

The Arctic: Indicator of Global Change



Inuit Circumpolar Council
www.inuitcircumpolar.com

Greetings. My name is Patricia Cochran, I am an Inupiaq Eskimo born and raised in Nome, Alaska. I have the honor of serving as Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council or ICC. ICC was formed in 1977 to defend the rights and further the interests of the 155,000 Inuit who live in Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia. ICC has a seat on the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and is a "permanent participant" to the eight-nation Arctic Council.



The Arctic may be seen as geographically isolated from the rest of the world, yet the Inuit hunter who falls through the thinning sea ice is connected to melting glaciers in the Andes and the Himalayas, and to the flooding of low-lying and small island states. What happens in foreign capitals and in temperate and tropical countries affects us dramatically in the North. Many of the economic and environmental challenges we face result from activities well to the south of our homelands; and what is happening in the far North will affect what is happening in the South. We are all connected on this planet of ours and the Arctic plays an important role.

Inuit are experiencing first hand the adverse effects of global environmental changes. We are on the front line of globalization. But we are not powerless victims. We are determined to remain connected to the land, and sufficiently resilient to adapt to changing natural forces as we have for centuries.

Discussion of climate change frequently tends to focus on political, economic, and technical issues rather than human impacts and consequences. We need to be aware of the dramatic social and cultural impacts indigenous peoples face in coming years.



For generations Inuit have observed the environment and have accurately predicted weather and sea-ice conditions, enabling us to travel safely on the sea-ice to hunt seals, whales, walrus, and polar bears. Talk to hunters across the North and they will tell you the same story, the weather is increasingly unpredictable. The look and feel of the land is different. The sea-ice is changing. Hunters are having difficulty navigating and traveling safely. We have even lost experienced hunters through the ice in areas that, traditionally, were safe. As a result of melting glaciers it is now difficult sometimes even dangerous for us to travel to many of our traditional hunting and harvesting sites.



Several Inuit villages have already been so damaged by global warming that relocation, at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, is now their only option. Melting sea ice and thawing permafrost have caused:

- " damage to houses, roads, airports and pipelines;
- " eroded landscape, slope instability, and landslides;
- " contaminated drinking water;
- " coastal losses to erosion of up to 100 feet per year;
- " melting of natural ice cellars for food storage.



You have probably heard of the devastation in Shishmaref, Alaska where houses have had to be relocated, several have fallen into the sea, and engineers predict that the entire village of 600 houses could be swallowed by the sea within the next few decades. Shishmaref's airport runway has almost been met by rising seawater, and its fuel tank farm, which seven years ago was 300 feet from the edge of a seaside bluff, is now only 35 feet from the bluff. The town dump, which has seawater within 8 feet of it, could pollute the nearby marine environment for years if inundated. Advancing seawater has contaminated Shishmaref's drinking water supply. Shishmaref is a harbinger of what's coming to all low-lying areas of the world.



We have documented similar changes to the environment in northern Canada. Residents of Sachs Harbour, a tiny community in the Canadian Beaufort Sea region, report:

- " melting permafrost causing beach slumping and increased erosion;
- " increased snowfall;
- " longer sea-ice free seasons;
- " new species of birds and owls, robins, pin-tailed ducks, and salmon-invading the region;
- " and an onslaught of mosquitoes and black flies.



Plans are well underway to relocate certain Arctic communities. **Climate change is not just a theory to us in the Arctic; it is a stark and dangerous reality.** Climate change is undermining the ecosystem upon which Inuit depend for their physical and cultural survival and may very well threaten your ability to live as you always have.

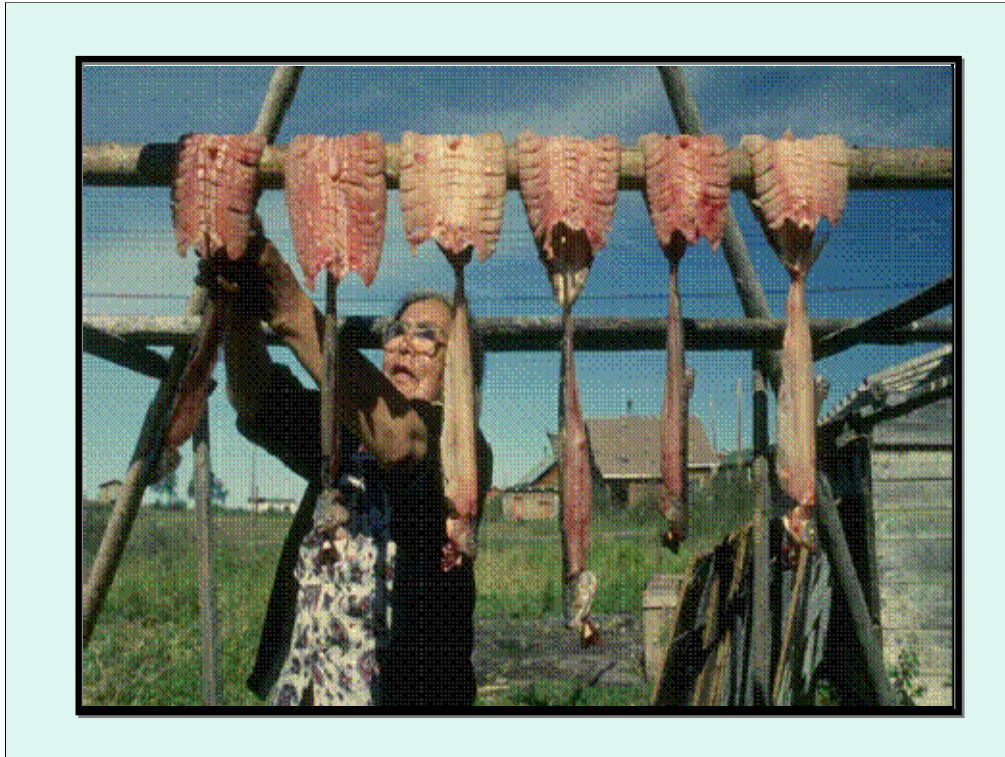
Some might dismiss our concerns saying: "the Arctic is far away and few people live there." That would be immensely short-sighted. The Arctic is of vital importance in the global debate on how to deal with climate change. That's because the Arctic is the barometer of the globe's environmental health. We are indeed the canary in the global coal mine.

The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment projects dramatic and drastic depletion of sea-ice. By as early as 2070 year-round sea-ice may be limited to a small portion of the Arctic Ocean around the North Pole. The rest of the Arctic will be ice-free in summer. However, it is possible that these climate changes won't follow the linear progression curves of scientist's computer models. It may come sooner. Imagine what that means for Inuit.



Polar bears, walrus, ringed seals and likely other species of seals are projected to virtually disappear. This is not to mention the millions of Arctic seabirds and fishes. Our ecosystem will be transformed with tragic results. Climate change in the Arctic is not just an environmental issue with unwelcome economic consequences. It is a matter of livelihood, food, and individual and cultural survival. It is a human issue.

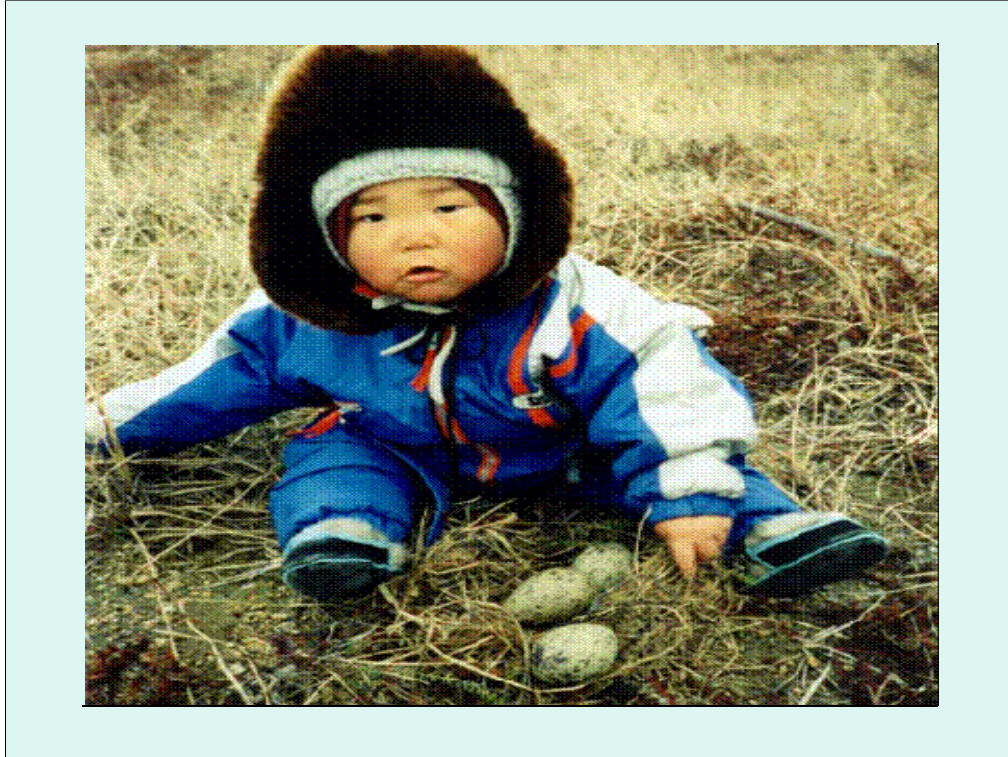
What can Inuit-only 155,000 of us-do about this global situation? First, we refuse to play the role of powerless victim. Responding to climate change has split the nations of the world. Our plight and the Arctic assessment show the compelling case for global unity and clarity of purpose to forestall a future that is not preordained.



Our rights, our human rights that we share with all of you - to live as we do and to enjoy our unique culture as part of the globe's cultural heritage, are at issue. The Arctic dimension and Inuit perspectives on global climate change need to be heard in the corridors of power.

We are not asking the world to take a backward economic step. All we are saying is that governments must develop their economies using appropriate technologies that limit significantly emissions of greenhouse gases. Short-term business interests must change and people must take stock of whether or not the consumptive way of life is ultimately sustainable.

Inuit and the Arctic are many times overlooked, but in relation to global climate change I suggest you do so at everyone's peril. What is happening now to Inuit will happen soon to you in the South. This is why UNEP is looking to the Arctic, and why you should as well. The experience of Inuit in the Arctic is shared by residents of small islands states in the Pacific, many people in the Caribbean and elsewhere.



We are working on many fronts to convince the world to take long-term action. We need to convey the message of the risks we face in the Arctic, the potential threats to the South, and the need for effective national and international action. Climate change is not about scoring political points. It is about families, parents, children, and the lives we lead in our communities throughout the world. We need many strong voices in order to be heard.

Quyana – thank you for the honor of speaking with you.