



## **Policy Paper: Climate Change and Inuit Food Sovereignty**

In 2020, the Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska (ICC Alaska) published the Food Sovereignty and Self-Governance: Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources report. The report examines Inuit management and co-management practices and approaches to distill lessons that can apply across geographic boundaries. The 144-page report is co-authored by Inuit from Alaska and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR) of Canada. Numerous meetings, focus groups, and workshops were held to inform the development of the report. The discussion was framed through the lens of co-management bodies related to four case studies: beluga and char in the ISR and salmon and walrus in Alaska. However, the discussion takes a much broader holistic view across all that makes up the Arctic within these areas of Inuit homelands.

Within every meeting, focus group, and workshop, Inuit authors raised concerns about the rapid, major changes taking place due to climate change in their communities and homelands. These environmental and ecological changes are directly threatening Inuit ways of life. These issues impact every facet of life, including food, food security and food sovereignty, including culture, language, social issues and both traditional and contemporary economic activities.

Examples of changes include water temperature fluctuations affecting salmon; changes in the birthing of walrus in coastal seas due to lack of sea ice; the influx of new species both on land and waters; an increase in vessel traffic impacting marine habitat; and numerous other transformations.

Though Inuit are adapting to the impacts of climate change and taking action to mitigate and adapt to such changes, more must be done by governments. Federal/state/territorial governments must take greater responsibility for climate action and work with Inuit on climate mitigation and adaptation policy and programs. Such partnership should include the provision of financial resources for increased monitoring, assistance to address adverse impacts such as coastal erosion, utilization of Indigenous Knowledge related to adaptation, and emergency preparedness. Many answers lie within our communities – the ingenuity and knowledge held within our communities provide solutions, adaptation strategies, and management approaches that are needed. Federal/state/territorial governments and international approaches will be strengthened through meaningful partnership with us and by looking to Inuit for solutions and direction.

- Call for action: The US and Canada must take their international commitments seriously, especially in areas where climate change impacts are creating food insecurity. Appropriate measures should include policy development, funding, and actions (in collaboration with Inuit), for example, Inuit should be included as key partners in the development of the Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans submitted by State Parties under the UN Framework on the Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- Call for action: Indigenous Knowledge and Inuit perspectives should be equitably and ethically included in international climate processes such as the UNFCCC's Facilitative Working Group of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

- Call for action: Federal/state/territorial governments must work in partnership with Inuit communities in the development of solutions, research prioritization, and adaptive management to address climate change.<sup>1</sup>
- Call for action: The US and Canada must take concrete action and measures to comprehensively implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in order to give full effect to its interrelated provisions and to safeguard Inuit food security in the face of rapid change that Inuit are facing due to climate change.
- Call for action: Develop Inuit-specific educational materials and platforms on the substance and objectives of the UN Declaration. This call to action focuses on utilizing the UN Declaration to support Inuit Food Sovereignty and Self-Governance through having a strong knowledge of its content.

Through the Food Sovereignty and Self-Governance report, the authors emphasized the changes that are occurring throughout Inuit Nunaat. There are multiple drivers to the changes that are occurring. It is important to look at the Arctic holistically to understand the interconnecting drivers and cumulative impacts. For example, there are connections between warming sea surface temperatures, change in sea ice movements, growth of berries and other vegetation, animal movements and behavior, conflict of interests, visiting sports hunters, shipping, scientists, and environmental groups who work and lobby through single species lenses), economics, pollution, and a young boy giving his first catch to an Elder.

All the above examples are pieces that make up the Arctic. These components (pieces), inherently include decision-making processes. Through Inuit holistic thinking and approaches these components are interlinked and connected to each other. Decision that are connected to one component will affect and be related to another component and other decision-making processes. For example, deciding when to harvest is related to how much can be processed at one time, to ensure that no part of the animal is wasted. This decision is related to the weather and is rooted in an understanding that people need to follow the weather and the animals. These decisions are also related to economics, storing food, providing for the community, and many other components that make up a healthy environment. The general example provided further explains the importance of understanding cumulative impacts, holistic thinking, and how decision-making processes are interconnected.

Throughout this project Inuit have shared many concerns about the different changes that are occurring and how it is impacting their lives and the Arctic as a whole. All these concerns and/or how the concerns are addressed are directly connected to food sovereignty. At the same time, it was stressed that Inuit have always adapted and will continue to adapt. Concern comes not from change alone – in this dynamic environment, change has been constant, and Inuit have always adapted. Additional concern comes from the lack of respect expressed toward all within the Arctic ecosystem and decisions made with unintentional impacts. Those decisions are sometimes made by individuals, governments, and institutions that are far from the Arctic, by those with differing value systems, by those that take a single species view of the world, and from those that lack adaptability.

A lack of equity along with discrimination and racism within some areas, and the lack of trust and respect for Inuit and knowledge within decision-making pathways to address these concerns impedes Inuit food sovereignty. Throughout the project, the Authors shared the following key changes occurring

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<sup>1</sup> Inuit have developed reports, documents, policy papers, and communications that provide direction on how to build partnerships and work with Inuit. For example, the Circumpolar Inuit Protocols on Equitable and Ethical Engagement (<https://tinyurl.com/InuitEEE>), provides 8 Protocols with directives for all that work within or effect Inuit homelands.

(this list is not exhaustive). Not all the changes described come with concern. For example, when a new whale species gives itself to a hunter (traveling near a community), there is an opportunity provided for the community. Box 1. Shared Changes<sup>2</sup>, provides a list of some of the changes shared related to climate change. All the items listed below require adaptive change in human behavior to be in harmony – or as one participant shared, to “follow the weather and the animals”<sup>3</sup>.

#### Box 1. Shared Changes

- Change in animal timing, migration, and behavior, (i.e., salmon arriving at a different time)
- Change in food webs (animals are eating different food sources)
- Change in vegetation timing (i.e., berries are ripening at different times)
- Warming temperatures earlier in the day • Impacts on preservation of food
- Rapid change in quality, timing, and formation of ice
- Change in sea ice - unpredictable sea ice, change in shore fast ice, rapid melting of ice, formation of new types of ice (thin ice)
- Change in harvesting and processing practices due to change in weather and ice
- Increase in storm variability and severity of storms
- Increased risk in hunting and other related safety concerns
- Increasing erosion
- New species in some areas
- Harmful algal blooms
- Change in prevailing winds
- Change in land formations
- Animal health
- Unusual Mortality Events - Large animal die offs and animals with unusual hair loss and sores in Alaska (i.e., birds and salmon)
- Changes in air and water currents and temperatures
- Decline in health of water and air
- Declining populations of certain species (ptarmigan, king salmon, muskrats); and increase in population of other animals.
- Ocean acidification
- Loss of permafrost
- Change in salinity levels
- Changes in precipitation (increase in rain and less snow in some areas)
- Increase safety risk
- Overall climate change
- Change in ice cellars

Additional changes and concerns relate to an increase in industrial marine ship traffic, increase in pollution (i.e., contaminants, plastics), increasing costs, and overabundance of certain species due to overarching management decisions that conflicted with Inuit traditional practices. Many of the changes listed above related to climate change and human actions occurring from outside of the Arctic. Inuit are at the forefront of all these changes. Inuit adaptability, ingenuity, and holistic worldview is needed to navigate this changing environment. This requires moving to a community-driven approach to decision-making, open involvement of Indigenous Knowledge, and equity. It also requires that national governments take responsibility for many of the changes occurring and provide financial support for communities to be responsive to the changes.

There are many local, national, and international laws and legal instruments that support the interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible rights of Indigenous Peoples which were developed to safeguard their distinct status, including hunting, fishing, and harvesting rights. However, the present system for management and co-management falls short in diverse ways and requires improvement and reform to realize the legal protections that exist and to gain true co-management. One crucial starting

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<sup>2</sup> Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska. 2020. Food Sovereignty and Self-Governance: Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources. Anchorage, AK. Page 113 – 114.

<sup>3</sup> Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska. 2019. The Role of Providing - Inuit Management Practices: Youth, Elders, Active Hunters and Gatherers Workshop Report. Anchorage, AK.

point is to effectively uphold the laws, policies, agreements, and human rights instruments intended to ensure the survival of Inuit as distinct peoples.

In addition, the objectives of this project have revealed many of the flaws and inequitable processes that impede true partnership with Inuit to support Inuit food sovereignty and subsequently Inuit food security and ecosystem health. For example, the report stresses the impact of “slow, rigid, complicated decision making, lack of adaptive management employed by federal, state, and territorial governments and international forums, such as those within the UN.” Authors stressed the importance of understanding that as animals give themselves to hunters, they need to harvest the animal for food. The animal is honored and never wasted. There is a challenge when federal regulations do not align with the sustainable practices, rules, and values that a community has held throughout history. The report also identifies lack of equity in funding mechanisms to support Inuit driven priorities, work rooted in Indigenous Knowledge. Equity overall is seen as a barrier to true meaningful partnerships and ensure Inuit approaches and solutions are at the forefront. Many barriers are shared within the report. Including barriers related to language and the exclusive use of English in management settings structure, form, and content of meetings. And a single species and siloed approaches to research and decision making<sup>4</sup>.

In the ISR, the case studies on beluga whales and char demonstrate that the Inuvialuit Final Agreement has provided a strong legal basis for equitable inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge and Inuit community-focused management. Within Alaska, the case studies on walruses and salmon demonstrate that there is still work to be done to elevate Inuit voices.

Across all four case studies, the Authors emphasized the need for respect and shared goals to support adaptation to climate change. Across the circumpolar Arctic, Inuit are facing similar political and legal threats. Throughout the project, the Authors shared realities which were sometimes painful and sometimes encouraging. The consensus is that both minor and major changes are needed to achieve food sovereignty and self-governance. In the context of such change, the worldviews, perspectives, knowledge, culture, and most importantly, Inuit themselves, must be central in the process. To Inuit, the term “management” can be difficult to translate directly, but the matter goes far beyond law and policy. Rather, it is closer to a way of life central to the continued existence of Inuit communities. Moving forward, the Inuit way of life must be recognized and respected.

## **Conclusion**

Inuit are on the forefront of the rapid changes occurring within the Arctic and hold thousands of years of proven sustainable management practices, the holistic understanding, and innovative solutions needed to better understand these changes and to adapt. There is a need to move toward putting Inuit knowledge, voices, approaches, and authority and the forefront of discussions and decisions to support the adaptive and holistic approaches and decision-making needed in today’s rapidly changing environment.

## **About Inuit Circumpolar Council**

Founded in 1977 by the late Eben Hopson, Sr. of Utqiagvik, Alaska (formerly Barrow), the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) has flourished and grown into a major international non-governmental organization (NGO) representing approximately 180,000 Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and

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<sup>4</sup> Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska. 2020. Food Sovereignty and Self-Governance: Inuit Role in Managing Arctic Marine Resources. Anchorage, AK. Page 140-141.

Chukotka (Russia). ICC works to promote Inuit rights, safeguard the Arctic environment, and protect and promote the Inuit way of life.

### **Citation and Authorship:**

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Authorship: This policy paper was collaboratively written by: Vernon Blaine Amos, Carolina Behe, Dalee Sambo Dorough, Robert Lekander, James Nicori, John Noksana, JakyLou Olemaun, Joanna Petrasek MacDonald, and Mary Sattler Peltola. The authors are from communities within Alaska and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of Canada and ICC staff and leadership. Below is a brief biography on each author.

Vernon Blaine Amos was raised by his parents and grandparents, growing up with a traditional way of thinking in Sachs Harbor. He is a life-long hunter and fisher. He spent much time on the land in his early years with his uncle and grandfather. They passed on a lot of traditional knowledge to Vernon. Today, he continues to learn from his father and build his traditional knowledge. Vernon studied biology at university and enjoys bringing together traditional knowledge and science in a way that benefits Inuit. Vernon has sat within co-management boards and worked for the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation for a combined 13 years as an elected representative and employee. Through this work, he has advocated for Inuit way of life both within the Inuvialuit Settlement Region and internationally. Vernon expressed that a highlight of his life has been representing Inuit people. Today, he works within the fisheries sector to foster and build sustainable fisheries within Indigenous communities and organizations.

Carolina Behe is the Indigenous Knowledge and Science Advisor for the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC). Carolina works within the ICC Alaska office in Anchorage. As part of the Inuit Circumpolar Council team, her work is diverse and ranges from topics within food security and sovereignty to biodiversity, climate change, co-production of knowledge, management, and policy. Over the past 11 years Carolina has been part of teams with focus on Inuit food security and food sovereignty. Carolina's work allows for her to work within two knowledge systems, Indigenous Knowledge, and science. Indigenous Knowledge takes a holistic view and sees how many pieces fit together. Working with this understanding and way of knowing, combined with science, will aid in make adaptive holistic and ecosystem-based decisions.

Dalee Sambo Dorough, PhD, is the former ICC Chair and Senior Scholar with the University of Alaska Anchorage. Her grandparents and parents were raised in the Norton Sound community of Unalakleet, but she essentially grew up in Anchorage. At an early age, concerned about the purported "extinguishment" of Aboriginal rights, she was drawn to the study of law and international human rights law in particular. Threads of this continuing work can be found in the present essay.

Robert Lekander is an Elder, active hunter, and fisher from Bethel, Alaska. He has grown up on the Kuskokwim River and continues to use his knowledge to inform decisions and teach others. Robert has been a Commissioner on the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and today is an Elder Advisor to the Executive Council and in-season managers.

Vera Metcalf was born and raised in Savoonga (Sivungaq) on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Since 2002, Vera has been the Director of the Eskimo Walrus Commission (EWC) at Kawerak, Inc., which represents 19 coastal Alaskan communities in areas such as promoting community involvement in research, documenting Indigenous Knowledge, and co-management of the Pacific walrus population. Vera represents the EWC in various forums, including the Indigenous People's Council on Marine Mammals. Vera is a Special Advisor on Native Affairs on the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, an Advisory Panel

member of the North Pacific Research Board, a Steering Committee member for the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy, a committee member on the Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program/University of Alaska and the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences/UAF, and a former member of the Inuit Circumpolar Council Executive Committee and Alaska board. Vera is also the Bering Strait Commissioner for the U.S. Department of State, facilitating travel between Chukotka, Russia, and the Bering Strait region of Alaska. Vera is a strong advocate for the subsistence lifestyles of Arctic Indigenous peoples, and passionate about strengthening Indigenous languages and cultures.

James Nicori is an active hunter and fisher from Kwethluk, Alaska. His Father is Inupiaq from King Island, his mother is Athabascan, and his grandmother is Yup'ik. James grew up on the Kuskokwim River and taught himself how to fish and has been fishing the river since his early teenage years. He has been a Commissioner with the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission since it became a reality. James and others worked to put forward a co-management approach within this role. He then became part of the Executive Managers and acted as an in-season manager. Today he is an Elder Advisor to the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission Executive Board and in-season managers.

John Noksana is a hunter from Tuktoyaktuk. He sat within co-management boards for over 12 years as an elected representative. By day, John is a facilitated maintainer and works with Oceans North. In his role with Oceans North, John advocates on behalf of Inuit way of life and connects people together. John's grandfather, Mark Noksana, is Inupiat from the Bering Strait region of Alaska and a signatory of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement.

JakyLou Olemaun is from Utqiagvik, Alaska, and was part of ICC Alaska's Emerging Leaders program (ended in June 2022). She grew up with a culturally active family participating in their subsistence lifestyle year-round and appreciates every bit of her Inupiat culture. She would like to highlight that the Inupiat people and Inuit across the Circumpolar North have been and will continue to occupy their homelands. As she has learned from her elders about their knowledge of the Inupiat culture, she will do the same and continue to pass on her knowledge to future generations.

Mary Sattler Peltola is Yup'ik and grew up on the Kuskokwim River in Kwethluk, Tuntutuliak, Platinum, and Bethel, Alaska. She is a salmon advocate and began fishing commercially with her father when she was six years old. In more recent years, Mary has played an active role in the development of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission as the Executive Director of the commission. Within this role, she helped mobilize 118 Tribes and rural Alaskans to advocate for the protection of salmon runs in Western Alaska. She also served on the Orutsararmiut Native Council Tribal Court and the Bethel City Council, and on the boards of the Nature Conservancy, the Alaska Humanities Forum, the Alaska Children's Trust, and the Russian Orthodox Sacred Sites in Alaska. Mary is the mother of four children, three stepchildren and grandmother of two children. In the summer, Mary and her husband Gene can be found with their seven children and two grandchildren fishing on the Gweek River, and at their fish camp on Steamboat Slough on the Kuskokwim River.

Joanna Petrsek MacDonald is the Policy Advisor, Climate Change for the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC). Joanna works within the ICC Canada office. Within her role at ICC, Joanna has led the coordination of ICC's delegations to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) annual conferences as well as ICC's participation within the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which included being the first Indigenous Peoples Organization to obtain Observer status. Much of ICC's work on climate change intersects with issues such as health, marine governance, Indigenous Knowledge, infrastructure, and youth engagement illustrating Inuit holistic perspectives of the environment.