



INUIT CIRCUMPOLAR CONFERENCE _____

Testimony of Sheila Watt-Cloutier

Chair, Inuit Circumpolar Conference

**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and
Transportation**

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Good morning. My name is Sheila Watt-Cloutier. I am the elected Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference which represents internationally the 155,000 Inuit who live in Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Chukotka, Russia. I want to thank the Chair, Senator McCain, and all members of the committee for the invitation to speak with you.

I provided written testimony to this Committee last spring, and I am here today, having made the trip to Washington DC from my home in Iqaluit, Nunavut, the new territory in the Canadian Arctic, because I believe that we find ourselves at the very cusp of a defining moment in the history of the planet. The earth is melting and we must all come together to do the right thing to address Climate Change.

While global warming is affecting the entire planet, there is a scientific consensus that it is impacting the Arctic much faster. Our elders having been experiencing these changes since the mid-1970's. The Inuit connection to the environment remains strong, and many of us still depend upon the land and sea to sustain our families. Our elders and hunters have intimate knowledge of the land, sea ice, and have observed disturbing changes to the Arctic Climate and environment, and to the wildlife. These changes include:

1. melting permafrost causing beach slumping and increased erosion and damaging infrastructure;
2. longer sea-ice free seasons;
3. new species of birds and fish—barn owls, robins, pin-tailed ducks and salmon invading the region;
4. invasion of mosquitos and blackflies;

5. unpredictable sea-ice conditions;
6. glaciers melting, creating torrents in place of streams.

Our observations are confirmed by western science in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) which is to be presented to Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the eight Arctic states in November. Let me quote two key conclusions from the summary volume of the ACIA:

1. Marine species dependent on sea-ice including polar bears, ice living seals, walrus, and some marine birds are very likely to decline, with some facing extinction; and
2. For Inuit, warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy their hunting and food sharing culture as reduced sea-ice causes the

animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible or possibly go extinct.

I remind you that the ACIA is the most comprehensive regional Climate Change assessment ever undertaken. Over 300 Scientists and many indigenous peoples of the Arctic actively participated in this assessment. It states that our ancient connection to our hunting culture may well disappear, and within my grandson's lifetime.

My culture continues to see us through much tumultuous change. This change has resulted in confusion and despair--and all too often in early death for our young people from suicides and addiction.

Inuit face many challenges in finding our place in the new world order of globalization. A place that affords us self-respect and security, and in which we also contribute to the well-being of others. Notwithstanding our struggles and our limited numbers, we Inuit do have a significant role to play globally. Especially now with the threat of climate change to our entire way of life, we need to capture the world's attention and conscience.

Climate change is happening first and fastest in the Arctic. My homeland—the Arctic—is the health barometer for the planet.

By looking at what is already happening in remote Inuit villages in Alaska, such as Shismaref and Kivalina, you can understand the future dangers for more populated areas of the world such as Florida, Louisiana or California. Shismaref is literally being battered to the point of falling into the sea.

If we can reverse the emission of climate change inducing greenhouse gases in time to save the Arctic from the most devastating impact of global warming, then we can spare untold suffering for hundreds of millions of people around the globe. Protect the Arctic and we Save the Planet. Use us in the Arctic as your early warning system.

In the 1940s, you, the Americans, set up a defense early warning system throughout the North American Arctic called the DEW line—short for Defense Early Warning. It is now time for another DEW line—Defense Environmental Warning--against climate change.

Global warming connects us all. Use what is happening in the Arctic—the Inuit Story—as a vehicle to re-connect us all, so that we may understand that the planet and its people are one. The Inuit hunter who falls through the depleting and unpredictable sea-ice is connected to the cars we drive, the industries we rely upon, and the disposable world we have become.

I ask you to look seriously at the Arctic for solutions to the global debate on Climate Change. More specifically I ask you to look at the role your Department of State is playing in the Arctic Council's Arctic Climate Impact Assessment process. This assessment has been largely paid for by the United States, which has also provided an assessment secretariat based at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. Bob Corell of Harvard

University and the World Meteorological Institute has done a superb job of Chairing the exercise.

The assessment is path-breaking and it is crucial that the world know and understand what it says. Yet the Department of State is minimizing and undermining the effectiveness of this assessment process by refusing to allow policy recommendations to be published in a stand alone form just like the assessment itself. Yet, this is what ministers of foreign affairs directed when, in Barrow Alaska in October 2000, they approved the assessment. I wrote to the Arctic Council chair last week about this, and have copies of this correspondence for the committee.

In closing, I grew up in the small community of Kuujjuaq in the Ungava Bay in northern Quebec and traveled by dog team for the first ten years of my life. Americans played a very important role in the history of my community. During the second world war many Inuit were starving, caught in a transition between a nomadic way of life and moving into a settled community. At that time, when most Inuit thought they had been totally forgotten, the Americans arrived to build airstrips, bringing with them jobs for the men, and supplies and food for the community. They came through for us during those challenging times in a very big way. Until her death two years ago, my mother always stated: “we would not have pulled through if it were not for the arrival of the Americans”.

The Inuit once again need your help in these challenging times.

The ACIA projects the end of Inuit as a hunting culture that has sustained us for millennia. Come back to help us. I have already said that what is happening in the Arctic is a snapshot of the future of the planet, and that, indeed, we are all connected.

Climate change is a matter of the survival of humanity as whole.

It is the most pressing global issue we face today. Protect the Arctic and we will save the planet.