

Arctic Governance Project – Panel Discussion

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Inuit are a people of the sea. While some of our villages are inland, most Inuit depend on the marine environment. We depend on ice to travel on, and now due to climate change it is melting. We depend on species that are now disappearing. We depend on livelihoods that are now disappearing. And we depend on community infrastructure that is now eroding, in some places, literally into the sea.

What we Inuit see as problematic, industry sees as an opportunity. Melting ice in the Arctic may mean for them, easier access to resources that formerly lay under the sea ice. It may mean shorter routes to and from Asia for European shipping companies. It may mean more opportunity for tourism companies that can now access the high Arctic. It also means an increasing fascination with the Arctic by university researchers and scientists.

As for states, non-Arctic states also see this as an opportunity to claim the Arctic as international water, and the archipelago as international land. Arctic states have differing views on this, depending where they are located. They may agree that certain parts at least are not international, but they argue among themselves, without Inuit at the negotiating table, over where the boundaries may be.

There is now a race to the Arctic. A very different race, one that the world has never seen.

Because of this increasing focus on the Arctic, and because of the way in which states and industry were acting, and because of the way in which scientists were researching, Inuit leaders concluded it was time to take stock and meet over what is commonly referred to as the Arctic sovereignty debate. ICC invited Inuit leaders to Kuujuaq to an Inuit Leaders Summit last year, where we reviewed some of the international positions of outside states, discussed among ourselves what each Arctic state was doing about this so-called sovereignty debate, and shared among ourselves how each of our respective paths towards self-determination was proceeding. We discussed the sad state of affairs that two of the Arctic states in which Inuit live, namely Canada and USA had voted against the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and one, the Russian Federation, had abstained. We all agreed that questions such as ‘who owns the Arctic?’ and ‘who has the right to traverse the Arctic?’ and ‘who has rights to the resources in the Arctic?’ should not be left to others, but Inuit themselves should take a stand on these questions.

From this meeting, the *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic* was created. I invite you to utilize this Declaration in our deliberations on Arctic Governance.

Let me turn now to the issues of ethics, values and principles as they relate to Arctic governance. I use the words of my Inuk sister, Sheila Watt Cloutier, with whom I agree.

“We, as indigenous peoples, 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 courageous decisions. 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.”

As we face difficult choices in the days to come, we must not lose our way. The way forward is through balance and clarity of vision. 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.

Quyana – thank you.