



2014 Arctic Circle Assembly  
Okalik Egeesiak | Reykjavik, Iceland | Oct 31 – Nov 2, 2014

## **Indigenous Voices of the Arctic**

(check against delivery)

I would like to thank the organizers of the Arctic Circle forum for the invitation to participate.

Inuit are an international people. As the International Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), I represent more than 150,000 Inuit in Chukotka, Alaska, Canada and Greenland.

Our relationship at ICC is based on a common culture and language. For most of human history the indigenous peoples of the circumpolar North have been at the top of the world, living their lives and carrying on their traditional ways.

Iceland is the only Arctic state that does not have indigenous peoples. No one lived here until the Nordic peoples arrived more than 1000 years ago.

So it is always interesting to me to attend conferences like this one. Suddenly interest in the Arctic is now wide-spread. This has all happened in a relatively short time.

In the short time I have today I want to leave two messages.

The first is a cautionary message to those who might see the Arctic as an empty wilderness or an open frontier where they have complete license to assert their own interests.

The second message is an offer of cooperation and collaboration.

Until recently not many people from the south have had an opportunity to visit Arctic regions. Transportation costs are high, distances are huge, communities are remote, and the climate is not for everyone.

***Message #1: the Arctic is not empty. Indigenous peoples have lived in this region for thousands of years.***

For whatever reason, many new-comers to the Arctic see it as a governance vacuum, or a region that should be considered the common heritage of mankind.

These perceptions often overlook the people who live in the Arctic and minimize the importance of existing governance systems. For example, in my own country, Canada, Inuit are the largest landowners in the Arctic.

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About 20% of the central Arctic Ocean can be considered international space. The rest of the land and sea in the Arctic is subject to the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of the 8 Arctic states. Inuit live in 4 of these Arctic states and have a variety of legal and political rights protected by domestic and international law.

In 2009 Inuit adopted a ***Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic***. In that Declaration we stated that the conduct of international relations in the Arctic and the resolution of international disputes in the Arctic are not the sole preserve of Arctic states and non-Arctic states. These matters are also within the purview of the Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic.

Issues of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Arctic have become tightly linked to issues of self-determination in the Arctic. Inuit and Arctic states must, therefore, work together closely and constructively to chart the future of the Arctic.

But the Inuit voice is not just an Arctic voice. Inuit are part of the global family of indigenous peoples and we are also involved in promoting and protecting Indigenous Peoples rights through the United Nations.

Inuit were pleased to see the UN General Assembly adopt the outcome document at the recent ***World Conference on Indigenous Peoples*** in New York in September.

The outcome document contains very important language. States commit themselves to make an effort to implement the ***Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*** locally, nationally and internationally, in cooperation with indigenous peoples.

So when I come to these conferences and hear all the plans that people from other parts of the world have for the Arctic, I sometimes feel a bit nervous. You can try a mental exercise to imagine what this is like.

Suppose the Inuit, Aleuts, Athabaskans, Saami, and numerous indigenous peoples of Russia convened a conference in your part of the world and laid out new ways for you to govern yourself, set new priorities for research and development in your communities, imposed new rules for how you protect your local environment and called for bans on which animals you can use on your farms and ranches. I suspect that you wouldn't pay much attention to us!

Inuit are aware that the Arctic has great resource wealth. We are also aware of the increasing global demand for Arctic minerals, hydrocarbons and living marine resources. Inuit have always adapted to change and we are determined to provide for the material and cultural well-being of Inuit into the future.

This is why Inuit adopted the ***Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Resource Development Principles In Inuit Nunaat*** in May, 2011. We are committed to the principles on resource development set out in this Declaration. Inuit expect all those who have or seek a role in the governance, management, development, or use of the resources of Inuit Nunaat to conduct themselves within the letter and spirit of this Declaration.

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Finally, I want to mention the ***Kitigaaryuit Declaration***. Inuit adopted this Declaration a few months ago in Inuvik. It provides a mandate to Inuit leadership to work for a future that includes successful economic, social and environmental conditions in the Arctic that reflect the central place of Inuit, Inuit culture, and Inuit values throughout Inuit Nunaat.

This Declaration contains the Inuit agenda for the next 4 years in relation to:

- the Arctic Council and other international fora;
- Environmental Stewardship;
- Safe Shipping and Fisheries;
- Sustainable Economic Development;
- Inuit Health and Well-Being;
- Food Security;
- Communication;
- Education and Language; and
- Traditional Knowledge and Science.

***So this leads to my second message: Inuit are very polite and adaptable people and we welcome cooperation and collaboration with those who have recently become interested in the Arctic.***

We simply ask that you respect our culture and long history as residents of this beautiful region. And we ask that you consult with us before you try to re-invent the Arctic according to your own interests.

But if you want to help the Arctic, I also encourage you to think about what you need to do differently in the south---in the places where you live. Rather than suggesting to us how we should govern ourselves differently in the North, consider how your activities in the south are impacting us in the Arctic and make some adjustments closer to home.

I am not suggesting that Inuit want to close the Arctic to others. We realize that the enthusiasm and interest of people and organizations at this conference are built on good intentions. ICC is always interested in opportunities to develop partnerships and work in cooperative and collaborative ways. So I look forward to meeting many of you and discussing your interests in the Arctic at this conference and into the future. And I look forward to working with you.

Thank you.



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