

**Reframing the Debate and Reclaiming the  
Moral High Ground:  
Indigenous Peoples, Climate Change and  
Human Rights**

Sheila Watt-Cloutier

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Good morning. It is wonderful to join you all here this morning for at the National Museum for the opening of Indigenous Peoples day here at COP 15. I am so pleased to be speaking here with my fellow Inuk, Tove Søvndahl Pedersen, along with Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, a great champion of indigenous peoples, and Egil Olli, President of the Sami Parliament. And I am thrilled to see so many Inuit here, so many indigenous peoples from around the world, and so many youth.

I have promised to begin all my talks in these two weeks by reminding everyone about where we are in the UNFCCC as a process. Where are we today on addressing its objections, and on securing the human rights of indigenous and

vulnerable peoples? 17 years ago now, in 1992, when our global community gathered in Rio de Janeiro and committed to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the objective of the convention was, and I quote, to:

Stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

In the nearly two decades since Rio, our global community has allowed virtually unchecked growth in emissions to push our climate into a warming cycle which has begun to spin out of

our control. “Dangerous anthropogenic interference” is already well underway in the Arctic and around the world in our indigenous communities, where our traditional sources of “food production” are not just under threat – they are actively impacted every day by climate change.

Having been the net recipients of persistent organic pollutants and dealing with that from afar, we developed the approach of using the human face of the issue to bring about change on a global scale. Having seen the power of that approach, and realizing that climate change would be much more of a challenge in light of the largest emitters refusing to cooperate, we strategized on how to make the world pay heed

to our intentions and show them how our way of life was being affected. After much planning and strategizing, we prepared the historical first climate change and human rights petition to the Inter-American Commission on human rights.

Using a human rights approach in climate advocacy can and has shifted the terms of the climate change debate away from a solely economic discussion to one focused on human rights and human values. Completing this shift in the text of the Copenhagen agreement is likely one of the strong ways to pull together global support for strong climate action, particularly now that the scientific community has once more become mired in a technical debate over the validity of climate science.

We Inuit have observed and confirmed the changes in the Arctic for decades – to use an astronaut’s term, who take pictures from space but rely on people on the ground to confirm and interpret those images – we are the “ground truthers” of these observations. With an intimate and holistic understanding of our land, we have known for some time and with great certainty about the changes to the climate. At this point, we have watched as the global debate has been sidelined too many times by technical and economic issues. While we now fight over emails, some of which are a decade old, we are ignoring the enormous, never before witnessed melt of the ice sheets in 2007 and the many other rapid changes we have seen across the

North. When the world focuses only on the Western science and the train gets derailed, our issues also get derailed.

We cannot allow indigenous peoples and indigenous issues to be swept around by these economic, scientific and technical debates that continuously arise on the global stage and at these negotiations. Climate change is very real for us now; we need to center these processes on our human rights so we can no longer be debated or obscured away, or made invisible. Only then will we safeguard our communities, our environment, our culture, and our very future as indigenous peoples.

We indigenous peoples, the human faces of climate change, have proven to be invaluable advocates in the climate debate. Ultimately, addressing climate change in the language of human rights, and building human rights protections into the Copenhagen agreement, are more than just strategic choices - they are ethical imperatives that demand the world retake a principled path and courageously reconnect to solve this great challenge. This is indeed a moral issue; for years, we have been asking the world to stop causing harm to our way of life, and they have always replied that it is too expensive to stop bringing harm to your ways of life therefore we cannot to do it. This can no longer be an acceptable response to Inuit and other indigenous peoples. The leaders of the

world that are coming together here this week must retake that principled path and confront these issues facing indigenous peoples.

On that note of ethics, values and principles, we have maintained our own moral compass by relying on our ancient sense of principles that sustained us for millennia. Everything we do now must show that same respect to our ancient cultures and ancestry who lived sustainably with the land. Our strength stems not only from our values and principles; the ingenuity we have in knowing how to live sustainably can serve as a model for all communities and nations and compel all countries to make the strong cuts in emissions needed to mitigate climate change. And, we must resist the urge to compromise

those very values and lose our high moral ground by adopting quick fixes to our economic and social problems. Our influence springs from our ethical authority. If we lose that moral high ground, we will give up our influence.

As wise stewards of our land, I would urge my own people to refuse the dangerous compromises between our principles and development that might diminish our own moral standing and claim to high ground as indigenous peoples. As we call on the world to change its ecologically degrading practices, we must not accept those practices at home no matter how desperate our need for jobs or economic development. Economic gain must not override the existence and well being of a whole people

whose way of life is already being severely taxed. We must not let the prospect of development in the Arctic diminish our ability and our region's ability to teach the "life centered sustainability" that Arctic Peoples have practiced for millennia. The people whose lives depend upon the ice and snow for cultural survival must be a central component of all our plans. We must not permit the discussion of northern development to be conducted only in terms of sovereignty, resources, and economics. The focus must be on the human dimension, human communities and protection of human cultural rights.

Over the decades, the speed in which globalization has hit our world has so negatively

impacted our ability to remain steadfast in maintaining our values. Losing our sense of principle has led the way to the monumental dependencies that have helped to erode our identities and sense of self-worth and have disabled us from thinking for ourselves. These mental and social problems are all too often understood as an inability by indigenous peoples to adapt to the modern world. In this place of vulnerability, we must not lose our way by believing the quick fixes through unsustainable development will be the end of all our social and economic problems. In this place of vulnerability, even the already well known devastation that accompanies extraction and fossil fuel industry, the very cause of much of global warming, sadly has now become

appealing to us, adding only to the confusion of the issue.

Particularly as we face difficult choices in our hunger for economic development we must ensure environmental justice. We must not move towards losing our culture by our economic choices at home at the same time we seek to defend our cultural rights internationally.

The way forward in these times is to find that balance and clarity of vision. I urge you all never to lose hope in what we can accomplish together. We have come so far, and whatever happens here in Copenhagen, our indigenous voices must remain strong and united around the world to continue to model and lead with 'life

centered sustainability” as our focus and  
commitment.

Nakurmiik-Thank you