

Inuit Delegates with Strong Presence at Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement Scientific Coordinating Group Meeting

ICC PRESS RELEASE

Thursday, March 23, 2023 — Inuit delegates took part in the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA) Scientific Coordinating Group (SCG) meeting as part of their national delegations in Utqiagvik, Alaska from March 14-17, 2023.

By the conclusion of this meeting, a consensus was reached by the SCG on the contents of a key document—the Joint Program for Scientific Research and Monitoring (JPSRM) Framework. The JPSRM Framework was crafted in line with the Agreement, which calls for a precautionary approach that prevents unregulated fishing in the high seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean. The goal is to ensure conservation and management measures are in place as part of a long-term strategy to safeguard healthy Arctic marine ecosystems.

The JPSRM Framework will be implemented through the cooperation of research that brings Indigenous Knowledge and science together to improve the understanding of the Agreement Area ecosystems; determine whether fish stocks may be harvested on a sustainable basis; and also the possible impacts of such fisheries on these ecosystems. This framework will be reviewed and considered for approval in June 2023 at a meeting of the Conference of the Parties in Incheon, South Korea.

The work ahead requires the involvement of three systems of knowledge on equal footing: scientific knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge, and local knowledge. Many Parties have so far upheld the continued importance of including Indigenous Knowledge, and ICC will continue to work with others to ensure it is not minimized. Inuit delegates contribute a holistic and balanced approach to understanding the Arctic ecosystems which considers the entire food chain, potential impacts to Inuit food security, and recognizes that Inuit are a part of Arctic ecosystems.

Hosting this Scientific Coordinating Group meeting in the most northern community in the United States must not be understated, as it brought delegates right up to the Arctic Ocean.

Ecosystems within the Central Arctic Ocean are not only a concern for Inuit because we live, interact, and are part of these ecosystems, but also because we are rights holders in the Arctic. Inuit lands, waters, and ice border and overlap with the CAO (including in my own region, the Inuvialuit Settlement Region).

— Herb Nakimayak, Inuit Circumpolar Council Executive Council Member (Canada)

Collectively, Inuit Nunaat (Inuit homelands) make up roughly half of the land mass bordering the Agreement Area. The Central Arctic Ocean ecosystem is important to Inuit who are a part of that ecosystem. Inuit hold a deep, intricate knowledge and understanding of the Arctic—our homeland — where we utilize the ocean, the ice, marine mammals, birds, and fish for our food security, transportation, economy, and cultural sustainability.

— Taqulik Hepa, Inuit Circumpolar Council (Alaska)

We hope the delegates gained an increased understanding of the significance of the Arctic Ocean ecosystem and its adjacent seas to Inuit. Delegates had the opportunity to experience Indigenous Knowledge firsthand through observing a whaling crew sew the ugruk (bearded seal) skins together to cover the frame of the umiaq (skin boat) in preparation for this spring whaling season.

—Marie Greene, Inuit Circumpolar Council Vice-Chair (Alaska)

Meeting delegates were warmly welcomed to Utqiagvik by the organizers: the United States, the North Slope Borough, and the Inuit Circumpolar Council (Alaska). We appreciate the community of Utqiagvik sharing their Inupiaq songs and dances, traditional foods, and culture with the international delegates.

The Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean was signed and ratified by ten Parties: Canada, China, The Kingdom of Denmark (in respect of Greenland and the Faroe Islands), the European Union, Iceland, Japan, Norway, Russia, South Korea, the United States of America. This agreement created a moratorium for 16 years to allow Parties to work together to study and understand complex Arctic ecosystems before potentially establishing any commercial fisheries. The CAO treaty is the first of its kind: a multilateral, binding agreement that recognizes both Arctic Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous Knowledge.

Inuit will continue to work together as part of our national delegations and in cooperation with international delegations throughout the implementation of the JPSRM and in the establishment of exploratory fishing measures to ensure a healthy and sustainable future of the Arctic Ocean ecosystems, as our people depend on it for our physical and cultural survival.

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The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is an Indigenous Peoples' Organization (IPO), founded in 1977 to promote and celebrate the unity of 180,000 Inuit from Alaska (USA), Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia). ICC works to promote Inuit rights, safeguard the Arctic environment, and protect and promote the Inuit way of life.