

PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Eighteenth Session: 22 April – 3 May 2019

Presentation by the Arctic Caucus on Item 9:

Special theme: “Indigenous peoples’ Traditional knowledge, generation, transmission and protection”

Speaker: Monica Ell-Kanayuk, ICC Canada President

Indigenous Knowledge in the Arctic

Thank you, Mr./Mrs. Chair.

I am speaking on behalf of Arctic Caucus.

The theme of this year’s session of the Permanent Forum couldn’t be more timely or important. It comes at a time where there is much debate and discussion about the term “traditional knowledge” – in our Arctic homelands and globally. Unfortunately, the term “traditional” is often misinterpreted and taken to refer to a static, unchanging body of knowledge and for that reason it is often discounted.

This is a mistake that can weaken research results, in the Arctic and elsewhere, and have many unintended consequences. Indigenous Knowledge methodologies and final products are peer reviewed and validated by IK holders. Just as scientific information is analyzed with a perspective unique to trained scientists, the same is true of IK. While the two sources of knowledge may complement each other in many cases, they are not the same and should be appreciated for the value and legitimacy that both bring to the table, especially when developed through genuine co-production of knowledge concerning our communities, lands, territories and resources.

Inuit use the term Indigenous Knowledge (IK). And we continue to argue that the Arctic Council, its working groups and other bodies adopt it. Indigenous Knowledge has an important role to play in understanding the changes occurring in our region. When used effectively, our knowledge will add to the quality of research conducted under the auspices of the Arctic Council – and other bodies.

There are a number of challenges on how to include IK in a meaningful way within the Arctic Council working groups. These challenges include confusion on how to define IK, how to use it and how to employ both IK and science together.

To better inform decision-making, it is important to first come to a consensus on what IK is. The Inuit Circumpolar Council offers the following definition:

Indigenous knowledge is a systematic way of thinking applied to phenomena across biological, physical, cultural and spiritual systems. It includes insights based on evidence acquired through direct and long-term experiences and extensive and multigenerational observations, lessons and skills. It has developed over millennia and is still developing in a living process, including knowledge acquired today and in the future, and it is passed on from generation to generation.

Under this definition, IK goes beyond observations and ecological knowledge. It offers a unique 'way of knowing' to identify and apply to research needs, which will ultimately inform decision makers.

An example of how Inuit use of Indigenous Knowledge is guiding decision-making is in the work of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission. Pikialasorsuaq means "great upwelling" in Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic) and is the name of the North Water Polynya shared by Greenland and Canada. An area of permanently open water teeming with marine life, it has nourished Inuit subsistence culture for thousands of years. Today it is under threat from climate and environmental change, increased shipping, oil and gas development and other drivers. The fate of this area will directly affect the health and long-term sustainability of Inuit communities in both countries.

Established by ICC in 2016, the Pikialasorsuaq Commission included Inuit from Canada and Greenland and consulted with communities in both countries that rely on this area. Indigenous Knowledge anchored the report and guided the recommendations for an Inuit strategy on "safeguarding, monitoring and managing the health of the Pikialasorsuaq for future generations."

I encourage you to read the report and its recommendations as an illustration of how Indigenous Knowledge is "a living process" linked to our language and is an important dimension of our right of self-determination.

Thank you.