



## CONFERENCE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE ARCTIC REGION

### **Intervention by Ms. Darcie Matthiessen Climate Change Coordinator, Arctic Athabaskan Council**

Good afternoon. My name is Darcie Matthiessen. I work for the Arctic Athabaskan Council or “AAC”, which brings together Athabaskan peoples in northern Canada and Alaska. I live in Whitehorse, Yukon in northern Canada and I’m speaking on behalf of Cindy Dickson, AAC’s Executive Director, who sends her regrets for not being able to attend this important discussion. AAC was formed in 2000. Our purpose is to bring the voice of Athabaskans to international affairs. Like five other Arctic Indigenous Peoples organizations, AAC is a “permanent participant” in the eight-nation Arctic Council.

I want to begin by thanking Norway and the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic for bringing us together today. Norway has been a champion of environmental protection and international co-operation in the circumpolar world and the Arctic Parliamentarians never shy away from difficult issues.

The Arctic as the world’s barometer of environmental change seems to be a recent idea. UNEP’s Governing Council passed a resolution to this effect in February 2003, and the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), released late in 2004, has greatly popularized the concept.

We need to embed the Arctic barometer into international legal instruments—the framework within which we make decisions. Then, and perhaps only then, will we be placed to listen to what the barometer is telling us. Let me elaborate.

When the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was negotiated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, very few people used the words “Arctic” and “climate change” in the same breath. That is no longer the case. The plight of polar bears and barren-ground caribou have become symbols of the impacts of climate change worldwide.

The Arctic is disproportionately impacted by climate change—Dr. Bob Corell has told us how and why. What’s more, people live in the Arctic—they are on the front lines of climate change. To Athabaskans, Gwich’in, Aleut, Inuit, Sami and many other Indigenous peoples, the Arctic is “home” with all that this implies. In the Arctic, climate change is a human, cultural, and human rights issue. It is not just a matter of environmental protection.

The framework convention on climate change singles out certain portions of the globe - mountains, deserts, low-lying areas - that are thought to be particularly vulnerable but it does not even identify the Arctic. Like most international conventions, the UNFCCC is essentially a deal between North and South—between the developed and developing worlds. But the Arctic does not fit in this framework. Perhaps this is why it was ignored.



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The Arctic states—Canada, USA, Iceland, Finland, the Scandinavian countries and, increasingly, Russia are highly developed, yet many residents in the region suffer from levels of unemployment, poor health, and social pathologies—suicide, spousal assault, and drug and alcohol abuse—and levels of income closer to the third world than the first.

Not only does the UNFCCC fail to mention the Arctic, it fails to mention Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples in the Arctic are among the most vulnerable and highly impacted human populations worldwide. But to the UNFCCC, we are invisible. This is inequitable and it is unfair. Arctic Indigenous peoples know a lot about the environment—we have to—we rely upon it for our very food—and protecting food production is a core objective of the convention.

Drawing upon traditional knowledge as hunters, trappers and herders, Arctic Indigenous peoples have for more than 25 years reported changes to the natural environment as a result of global warming. Until recently few people listened. The ACIA is notable for its genuine effort to integrate traditional knowledge and science. This is why Arctic Indigenous peoples continue to speak about the ACIA and call upon other countries to emulate it and to heed its conclusions. The ACIA is the barometer in action. Unlike the Convention on Biological Diversity, the climate change convention does not have provisions endorsing and encouraging the use of traditional knowledge in decision-making. We think this is a major weakness of the convention.

I suspect that almost all of us in this room have attended Conferences of the Parties to the UNFCCC. So let me ask you a question: should not those who are most impacted by climate change and most vulnerable to its effects have their voices heard in the implementation of the convention? I think the answer is “yes.” Indigenous peoples around the world are becoming more insistent that they have a formal seat at COPs. Providing for this may require amendment to the convention, and I am interested in the views of the panel on this issue.

Some of you may think it is fanciful for Indigenous peoples to sit at the same table as governments in international meetings. Well, this already happens in the circumpolar world. The Arctic Council brings together Ministers of Foreign Affairs from eight countries. Six Arctic Indigenous Peoples organizations sit at the same table intervening under the same rules. We even have our own flags. It works pretty well. This is the sort of participatory model that should be emulated in COPs under UN conventions.

At the 2005 climate change COP in Montreal, Klaus Topfer, the Executive Director of UNEP, announced a programme to enable Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Arctic interests to work together on climate change. Klaus was a visionary. He understood the importance of the Arctic barometer and he appreciated the need for vulnerable regions to support each other internationally on adaptation, resilience and mitigation. I was in Belize last year working with representatives of SIDS to add flesh to the programme he announced. Norway has been highly instrumental in funding this programme called Many Strong Voices. The Arctic barometer is equipping AAC to work with people in other regions—we know we are all in the same boat.



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I want to finish with some words about Canada. Earlier I mentioned that to Athabaskans and other Arctic Indigenous peoples in Canada, climate change is an issue of rights. Let me explain. In the last 40 years, Canada has negotiated far-reaching, detailed, and comprehensive modern treaties with northern Indigenous peoples. The rights defined in these treaties are protected by our national constitution. To get these rights we had to cede to Canada our pre-existing but ill-defined aboriginal title to land and natural resources—not something we did lightly.

Modern treaties deal with land ownership, environmental management, wildlife harvesting and management, self-government and other issues. The impacts of climate change are eroding and undercutting the value and meaning of the rights, particularly rights to harvest wildlife, in our treaties. Defending our rights is the touchstone of Athabaskan organizations. This is why, to us, climate change is a matter of rights and we constantly urge the Government of Canada to press forward on mitigation and adaptation in order to protect our rights. As the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom said some years ago—climate change is a foreign policy issue.

In the early 1990s Canada had an enviable international reputation on environmental issues. Prime Minister Mulroney was the first, or one of the first, heads of government to sign the climate change and biodiversity conventions. Lamentably Canada is no longer an environmental leader and, in response to climate change, lags behind many others. Let me give you one recent example.

Following more than five years of effort by scores of government and university scientists with the involvement of Indigenous peoples, Canada completed this year its national climate change assessment—our equivalent of the ACIA. Rather than informing Canadians of the conclusions of the national assessment, it was posted, I might say slipped, onto the web site of a government department late on a Friday afternoon with not even an explanatory press release. Ministers did not speak to it or explain its conclusions.

From an Arctic and Indigenous peoples' perspective, this is an abrogation of responsibility and a dereliction of duty. This tawdry episode may prompt you to ask about the Government of Canada's commitment to address climate change. To some, climate change is one issue among many. In northern Canada and the circumpolar world, climate change is emerging as the key driver of social, economic, cultural and environmental change. In the North climate change is **the** issue.

Thank you very much.