

Global Warming: Inuit Circumpolar Conference Petition

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Inuit Circumpolar Conference Petition to the Inter American Commission on Human Rights Seeking Relief from Violations Resulting from Global Warming Caused by Acts and Omissions of the United States," December 7, 2005 (excerpts)

Sheila Watts-Cloutier presented a petition to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2005 which stated that:

"The Inuit, meaning "the people" in their native Inuktitut, are a linguistic and cultural group descended from the Thule people whose traditional range spans four countries - Chukotka in the Federation of Russia, northern and western Alaska in the United States, northern Canada, and Greenland. While there are local characteristics and differences within the broad ethnic category of "Inuit," all Inuit share a common culture characterized by dependence on subsistence harvesting in both the terrestrial and marine environments, sharing of food, travel on snow and ice, a common base of traditional knowledge, and adaptation to similar Arctic conditions. Particularly since the Second World War, the Inuit have adapted their culture to include many western innovations, and have adopted a mixed subsistence- and cash-based economy. Although many Inuit are engaged in wage employment, the Inuit continue to depend heavily on the subsistence harvest for food. Traditional "country food" is far more nutritious than imported "store-bought" food. Subsistence harvesting also provides spiritual and cultural affirmation, and is crucial for passing skills, knowledge and values from one generation to the next, thus ensuring cultural continuity and vibrancy.

"Like many indigenous peoples, the Inuit are the product of the physical environment in which they live. The Inuit have fine-tuned tools, techniques and knowledge over thousands of years to adapt to the arctic environment. They have developed an intimate relationship with their surroundings, using their understanding of the arctic environment to develop a complex culture that has enabled them to thrive on scarce resources. The culture, economy and identity of the Inuit as an indigenous people depend upon the ice and snow.

"Nowhere on Earth has global warming had a more severe impact than the Arctic. Building on the 2001 findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment - a comprehensive international evaluation of arctic climate change and its impacts undertaken by hundreds of scientists over four years - concluded that:

The Arctic is extremely vulnerable to observed and projected climate change and its impacts. The Arctic is now experiencing some of the most rapid and severe climate change on Earth. Over the next 100 years, climate change is expected to accelerate, contributing to major physical, ecological, social, and economic changes, many of which have already begun.

“Because annual average arctic temperatures are increasing more than twice as fast as temperatures in the rest of the world, climate change has already caused severe impacts in the Arctic, including deterioration in ice conditions, a decrease in the quantity and quality of snow, changes in the weather and weather patterns, and a transfigured landscape as permafrost melts at an alarming rate, causing slumping, landslides, and severe erosion in some coastal areas. Inuit observations and scientific studies consistently document these changes. For the last 15 to 20 years, Inuit, particularly hunters and elders who have intimate knowledge of their environment, have reported climate-related changes within a context of generations of accumulated traditional knowledge. ...

“Because Inuit culture is inseparable from the condition of their physical surroundings, the widespread environmental upheaval resulting from climate change violates the Inuit’s right to practice and enjoy the benefits of their culture. The subsistence culture central to Inuit cultural identity has been damaged by climate change, and may cease to exist if action is not taken by the United States in concert with the community of nations

“The Inuit’s fundamental right to use and enjoy their traditional lands is violated as a result of the impacts of climate change because large tracks of Inuit traditional lands are fundamentally changing, and still other areas are becoming inaccessible. Summer sea ice, a critical extension of traditional Inuit land, is literally ceasing to exist. Winter sea ice is thinner and unsafe in some areas. Slumping, erosion, landslides, drainage, and more violent sea storms have destroyed coastal land, wetlands, and lakes, and have detrimentally changed the characteristics of the landscape upon which the Inuit depend. The inability to travel to lands traditionally used for subsistence and the reduced harvest have diminished the value of the Inuit’s right of access to these lands.

“The Inuit’s fundamental right to enjoy their personal property is violated because climate change has reduced the value of the Inuit’s personal effects, decreasing the quality of food and hides, and damaging snowmobiles, dog sleds and other tools. Their right to cultural intellectual property is also violated, because much of the Inuit’s traditional knowledge, a formerly priceless asset, has become frequently unreliable or inaccurate as a result of climate change.

“The Inuit’s fundamental rights to health and life are violated as climate change exacerbates pressure on the Inuit to change their diet, which for millennia has consisted of wild meat and a few wild plants. Climate change is accelerating a transition by Inuit to a more western store-bought diet with all of its inherent health problems. Life-threatening accidents are increasing because of rapid changes to ice, snow, and land. Traditional food preservation methods are becoming difficult to practice safely. Natural sources of drinking water are disappearing and diminishing in quality. Increased risks of previously rare heat and sun related illnesses also implicate the right to health and life.

“The Inuit’s fundamental rights to residence and movement, and inviolability of the home are likewise violated as a result of the impacts of climate change because the physical integrity of Inuit homes is threatened. Most Inuit settlements are located in coastal areas, where storm surges, permafrost melt, and erosion are destroying certain coastal Inuit homes and communities. In inland areas, slumping and landslides threaten Inuit homes and infrastructure.

“The Inuit’s fundamental right to their own means of subsistence has also been violated as a result of the impacts of climate change. The travel problems, lack of wildlife, and diminished quality of harvested game resulting from climate change have deprived the Inuit of the ability to rely on the harvest for year-round sustenance. Traditional Inuit knowledge, passed from Inuit elders in their role as keepers of the Inuit culture, is also becoming outdated because of the

rapidly changing environment” (Inuit Circumpolar Conference, 2005).