

a human issue

by Sheila Watt-Cloutier

Climate change is no theory to the Arctic's inhabitants: it is stark and dangerous reality. Human induced climate change is undermining the ecosystem upon which we Inuit depend for our physical and cultural survival.

Discussion of global warming all too often tends to focus on political, economic and technical issues rather than on human impacts and consequences. But Inuit and other northerners are already directly experiencing its impact and we face dramatic problems with possible social and cultural dislocation in the coming years.

We have closely observed the environment for many generations, accurately predicting the weather to enable us to travel safely on the sea ice to hunt marine mammals, walrus and polar bears. Nowhere else does ice and snow represent mobility as it does for us. They are our highways that lead us to our supermarkets — the environment — and link us to other communities.

Among the harm we have suffered from melting sea ice and thawing permafrost are: damage to houses, roads, airports, and pipelines; eroded landscape, unstable slopes, and landslides; contaminated drinking water; coastal losses to erosion of up to one hundred feet per year; melting natural ice cellars for food storage; melting permafrost causing beach slumping and increased erosion; increased snowfall; longer sea ice-free seasons; the arrival of new species of birds, fish and insects; unpredictable sea ice conditions; and melting glaciers, creating torrents in place of streams. These monumental changes threaten the memory of where we were, who we are and all that we wish to become.

The Arctic is the early warning, the health barometer for the planet. Whatever happens in the world occurs here first. If you wish to see how healthy the planet is, come here to take its pulse. Science has recently caught up with the changes our hunters — scientists in their own right — have been observing for decades. In 2004, the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) released the world's most comprehensive detailed regional assessment of climate change, prepared by close to 300 scientists from 15 countries and chaired by the United States. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) and other indigenous organizations of the north

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Each issue of Our Planet features the views of one of UNEP's Champions. For more information on the UNEP Champions of the Earth award see <http://www.unep.org/champions/>.



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ensured that it included traditional knowledge, that it would be more than a piece of science, and that policy recommendations should be attached to it.

Among its key conclusions were:

- I. Marine species dependent on sea ice, including polar bears, ice-living seals, walrus, and some marine birds are very likely to decline, with some facing extinction.
- II. For Inuit, warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy their hunting and food-sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes populations to decline or become extinct.

More recently the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, involving over 2,000 scientists, came to much the same conclusion. This is a good sign: the world now finally appears to be singing from the same song sheet.

Climate change in the Arctic is not just an environmental issue with unwelcome economic consequences. It is a matter of livelihood, a matter of food and a matter of individual and cultural survival. It is a human issue affecting our children, our families, our communities. The Arctic is not 'wilderness' or a 'frontier'. It is our home and homeland.

Despite the ACIA's compelling science we continued to have challenges with the global community over this urgent issue. At the time, as Chair of ICC, I looked at international human rights regimes in place to protect peoples from cultural extinction — just what we Inuit could be facing with climate change. The question before us was how to bring some clarity of purpose and focus to a debate that always seems to be caught up only in technical arguments and competing short term economic ideologies. I believed strongly, and still do, that it would be internationally significant if global climate change were debated and examined in the arena of human rights — one that many governments, particularly in the developed world, take seriously.

After two years of preparations, I and 62 other Inuit from Canada and Alaska filed a legal complaint last December. We believe that the 1948 American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man, supported by the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, may provide an effective means for us to defend our culture and way of life. We are not asking the United States and the world to take a backward economic step. What we are saying is that governments must develop their economies using appropriate technologies that significantly limit greenhouse gas emissions. Inuit and other northerners are at peril because some are taking a short-term view favored by some businesses.

My purpose is to educate and encourage the global community to join to combat global threats. Through our work, we have put the human face front and central. We have changed the international discourse from dry technical discussions to debates about human values and human rights, and have given United Nations conferences a heartbeat, a renewed sense of urgency. We did this by reminding people far away that the Inuit hunters falling through the thinning ice are connected to the cars they drive, the industries they support and the policies they chose to make and enforce.

Our work has not been aggressive or confrontational. We are reaching out, not striking out. The Inuit message is a 'gift', an act of generosity from an ancient culture, still deeply tied to the natural environment, to an urban, industrial and modern world that has largely lost its connection with it.

Initially the Commission chose not to "proceed at present" with our petition. When we insisted, it decided to hold a hearing on the legal aspects of climate change and human rights. This was truly a historical moment for us and the world.

We Inuit have lived in the Arctic for millennia. Our culture and economy reflect the land and all that it gives. We are connected to the land and our understanding of who we are — our age old knowledge and wisdom — comes from it. Our struggle to thrive in the harshest environment has given us the outlook we need to survive in the modern world. That outlook — a respectful human one that sees connections to everything — should inform the debate on climate change. Is it not because people worldwide have lost the connection between themselves and their neighbours, between their actions and the environment, that we find ourselves having to come to grips with climate change?

We will adapt as best we can. But I strongly believe, as do many others well versed in this issue, that there is a window of opportunity in the next 10 to 15 years to make effective changes in how we live as the global community. There is still time to prevent from fully unfolding ACIA's stark predictions that our hunting culture will be lost in my grandson's lifetime.

We must come together as a global community and understand our shared humanity — so as to take responsibility and immediate action to address this defining issue of our time. 