

Nobel Prize Nominee Testifies About Global Warming

Inuit leader Sheila Watt-Cloutier's testimony before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights put spotlight on climate change and indigenous peoples

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My Name is Sheila Watt-Cloutier. I was born in Kuujuaq in Arctic Canada where I lived traditionally, travelling only by dogteam, for the first ten years of my life. I now live in Iqaluit, the Capital of the Northern Canadian Territory of Nunavut.

I am here today to talk to you about how global warming and climate change are affecting the basic survival in many vulnerable regions and, in particular, of indigenous cultures throughout the Americas.

Of course, what I know best is from my own region -- the Arctic, which happens to be the hardest hit by climate change. As such, many of the impacts that I will refer to will come from my own homelands. However, you can consider similar impacts on most indigenous peoples who remain integrated with their ecosystems. Inuit and other indigenous peoples continue to be an integral part, and not separate, from the ecosystems in which we live. Climate change brings into question the basic survival of indigenous people and indigenous cultures throughout the Americas.



Sheila Watt-Cloutier testifies before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

To borrow and quote the words of the Hon. Julian Hunte, Ambassador and permanent representative of Saint Lucia to the United Nations: "[...]the adverse impacts of climate change are real, immediate and devastating."

While time is short, I will give some insight into the impacts of global warming and climate change on indigenous peoples within the Hemisphere.

Extreme weather events

In our region, Elders say that the weather is Uggianaqtuq -- meaning it behaves unexpectedly, or in an unfamiliar way. Last month, we had record breaking winds in Iqaluit that tore roofs off buildings and homes.

In the Caribbean, Venezuela, Central America and the United States the adverse effects of climate change and the associated phenomena of sea-level rise have contributed to the increase in the intensity and frequency of hurricanes threatening the lives of many. In 2004, over 3000 persons were killed in Haiti as a result of Tropical Storm Jeanne. That same year Hurricane Ivan destroyed or damaged over 90% of the houses in Grenada and caused over US \$815 million in damages or twice the GDP of that country.

Changes to the oceans

Global warming is impacting Inuit and many indigenous communities who are coastal, sea-going peoples. Inuit happen to journey on a frozen ocean for much of the year.

For Inuit, sea ice allows for safe travel on the perilous Arctic waters and provides a stable platform from which to hunt its bounty. The ice is not only our 'roads' but also our 'supermarket.' Deteriorating ice conditions imperil Inuit in many ways. Ice pans used for hunting at the floe edge are more likely to detach from the land fast ice and take hunters away. As the ice is melting from below, hunters can no longer be certain of its thickness and how safe it is to travel upon. Many hunters have been killed or seriously injured after falling through ice that was traditionally known to be safe. Thinner ice also means much shorter hunting seasons as the ice forms up later and melts sooner. In turn, some ice dependent species such as ringed seals, walrus and polar bears are experiencing impacts and the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment projects that these species will likely be pushed to extinction by the end of this century. Inuit have relied on ringed seal for food and clothing for millennia. The lack of ice also has profound impacts on our communities. As the land fast ice and pack ice disappears, the coastline, where most Inuit live, is exposed to fierce storms -- whole communities, such as Shishmaref in Alaska, are having to move altogether, because the storms are eroding the land out from under them.

These impacts are destroying our rights to life, health, property and means of subsistence. States that do not recognize these impacts and take action violate our human rights.

Similarly, in the South, corral reefs are dying under the rising ocean temperatures leaving coastal communities equally vulnerable to storm surges and coastal erosion.

In the Caribbean, Central America, Venezuela and Uruguay, sea level rise leads to the loss of land and the intrusion of salt-water into freshwater resources, impacting the ability of local communities to farm and to have sufficient freshwater for basic needs.

As little as one meter of sea-level rise could displace up to 8 million people in the Caribbean and Latin America. The impact of a one meter rise on Suriname, Guyana, French Guiana, and the Bahamas would be catastrophic, displacing as much as seven

percent of their national populations. The current atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases is sufficient to raise sea levels substantially more than one meter.

Changes to the land

Of course, the land is not resistant to the changes brought on by global warming.

Increased temperatures have affected subsistence agricultural practices throughout the Americas, many of which are directly tied to the survival of indigenous cultures. Indigenous communities in Ecuador and elsewhere are unable to farm in the manner and locations where they have for generations, and must choose between subsistence farming and maintaining their cultural ties to land they have lived on and cultivated for generations. These changes thus undermine the realization of their rights to culture, life, health and means of subsistence.

In North America, in the Great Lakes Region, climate change is disrupting traditional foods of wild rice and berries and early and rapid winter snowmelt is causing flooding and endangering peoples lives and property and the dramatic fluctuations in water levels and warmer lake waters is negatively affecting fish populations and allowing for severe infestations of disease spreading insects such as mosquitoes.

While Inuit are not an agricultural people, we depend on the bounty of the land for our survival. The traditional Inuit diet is being eroded as animals are less plentiful, less healthy and more difficult to harvest. Further, as the planet warms more persistent organic pollutants, of which Inuit are the net highest recipients on the planet, find their way to our homeland through the additional run-off from watersheds that empty in the Arctic. We can no longer rely on the traditional practice of food caching as food rots and insects invade caches. Often our access to our traditional hunting is cut-off as sea-ice is depleted and permafrost slumps or melts. These changes undermine the realization of our rights to culture, life, health and means of subsistence.

In the Arctic and elsewhere glaciers are melting at unprecedented rates turning streams into dangerous torrents in the summer. Glaciers are melting rapidly in all Andean countries, from Venezuela and Columbia to Chile. Many of the large cities in the Andes, including Quito, Ecuador and La Paz, Bolivia -- one of the poorest cities in Latin America -- are dependent on melting glacier ice for drinking water. The Altiplano of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia is home to large numbers of indigenous peoples who could be devastated by loss of water from glaciers. The rapid melting of these glaciers may cause flooding in the near term and the complete loss of fresh water in some communities in the longer term.

Health Impacts

Human health will be affected by changing disease vectors, extreme heat, and reduction of air-quality. Mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and possibly avian flu are spreading to higher elevations and newly warming regions. Ground-level ozone

and other air pollutants are increasing, afflicting the most vulnerable members of society: the elderly, young children, those that suffer from respiratory diseases -- such as asthma and emphysema -- and the poor, who lack access to air-conditioning and adequate health care. Areas already suffering poor air quality will be hardest hit.

Native housing is typically sensitive to prevailing climatic conditions. Air-conditioning is often not as available to address increasingly hot and dry conditions. Increased dust and wildfire smoke could well aggravate respiratory conditions. Health care options for indigenous communities are limited, and extreme weather events are likely to cause significant interruptions in access.

Culture

Culture is well beyond what many people understand it to be. Culture is not only folklore, legends and songs although those in and of themselves are important and powerful. For instance, the hunting culture that I come from is not only about the pursuit of animals and the technical aspect of a hunt. Hunting is, in reality, a powerful process where we prepare our young for the challenges and opportunities not only for survival on the land and ice but for life itself. The character skills learned on the hunt of patience, boldness, tenacity, focus, courage, sound judgement and wisdom are very transferable to the modern world that has come so quickly to the Arctic world. We are seeing this powerful training ground on the land and ice being destroyed before our very eyes. Not only are our livelihoods being threatened, we are losing lives as a result of these dramatic changes as the sea ice depletes and creates precarious situations for our hunters and their families.

It is within this context or similar ones that indigenous peoples are experiencing and will increasingly be subjected to devastating impacts of climate change. Global warming and climate change touches on almost every aspect of an indigenous person's life. When viewed in the context of the cumulative impacts of all the other cultural, economic and environmental degradation that indigenous peoples face, climate change threatens our very survival as peoples.

The non-physical impacts of climate change are sometimes more difficult to measure but, nonetheless, just as devastating. The impacts on the Inuit culture are already happening. One hunter, in Barrow, Alaska summed up the impact climate change is having this way:

"There's a lot of anxieties and angers that are being felt by some of the hunters that no longer can go and hunt. We see the change, but we can't stop it, we can't explain why it's changing it... our way of life is changing up here, our ocean is changing."

Conclusion

As I sit here today at this hearing of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, I fully understand the challenge of connecting of climate change and human rights. I appreciate fully the opportunity you have given me to speak to these urgent matters.

The individual rights of many are at stake. The collective rights of many peoples to their culture is also at stake. I encourage the Commission to continue its work in protecting human rights. In so doing, you will protect the sentinels of climate change -- the indigenous people. By protecting the rights of those living sustainably in the Amazon Basin or the rights of the Inuit hunter on the snow and ice, this commission will also be preserving the world's environmental early-warning system.

Thank you.

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