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## THE INUIT CASE STUDY

The Inuit, indigenous people inhabiting the Arctic region of Canada, Alaska, Greenland and Russia, share a unique heritage, culture, and homeland.<sup>1</sup> Transported by dog teams, finding temporary shelter in igloos, and warming up with furry karpas, Inuit inhabit one of the most isolated and harsh lands on Earth. The warming of temperatures over the last 30 years has resulted in major changes to their ancestral land and consequently, their livelihoods. United into a major human rights movement with wide international support, the Inuit are currently fighting to defend their right to live and conserve a land that is literally melting under their feet.

### THE INUIT

The more than 155,000 Inuit people located in the Northern Polar Region have successfully managed to balance their traditional practices and modern life. The economy of the region is based largely on natural resources, from oil and gas to fish, caribou, and whales. Tourism is also a growing source of income and the public sector, including the military, employs a wide part of the population in the area.

In addition to the cash economy, traditional subsistence through hunting and fishing represents a main source of

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<sup>1</sup> The Inuit Circumpolar Charter defines Inuit as “indigenous members of the Inuit homeland recognized by Inuit as being members of their people and shall include the Inupiat, Yupik (Alaska), Inuit, Inuvialuit (Canada), Kalaallit (Greenland) and Yupik (Russia)”.

income for the Inuit and contributes greatly to their overall well-being.

### HOW CLIMATE CHANGE IS AFFECTING THE INUIT

The Arctic region consists mostly of permafrost soil—permanent frozen soil. During the winter, the average temperature oscillates between  $-28^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-18.4^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), and  $-70^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-94^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). During the summer, temperatures rise to an average of  $12^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $53.6^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), melting the top layer of the permafrost, and forming marshes, lakes, bogs and streams where some vegetation can grow.

Observed Sea Ice September 1979



Observed Sea Ice September 2003



ACIA, Impacts of a Warming Arctic: Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (2004)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change described in its Fourth Assessment Report an increase of Arctic temperatures between  $2$  and  $3.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  since 1970. The fragile equilibrium of the permafrost, which needs to remain

frozen in the lower layers, is being altered by these warmer temperatures—resulting in greater ground melt during the summer and loss of critical soil moisture due to excessive runoff.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Nobel Peace Prize Nominee and member of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, described the effects of these temperature increases before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in March 2007:

- **Human Safety:** Deteriorating ice conditions imperil hunters traveling on ice. For example, ice pans used for hunting are more likely to detach and take hunters away, and thinner ice has meant that many hunters have been killed or seriously injured after falling through ice that was traditionally safe.
- **Biodiversity Loss:** Thinner ice has affected ice dependent species, such as ringed seals, walrus and polar bears, which may be pushed to extinction as a result.



Global Warming Awareness2007. July 25 2007.  
<http://globalwarming-facts.info/globalwarming-awareness2007.html>

- **Food Security:** The decline of lake trout and other freshwater fish are impacting local food security, sport fishing, and tourism.
- **Property Damage:** The melting land-ice has exposed the coastline,

where most Inuit live, to fierce storms and erosion. Some homes have already fallen into the sea, such as in the town of Shishmaref in Alaska. As a result, whole towns have had to relocate. Also, thawing permafrost has damaged buildings, roads, pipelines and other infrastructure.

- **Natural Disaster:** There has been harsh and unexpected weather, such as record-breaking winds in Iqaluit last February that tore roofs off buildings and homes.
- **Culture Loss:** Warmer weather has also affected traditional lifestyles. For example, most Inuit can no longer rely on the traditional practice of food caching because food rots and insects invade caches.

The Inter Governmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report points to climate change as the cause of these alterations of weather conditions. Moreover, an acceleration of these climatic trends is projected to occur during this century, due to ongoing increases in concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The IPCC predicts a continuing reduction in the thickness and coverage of glaciers and ice sheets, as well as detrimental changes in natural ecosystems affecting many organisms including migratory birds, mammals, and predators higher on the food chain. Barriers to invasive species will also be lowered, putting additional stress on endemic species. Additional impacts include reductions in the extent of sea ice, increased coastal erosion, and an increase in the depth of permafrost seasonal thawing. These changes are already changing the Inuit's environment and could transform the way they live in the near future.

### INUIT EFFORTS TO ADAPT

Inuit are renowned for their ability to prosper in a harsh climate, and for their resilience in changing conditions. However, climate change poses a threat unlike any they have ever faced.

Inuit hunters are now navigating new travel routes, trying to avoid areas of decreasing ice stability and changing their hunting practices to coincide with shifts in the migration times and routes of caribou, geese, and new species that are moving northwards.

Reallocation of human settlements has been a major change for some Inuit people. The entire town of Shishmaref, in Alaska, moved recently due to increasingly violent weather events such as storms and winds.



Ken Graham, Stone/Getty Images. Encyclopaedia Britannica online. 26 July 2007. <http://www.britannica.com/ebi/art-52504/The-Inupiat-speak-a-dialect-of-the-Inuit-language?articleTypeId=31>

### HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

Inuit have also experienced a remarkable change in their governance system, from organizing decision-making processes in small and nomadic communities to spurring new climate change initiatives in international fora. For example, international Inuit communities organized the Inuit Circumpolar Conference to pursue an unprecedented complaint before the Inter-American

Commission of Human Rights regarding the violation of their human rights resulting from climate change. The Inuit complained that climate change jeopardizes their right to life, physical integrity and security, their right to use and enjoy the lands they have traditionally used and occupied, to use and enjoy their personal property, and the inviolability of their home—rights that are recognized by both The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights.

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