

Keynote Address

Sheila Watt-Cloutier – Speaking Notes

Good evening. I am honoured to be with you tonight in Ottawa as you come together for the week for this remarkable conference. CARC's national planning workshops have had a profound influence on Northern planning and global agreements that impact the Arctic, and their last national workshop in 2002 was amongst the first high profile events to strongly raise the issue of climate change in the Arctic. I thank all of the indigenous representatives, government officials, researchers, attorneys, academics and resources managers present here this week for your work, and am happy to join you and share my thoughts on the road map ahead over the next 20 years as we look forward to 2030 in the North from so many angles: climate change, Arctic sovereignty, land claims agreements and science and research. I hope you will all approach the discussions this week as I try to do, by thinking about none of these issues individually, but by seeing how they all connect and impact upon one another. For a region at so many global and historical crossroads, we can only move ahead in the North successfully and strategically my thinking holistically about the many challenges facing our region and its peoples. I believe that what happens in the Arctic, and how we choose to proceed as a region and a nation, will colour Canada's approach to the rest of the world.

I will speak today often about the development of Inuit communities and the challenges that face our people, but, as all of you are aware, most of these challenges and rapid changes are shared by all of the indigenous peoples who have and will call the North their home over the coming decades and centuries.

Inuit are an extraordinarily adaptable people. We have weathered the storm of modernization remarkably well, moving from an almost entirely traditional way of life to adopt many Southern or "modern" innovations all within the past 50 years. Understandably, the speed in which these enormous changes happened knocked us off balance. A people who used to be the most amongst the most independent and self-sufficient lost much control over our lives as a result of tumultuous change and multiple historical traumas.

Many families from specific communities were forcibly relocated to new communities not of their choosing in the name of sovereignty. They were the first to assert sovereignty for Canada. Many of us, as children, were uprooted from our families and culture to be "educated" as boarding schools far away. Children and family members were sent away for medical reasons never to be heard from or seen again. Our dogs-- centrally important to our free movement and hunting—were slaughtered on the orders of southerners who did not understand this relationship. Sexual abuse occurred by those in authority positions. Political agitation by non-governmental groups who had never visited and completely misunderstood our communities caused the collapse of our sealskin economy. Together these traumatic events deeply wounded and dispirited many, translating into "collective pain" experienced by families and communities alike. Substance abuse, health problems, and, most distressing, the loss of so many of our people to suicide, have been amongst the saddest results.

But through all of this, we have had our land, our predictable environment and climate, and the wisdom of our Hunters and Elders gained over millennia and passed down from generation to generation to help us adapt. We remain, today, a hunting people of the land, ice, and snow. The



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process of the hunt teaches our young people to be patient, courageous, bold under pressure, and reflective. They learn to be focused and strategic and become natural conservationists. They learn to control their impulses, to withstand and cope with stressful situations, to develop sound judgment and ultimately wisdom. Our hunting culture is not only relevant for survival on the land – it teaches crucial life skills and wisdom that are transferable to the modern world. Many Inuit who have acquired and continue to practice these traditional skills are in large part “making it” in the modern world. One way of life does not have to be at the cost of another. In fact many Inuit who are connected to the values, principles, traditions, and wisdom of our traditional culture are better equipped and able to balance more effectively the two worlds.

As you all know, major international environmental challenges have profoundly impacted the Arctic and its continuing viability as a home for our indigenous cultures. We can successfully address these challenges only by drawing once more upon our traditional knowledge, culture and wisdom and by adding our Indigenous voice to both more effectively to our regional planning and the international debate.

Tran boundary contaminants released into the environment far to the south were carried north on the winds and ocean currents and accumulated in the bodies of our animals and the nursing milk of our mothers. Other chemicals from the south weakened the ozone layer around the world but with the greatest effects over the Polar Regions.

Lastly, rapid climate change has profoundly impacted our very right and ability to exist as an Indigenous people. We face dangerously unpredictable weather, extreme erosion along coastal communities and an invasion of new species of insects. In some areas of the circumpolar regions, during certain periods of the year, as travelling and hunting on the land become more dangerous, fewer continue the traditional subsistence way of life. This can mean less and less of our culture is passed down to our young people. As well, the decline in hunting increases the reliance on expensive, imported Southern goods and foods which are far less nutritious than eating what we hunt. Northern communities already have some of the highest growth rates of diabetes and other food-related illnesses in Canada, trends that will only continue as we shift away from a country food diet. Leaving behind our traditional food and adopting a less healthy southern lifestyle is another step toward the loss of our language, our arts, our culture, and our very way of life as an indigenous people.

As we look forward over the next 20 years, we all know that the projections of the continuing rapid sea ice decline will profoundly reshape our region, regardless of how we successfully we begin to address climate change now. Now nations look north to the newly available shipping routes and newly accessible oil, gas and mineral resources. Shipping through the Northwest Passage, and the increased risk of oil spills and contamination of our delicate ecosystem, would be clear evidence that climate change gone too far. And yet nations have now begun to posture and threaten each other, asserting claims to Arctic sovereignty and ownership of natural resources.

For all of these reasons, climate change threatens to erase the memory of who we are, where we have come from, and all that we wish to be. If we protect the environment and climate of the Arctic, keep our Inuit hunting culture alive, and stay connected to the rhythms and cycles of nature we will, as peoples and as Canadians, prevail and thrive.

When I speak of these many traumas and challenges, I do not suggest we that the answer through 2030 is for greater government intervention to support us as a wounded or dependent people. I say

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these things to help us all understand the how our governments, land claim organizations and civil society need to work together develop our potential for the good of our communities, our region and our world. A central consideration in this process, and a personal challenge for each of us, must be to avoid becoming silo'd into our individual area of work, research or personal focus, and to consider constantly how our own roles interconnect with and relate to the broader, holistic development of the North and its peoples.

Governments, in particular, have great difficulty in taking a holistic approach to development. The Deputy Minister of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development told the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples last year of the difficulty of getting federal agencies to do their bit to implement modern treaties—and they are the law of the land. People feel safe and secure in silos, but we need interdepartmental, “whole of government,” holistic approaches to northern development.

That holistic focus must begin with a rethinking of the Northern education system over the next 20 years, and with finding new ways to bridge traditional skills with the knowledge necessary to engage in the modern world. Already, many of our young people are now taking on both worlds very effectively, whether adapting the newest technologies to record and beam our thinking, activism, arts and culture around the world, or working together effectively in the hockey rink, all on the same day they go onto the land to hunt for subsistence food. Inuit have now worked to translate all of the Microsoft applications into Inuktitut, increasing our ability to connect remotely into our ever-more integrated global data and creative economy. As well, a new generation of Inuit lawyers, trained in the North, will provide the foundation for our own government and civil affairs.

We have also had many successes within our international organizations as we reached out to warn the world of the effects of environmental change and to spur peoples and nations to action. I was honoured to serve as the spokesperson for a coalition of Northern indigenous peoples during the global negotiations that resulted in the Stockholm Pops Convention, concluded in 2001. In that process, we shared our traditional knowledge gained from living on the land. Our coalition built partnerships with environmental groups and less likely allies including government agencies and industry and met with leaders of foreign governments and lobbied our own government. We persuaded countries to single out the Arctic and Indigenous communities in the Stockholm Convention—a UN convention that was negotiated, signed, ratified and implemented in record time. There are lessons from POPs experience—specifically how Inuit, First Nations and the federal negotiating team worked together—that could be applied to northern development.

As well, we have taken strong action on climate change, working to shift the world's thinking on this issue from one dominated by economics and technical science to human impacts, human rights and human development. In December 2005, we submitted our climate change-related petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. To prepare, we engaged a team that included our own counsel and advisors in the North and legal scholars from the U.S. and drew upon the compelling testimony and knowledge of Inuit in northern Canada and Alaska. We sought a declaration from the IACHR that the destruction of the Arctic environment and the culture and economy of Inuit as a result of virtually unrestricted emissions of greenhouse gases by the United States was violating our human rights guaranteed in the 1948 American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man. We stated that climate change was infringing our rights to subsistence, to health, to use of our traditional lands, and to our culture and environment.

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We launched this petition from a position of focus and strength. The petition aimed to educate and encourage the Government of the United States to join the community of nations in a global campaign to combat climate change. It was neither aggressive nor confrontational. We were reaching out, not striking out. In a very real sense our petition was a “gift” from Inuit hunters and elders to the world. It was an act of generosity from an ancient culture deeply tied to the natural environment and still in tune with its cycles and rhythms, to an urban, industrial, and “modern” culture that has largely lost its sense of place and position in the natural world.

I believe we helped to influence what had already started in the US: a real shift in the public debate on what to do about climate change. Our message has resonated with the rest of the World as well; the U.N. Human Rights Council has recognized climate change as a human rights issue for all indigenous peoples. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has responded to our call and now argues that we must use a human rights approach in responding to climate change that empowers individuals and communities and gives all those affected active participation in decision-making.

These successes remind us of the extraordinary potential of Northern peoples. I see several important roles for all of us in the next 20 years in securing the future of the Arctic and along a principled, holistic strategy. First, while we act locally in the Arctic, we must insist as well that our national government take bold, courageous, principled action to promote balanced, sustainable development in the Arctic. Our government must return to the forefront of the international negotiating table that it left years ago when we turned our back on the Kyoto Protocol even as we ratified this international agreement. We must retake the moral high ground that we have squandered if we are to convince other nations to reduce their own emissions. From an Arctic perspective, it is Canada’s foreign policy that is the key to preserving our Arctic future. This is why one product of the conference over the next few days could be to call on the Government of Canada to develop a formal and detailed Arctic Foreign Policy. Canada used to have such a policy. It was approved by the federal Cabinet in 2000 and lasted five years. Mary Simon was instrumental in getting it approved. Minister Cannon has given some useful speeches about the Arctic, but speeches are no substitute for policy.

We must produce in Copenhagen this December a strong successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. A new treaty offers perhaps the last best hope for us to come together as a true international community to reduce and eventually eliminate greenhouse gas emissions before the changes to the world’s climate spiral beyond our control. In this effort, northern indigenous peoples must be more than “window dressing” for interests that too often control our development decisions and negotiating positions. Rather, these decisions and positions should be infused with the wisdom of Northern cultures.

As well, the Government of Canada should publicly recognize that climate change and Arctic sovereignty are sides of the same coin. Canada maintains, with the full support of Inuit, that the Northwest Passage is “internal water” over which we have full jurisdiction and control, not an international strait as maintained by the US. Canada’s Arctic sovereignty is explicitly supported and referenced in the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. As Inuit know, the sea-ice, including the land-fast ice that covers much of the Passage, has offered our hunting culture a stable platform for travel for untold generations. That ice also offers the best defence against ships attempting the shorter route.

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Slowing down climate change would be the best long-term solution to enforcing Canada's arctic sovereignty. Instead of aggressively dealing with climate change and becoming an international leader in these global efforts, however, Canada has decided that the best way to defend its Arctic sovereignty is with the military through a new fleet of armed icebreakers - Canada, a peaceful nation, will now 'defend' the Arctic.

Canada should take another approach – a more principled and human-centred approach. To focus international attention and debate we should consider promoting new multilateral institutions, or greatly expanding the role of the Arctic Council.

My preference and, I imagine, that of most of us here today, is to avoid creating yet another region where relationships between nations are tense with strife and fear. The Arctic is one of the last peaceful and relatively pristine places in the world. We should realize that thriving, human communities will speak more strongly to our Arctic sovereignty and Canada's national values than a fleet of armed ice breakers or barracks full of soldiers.

I acknowledge and applaud our government's campaign abroad to show that Inuit have an ancient culture here in the Arctic. But this campaign must be matched by real action at home to empower us to become the best possible stewards of this land.

Northern indigenous peoples can play a key role in this process as the best and closest observers of the Northern environment, the global barometer of environmental health. As our world addresses global environmental challenges, the Arctic will indicate the success of our collective efforts. The United Nations Environment Programme last year passed a resolution that stresses the Arctic-as-global-barometer. This characterization could inform continued science in the Arctic following on from the International Polar Year.

Partnerships between government, labour, non-profit organizations, research institutions and indigenous and local communities across the north are key to this effort. An example of success in this approach with which most of you will be familiar is Arctic Net, a program that brings together traditional knowledge holders, researchers, and resource managers to study and monitor the impacts of climate change across our Northern coast. We need more such efforts, integrated across Canada, to monitor the changing environment, and hopefully one day, to serve as a measure of the success of the global efforts to reduce climate change.

I propose revitalizing an old idea with a 'made-in-Canada' notion that draws upon the co-operative management arrangements in our Northern land claims agreements. In recognition of the global environmental importance of the Arctic, and drawing upon the historical stewardship and traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples resident in the North, let us consider a new international project: an Arctic treaty that charges circumpolar Indigenous Peoples in co-operation with nation states with the stewardship of the region for the continued benefit of humankind. International co-management arrangements could integrate traditional and scientific knowledge to ensure sound and peaceful use and management of the Arctic's natural resources.

This model represents a significant change from our Canada's current "use-it or lose-it" philosophy of Arctic development. Instead, this approach embraces the vision of a sustainable developed Arctic economy together with a carefully managed Arctic ecosystem.

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Moreover, Northern leaders must help indigenous peoples and local communities display a model of sustainable development for the rest of the world to emulate by taking the best of traditional knowledge and blending it with the newest, cleanest industries and practices. Remote Northern communities are ripe for the use of renewable energies – particularly wind and solar – as transporting diesel fuels so far from their places of production is tremendously inefficient, costly, and environmentally damaging - not to mention the emissions they create as we burn them. By making these changes, we can display a model for transformation in energy, infrastructure, and resource extraction for the entire world.

As wise stewards of our land, I would urge my own people, and particularly our own businesses, communities, regional governments, and land claims organizations, to refuse the dangerous compromises between our principles and development that might diminish our own moral standing and claim to high ground as indigenous peoples. As we call on the world to change its ecologically degrading practices, we must not accept those practices at home no matter how desperate our need for jobs or economic development. We must not let the prospect of development in the Arctic diminish our ability and our region's ability to teach the "life centred sustainability" that Arctic Peoples have practiced for millennia. We must not permit the discussion of northern development to be conducted only in terms of sovereignty, resources, and economics. The focus must be on the human dimension, healthy human communities and protection of human cultural rights.

I want to stress here that I am not saying we should halt economic development in the Arctic or elsewhere in the world. Rather, we must retake control over development by insisting that every opportunity and program be systematically analyzed for its impact on the world; including the greenhouse gases it will emit, the unsustainable cycles it will feed, and the lasting impact it will have on our delicate landscape and the health of our people. We must recognize in our decisions the full costs and benefits of our actions, not only for ourselves, but also for future generations and for all of those to whom we are connected around the world.

As we do so, we will be able to ask those around the world—our fellow citizens of the globe—to make similar decisions. The balance then, is really in understanding our interconnection with all of humanity, and working to ensure all of humanity understands that connection with us.

We cannot and should not separate political and economic development in our communities from the education and health of individuals and families. Every level of the governance system here in the North must be mobilized to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and wisdom is the foundation of sustainable human development. I believe we can return to this sustainable cultural system again, but we must do so by stepping away from cycles of dependency on our government. While government at all levels must do more to invest in health care infrastructure and capacity in the Arctic, such efforts will never be fully realized until we are again truly self-sufficient educationally and economically.

This is Canada's moment to lead by example—to take a principled stance on the national and global stage. Let be courageous and wise as we lead our nation in this great challenge. Let us make the peaceful, cooperative, sustainable management of the Arctic a model for the globe. Let us create a shining example at the top of the world of how communities, aided by a principled support from government and civil society, can develop consciously with their environment and come to a shared vision of sustainability for the Arctic and the planet.

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I hope that these considerations will help you each frame your own roles in developing and protecting our Northern ecosystems and communities over the next 20 years. I urge you each to take courageous, principled leadership to move our Arctic, our nation, and our world forward.

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