with Inuvialuit. Before the IFA, there were many examples of industry misusing the land, not cleaning up properly, not restoring the land after large scale projects, disrupting harvesting, and not consulting with Inuvialuit. Participants further shared that today, Inuvialuit have greater control over what industrial

activities take place in their region and have the tools to ensure that industry continues to follow their rules.

Participants described a movement towards a stronger insistence on the upholding of the IFA by people and communities within the ISR. One participant explained: “historically, we are a nice people, we always just went along. We are starting to use our land claim more and more. That is why our co-management boards are starting to work pretty good. Because we are starting to say look, this is the claim—if you keep going against the claim, then we have no choice but to go to court.” Participants expressed that this change in approach was born out of impatience after years of being ignored. Now, as Inuvialuit focus on asserting their rights more, government, industry, and researchers are responding.

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*“Today, it is more meaningful to us. We want to be involved more because we are being consulted.”* -Meeting Participant

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Overall, participants shared that people in the communities have a greater voice now and a more equitable seat at the table during decision-making. Individuals are represented mainly through the HTC. And, participants explained, the HTC memberships are strong and active and unified and ready to speak out. Participants indicated that this shift has inspired even more confidence and more meaningful engagement by Inuvialuit.



Photo: Carolina Behre

### **On Barriers Within the Co-Management System**

While the land claims agreement is seen as very strong, participants noted that it is not always followed. Participants emphasized that improvement is a



continuous process and while participants feel that their voices are now heard, they do not feel that there is true equity of voice.

Participants stressed that although Inuvialuit rights are supposed to be ensured, written into law by the IFA, the government doesn't always adhere to the agreement. Participants commented on feeling "overrun" several times throughout the discussion and described a constant resistance from the government. They indicated that the federal and territorial governments need to work on their approach to the consultation process. One participant also noted that often, the voices of environmental groups and NGOs are considered over the voices of Inuvialuit.



Photo: Carolina Behe

During this discussion, participants identified ways in which the co-management and consultation process could be improved. They recommended that Inuvialuit, and people within the federal and territorial governments, prioritize becoming more familiar with the IFA. Participants commented that greater knowledge of the IFA is empowering for Inuvialuit and crucial for federal and territorial government workers (who need to stay within their legal bounds), to be effective co-management partners.

Participants also indicated that the government needs to make an effort to release some of their sense of control over Inuvialuit people and to make an effort to understand that Inuit have always know what they are doing when it comes to wildlife management. They noted that more cooperation from government and less resistance is needed overall.

### **On The Cultural Irrelevance of Current Subsidy Programs**

During the focus group, participants discussed the high cost of living in Ulukhaktok and other communities in the ISR. They expressed frustration regarding government subsidies in the ISR. As one participant commented, the Canadian Government subsidizes what "works for them; it doesn't work for us." Participants provided the example of fresh



produce, currently subsidized by the Canadian government, often arrives in the community already in bad shape. People in the community try to make due, cutting off ends of vegetables or picking out the best parts, but participants agreed that subsidizing produce does not work for the people of the ISR. They noted the need for subsidies to be helpful and to stimulate the economy. Participants expressed that current subsidies do not accomplish either of those goals.

One participant also pointed out the inequity of the distribution of subsidies, noting that everyone from farmers to car manufacturers receive billions of dollars in subsidies that are helpful to them. “The government needs to start helping us out too because we are citizens just like the citizens in Toronto and Montreal. So those inequalities...need to [be] balanced.”

Participants commented that subsidies which are more culturally relevant would be far more beneficial to communities within the ISR. It was suggested by several participants that gas and or ammunition could be subsidized by the Canadian government instead of things like produce and milk. Participants further explained that the high cost of gas and ammunition can be prohibitive for harvesting. Young people in particular have a hard time getting out on the land because they often cannot afford gas. Increased availability to gas and ammunition would be far more meaningful and beneficial.



Photo: Carolina Behe

## **On The Relationship Between IK and Western Science**

Another barrier to food sovereignty, identified by focus group participants, is when scientific methodologies and/or findings conflict with IK. Participants listed making decisions based solely on animal counting as an area of conflict. They explained that science is typically intent upon charting numbers in order to try to project increasing or declining populations. While

Western scientists and the government agencies they work for often understand declining populations to be indicative of a problem, participants stressed that because of their IK they understand that animals vary from year to year, sometime experiencing unpredictable cycles. One participant commented: “science would say that it is disappearing, but when you have the traditional knowledge and you look at the animals, you will know... it has happened before and it is going to happen again.” They explained that oftentimes declining numbers can be attributed to changes in migration habits, noting that animals such as beluga and caribou often change their habits even after an extended period of time migrating along a set route.

Additional issues arise when the methodology of Western science conflicts with IK. Under the IFA, the HTC members are involved in the shaping of research questions and have ongoing opportunities throughout a project’s lifespan to provide commentary or make recommendations to scientists and researchers. The system



Photo: Carolina Behe

set in place aims to achieve a coproduction of knowledge approach. Participants pointed out that although they have opportunities to provide input and voice their IK, some scientists and other outside entities don’t always take it seriously. One example discussed by participants involved a proposal to install scratching posts meant to collect muskox fur. This research project, like all projects involving animals, was scrutinized by the HTC. The HTC members knew through their IK that the project was destined to fail—that muskox would not rub against posts because they do not behave that way. They explained that although the HTC sometimes disallows projects like this in favor of leaving the animals alone, this particular project was allowed to take place.

## Recommendations

Through discussion of the above themes and concepts, the following three key recommendations were gathered from the Olokhaktomiut HTC Focus Group:

- The Canadian government should work with Inuit to create culturally relevant subsidy programs
- There should be more knowledge and understanding of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement by outside entities
- The Canadian government should make a concerted effort to let go of the desire to control Inuvialuit management practices

## **Conclusion**

The Olokhaktomiut HTC Focus Group Meeting was a necessary step in the process of evaluating and understanding the Inuit role in managing Arctic resources. Participants shared their experiences with consultation and co-management processes and described their interactions with government, industry, and science. They identified ways in which the IFA has enhanced their lives and experiences with co-management and they cited ways in which the process could be improved. This focus group provided an important building block in the FSSG project.

This report provides a 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.