

The Inuit Future: Food Security, Economic Development, and U.S. Arctic Policy

by Jim Stotts

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Global climate change, with its resulting loss of sea ice, has opened up access to the Arctic Ocean as never before. Moreover, the rate of global warming and the pace of development are accelerating. Stakeholders have different ideas on how to handle these changes. Depending on one's perspective, the pace of development seems to be either too fast or too slow; and, like most contentious issues, the best solutions may lie somewhere in the middle.

Those who prefer a slow approach generally emphasize the following:

- The need to create new standards and technologies for development;
- Necessary robust management and oversight capabilities for industry;
- Protecting biodiversity and ecosystems; and
- The needs of Arctic peoples and communities.

In contrast, those preferring a fast approach focus on:

- Economic development standards and technologies that are already sufficient;
- The stifling effects of excessive environmental oversight and over-regulation;
- Global needs outweighing local concerns; and
- A sense of urgency to begin development to respond to the global economic crisis.

These perspectives can polarize stakeholders into different camps; unfortunately, the Inuit and other Arctic indigenous peoples are caught in the middle of this environmental discussion.

I. The Inuit Circumpolar Council

The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), an international organization that advocates on behalf of 160,000 Inuit in the Arctic region, which stretches from Chukotka, Alaska,

across Canada and into Greenland, has consultative status with the United Nations and consults on a broad range of Arctic issues. Moreover, the ICC is a permanent participant to the Arctic Council, the eight-nation intergovernmental organization that works to develop Arctic policy.

ICC's principle goals include the following:

- Strengthening unity among the Inuit of the circumpolar North;
- Promoting Inuit rights and interests on an international level;
- Developing and encouraging long-term policies to safeguard the Arctic environment; and
- Seeking full and active partnership in the political, economic, and social development of the circumpolar North.

The ICC believes in sustainable development. For most of the world, this means having a balance between economic development and environmental protection. For the ICC, it also means preserving the Inuit culture and society—this belief is important to remember in any discussion with Inuit about sustainable development. As the first inhabitants and stewards of the Arctic, the Inuit have the responsibility and right to ensure the protection of their environment and culture.

II. The Inuit and Food Security

Presently, the highest priority for ICC Alaska is food security. For most of the world, food security means having enough money to purchase food and other necessities at the grocery store. In other words, food security is tied to having a permanent job and income. This is not the case for the Inuit, who measure food security from a completely different economic and cultural perspective. Well-paying jobs are at times few and far between in rural areas of Alaska, where continued access to traditional hunting and fishing areas is a key to health and well-being.

The Inuit and U.S. Arctic Policy

In January 2009, President George W. Bush issued National Security Directive 66 with respect to the Arctic region. Paragraph III of that directive sets out the policy objectives:

- (1) Meet national security and homeland security needs relevant to the Arctic.
- (2) Protect the Arctic environment and conserve its biological resources.
- (3) Ensure that natural resources management and economic development in the region are environmentally sustainable.
- (4) Strengthen institutions for cooperation among the eight Arctic nations.
- (5) Involve the Arctic's indigenous communities in decisions that affect them.
- (6) Enhance scientific monitoring and research into local, regional and global environmental issues.

Interestingly, all six policies are related to work in which the ICC has been engaged.

In May 2013, President Barack Obama issued a *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*, which lays out three lines of effort and four guiding principles. The lines of effort include:

- (1) Advance United States security interests
- (2) Pursue responsible Arctic region stewardship
- (3) Strengthen international cooperation.

The guiding principles that will inform the U.S. approach are the following:

- (1) Safeguard peace and stability
- (2) Make decisions using the best available information
- (3) Pursue innovative arrangements
- (4) Consult and coordinate with Alaska Natives.

Once again, these lines of effort and guiding principles align with work that the ICC is already doing. The following section provides a brief overview of the linkages between ICC efforts and the 2013 Arctic Strategy.

Both the Security Directive and the 2013 Arctic Strategy call for meeting U.S. security needs in the Arctic, and the 2013 Arctic Strategy calls for safeguarding peace and stability. The ICC has long maintained that the Arctic should be a region of peace. We are hopeful that any military activity in the Arctic will be minor and any buildup of military action will not increase tensions nor lead to another cold war.

Both the Security Directive and the 2013 Arctic Strategy call for Arctic stewardship and protection of the Arctic environment, with the Security Directive including a specific objective of achieving sustainable development of economic activities and natural resource management. The goals of stewardship and protection are in complete harmony with Inuit perspectives, and will go a long way toward protecting and ensuring Inuit food security. However, the ICC would add to the stewardship objectives the sustainability of the Inuit culture.

Both policies call for strengthening international cooperation, and the ICC completely agrees with these objectives and is an active participant in the Arctic Council and other international forums.

The 2009 policy calls for involving Arctic indigenous communities in decisionmaking, and the 2013 Arctic Strategy takes this objective one step further in calling for consultation and coordination with Alaska Natives. The ICC appreciates the more specific and meaningful approach taken to working with the indigenous people of the Arctic in the 2013 Strategy. However, the ICC also recognizes that consultation with indigenous communities varies greatly, depending on the agency and must be meaningful to be effective.

The 2009 Security Directive calls for enhanced scientific monitoring and research, and the 2013 Arctic Strategy takes a similar approach in calling for decisions to be made using best available information. The ICC suggests that all Arctic scientific research include interaction with indigenous experts to capture traditional ecological knowledge.

In both policies, on paper it appears that the government's objectives are aligned with the objectives of the Inuit people; however, the best way to ensure that everyone's interests are properly considered is to communicate often. The ICC is committed to keeping all lines of communication open.

Most Inuit are coastal people who rely heavily on resources from the ocean for nutritional and cultural survival. The Inuit are a hunting society and are extremely concerned about the health of the ocean ecosystem, along with birds, fish, and animals that need a clean and healthy habitat to thrive. Despite adapting to the modern world, hunting still defines the Inuit people, who are concerned regarding food security in these times of global climate change and the rapid industrialization of the Arctic.

The ICC believes food security should be the standard against which all development should be measured. If a proposed development threatens food security, it should not be allowed to proceed until all concerns are adequately addressed. A clean ecosystem with healthy, abundant flora and fauna is the best indicator that any particular type of economic development is sustainable and wise.

III. The Inuit and Development

The ICC is not opposed to sustainable development, especially if cultural sustainability is incorporated into the process. It is evident to all that Arctic development will occur, the planet is warming, and permanent sea ice and permafrost are melting. We can see it with our own eyes—our world and that of other people in the Arctic region is on the verge of being turned upside-down, and we must calculate how to manage this development as we adapt to climate changes.

In the summer of 2010, the ICC held its general assembly in Nuuk, Greenland. At this gathering, it was evident that there were differences of opinions among the Inuit on three issues:

- Offshore oil and gas development;
- Mining, particularly uranium mining; and
- The environmental and social impact assessment process.

In February 2011, the ICC hosted an Inuit Leaders Summit that resulted in a unified *Inuit Declaration on Resource Development Principles*.

The Declaration sets out basic principles that we hope will lead to responsible, sustainable development. Arctic development must bring tangible and long-lasting benefits to the Inuit people, while avoiding any degradation of the healthy ecosystems.

These are frightening yet exciting times. As we look out to the sea to study the approaching prospects, we see great opportunities and great risks on the horizon. We must get things done right the first time, as we have learned from our ancestors and our own experiences. In the Arctic, one does not get too many second chances—that is a truth we want to share with our children and grandchildren as the Inuit continue to live and thrive in the North.