

**The Inuit of the Circumpolar Region in a Challenging World**

**Address by**

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Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen;

What a delight to be here with you, in your beautiful city, Oslo, to celebrate International Heyerdahl Day.

As you have just heard from the kind introduction, I am the national leader for Inuit in Canada and President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, or ITK, the national voice of the Inuit of Canada.

I was born in a small community on the eastern shore of Ungava Bay called *Kangiqsualujjuaq*. This is in Nunavik which is the northern part of the province of Quebec, in Canada.

In English, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami means “Inuit are united in Canada.” We live in four Arctic regions: Nunavut, the newest Territory in Canada governed by Canada’s only Inuit public Government; Nunavik, located in the northern region of the Province of Quebec; Nunatsiavut (formally northern Labrador and now the newest region setting up its own government); and the Inuvialuit Region in the Western Arctic of the Northwest Territories.

The mandate of ITK is to address issues of vital importance at the national level for the preservation and promotion of Inuit identity, culture and way of life in Canada.

I have had many years of circumpolar experience, first as president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, an organization that represents Inuit across the circumpolar region, and second as Canada's ambassador for circumpolar affairs and senior official to the Arctic Council. As you heard earlier I also served as Canada's Ambassador to Denmark.

I have been asked to speak to you today about critical issues facing indigenous peoples in the world. I hope you will appreciate that both from a cultural and geopolitical perspective there are many such pressing issues.

I have chosen, therefore, to introduce a theme for my presentation which on one hand pays homage to the intellectual curiosity which drove Thor Heyerdahl to continually 'push the edges' of conventional thinking, and on the other provides a framework for trying to explain and understand the complex challenges facing indigenous peoples in a rapidly changing world.

This theme is: Currents of Change

Thor Heyerdahl believed in the power of multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural approaches to learning and problem solving. Perhaps at no other time in our history has there been a more urgent need to apply those principles.

His voyages across the Pacific on the Kon Tiki and across the Atlantic on the Ra voyages were not only journeys of exceptional imagination, they are constructive for us even today as we struggle with the currents of change embracing our planet, and the Arctic in particular.

Heyerdahl used prevailing ocean currents to challenge conventional thinking about the movement of early civilizations across the globe.

In his many extraordinary journeys he developed a respect for local knowledge and different ways of seeing the world. He appreciated how these knowledge systems could contribute to a better understanding of biological and social processes.

In the present day, the prevailing currents in our world oceans appear to be changing. The thermohaline circulation system in the North Atlantic, for example, is a subject of serious concern to climate change scientists who believe disruptions to these currents could carry important implications for global systems.

So, where are the currents of change carrying us in the Arctic and how are indigenous peoples responding?

In recent years the circumpolar region has attracted much attention – however not always for positive reasons. I would like to explore some of these with you, the degree to which Indigenous peoples are impacted, and how they are responding and adapting.

I want to address today what I consider to be three of the main issues affecting the indigenous peoples of the circumpolar North today.

- The first is climate change and its affects on the Arctic and its peoples.
  
- The second is the transition of the Arctic from a remote, isolated part of the planet to a region of increasing global importance for environmental, economic and geopolitical reasons.

Both of these issues are driven, for the most part, by forces external to the Arctic.

- The third key issue, I believe, is driven from within indigenous communities. It is the perennial struggle to adapt to socio-economic change, participate in decisions that affect their communities and create opportunities which allow them to continue to live and prosper in the territories that they have inhabited for thousands of years.

Let me start with Climate Change

It is now well documented that the Arctic is at the epicenter of our looming global climate crisis. My friend and colleague, Dr. Robert Correl addressed you last year on this very issue. The situation has worsened since.

Climate change has been proven beyond any rational doubt. Temperatures in the Arctic are increasing at least twice as fast as elsewhere on the planet. The ice cap and permafrost are melting.

The consequences of this melting will be dramatic throughout the world. Rising sea levels will ignore political boundaries and affect all low lying areas without discrimination. The people and governments of the Florida Keys and Bangladesh will each have to face the catastrophic events that rising sea levels will unleash.

Inuit are responding domestically and internationally.

In the context of climate change, the radical shifts needed in aggregate global carbon emissions will be unachievable in the absence of close attention to the basic needs of all human beings for adequate education, shelter, food and work.

While the Inuit Circumpolar Council is active on the international front, we at ITK are working back home in Canada to drive home the importance of involving Inuit in developing mitigation and adaptation strategies.

We have lobbied the Canadian Government to take more profound and accelerated action to not only provide leadership on reduction of greenhouse gases but perhaps as importantly to help Arctic communities adapt to the damage already inflicted on our homelands and to prepare for the inevitable accelerated changes to the environment in which we live.

We are far better equipped now than in the past, to participate forcefully and constructively in national, regional and global political and economic decision-making. Over the past ten years, many positive changes have occurred in both the policy and legal relationships between Canadian Arctic Indigenous peoples and governments. Our collective responsibility is to continue building on these accomplishments.

In the Canadian Arctic, the evidence is clear that existing levels of exposure and sensitivity to climate related changes, as well as our present limitations in adaptive capacity make the northern environment and its peoples particularly vulnerable to impacts.

For example

- Climate induced changes in permafrost, sea ice and snow cover have huge implications for infrastructure maintenance and design.
- There are already shifts in species availability, accessibility and quality with consequences for biodiversity and human populations that rely on these resources.

- Increased navigability of Arctic seas will bring both opportunities for growth in a range of economic sectors and challenges associated with culture, security, sovereignty and the environment.
- Maintaining and protecting the way of life for indigenous peoples in the Arctic is also becoming more difficult in a changing climate.

As a result of what humans have already done to alter the composition of the atmosphere, and some countries lack of will to act, there are some climate change impacts that are now inevitable well into the future.

It is for this reason that many of the world's leading scientists and policymakers believe that adaptation has become more than just a policy option – it has become a policy imperative.

Globalization...

My remarks on climate change in the Arctic naturally leads me into a discussion of the new era of an accessible Arctic, globalization, and how this 'world view' is impacting Inuit and other Arctic people.

A decade ago, when we talked about globalization, in the first instance we talked about economic processes, especially liberalization of trade and capital flows and advances in technology.

Now we know, through experience, that globalisation is also very much about political, social, environmental and cultural processes.

In northern Canada we are now confronting many new challenges. From a geo-political perspective, we are now facing assertions by other countries for sovereignty in our Arctic region. The pursuit of European and North American continental energy strategies for more secure sources of hydrocarbons has led to massive investments in exploration and development.

Potential Arctic energy resources have attracted world-wide attention recently and this is somewhat ironic. On the one hand the burning of fossil fuels has accelerated climate change and undermined the Arctic environment. On the other hand, access to affordable energy resources is critically important to sustain human life in the Arctic. The development of energy resources holds some promise for local economies in the Arctic.

On the energy front, the challenge will be finding a balance between the need for economic development and accounting for the effect that increased energy production may have on the environment, particularly climate change.

One needs only to look at the huge economic and environmental stakes at play in the MacKenzie Valley region of Canada's western Arctic, and the oil sands region in northern Alberta to get a sense of the magnitude of these projects.

The proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline is a \$15-billion project funded by the world's major petroleum producers and is now moving through the Canadian regulatory process. Even with the declining price of crude oil today, we have no doubt that this pipeline will be crucial to moving natural gas from the Arctic to southern markets.

Global demands for other resources are also creating an unprecedented advance into northern regions. Huge deposits of high grade iron ore and nickel, once unprofitable because of geography, are now being extracted and transported by massive tankers through our waterways. Diamonds are now a major driver of the economy in Canada's Western Arctic. Uranium is the next frontier, with frenzied exploration in the eastern Arctic regions.

Northern Europe is equally challenged. Dependence on imported oil, natural gas and electricity continues to grow as do the effects of global warming. Cooperative bodies such as the Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council are tackling these issues through joint working groups on energy and the environment. As you may know, Indigenous peoples have some representation and voice in these various councils.

Modern technology has totally transformed communications in the circumpolar region in the past decade. It offers new ways to overcome long distances. Information and communication technology can provide innovative forms and forums for discussion and decision-making.

The Internet offers us the opportunity to engage at an inter-regional and international level. Our young people, in particular, have quickly become very adept at computer technology.

However, at the same time, these advances in technology have created a widening gap between young and old. It threatens our languages and undermines respect for our Indigenous knowledge systems. Our youth are losing touch with their Indigenous roots.

In many parts of the circumpolar world there is another looming crisis – the youth crisis. Our children are caught in conflicting worlds, often not properly equipped to succeed in either. In many regions, the demographics are startling – with 50% or more of the population under the age of 25. The youngest demographic among any group in Canada is the Inuit.

This has enormous implications for the future of our Inuit children. Not only must they straddle both worlds - their traditional world and culture, and the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - but we as Inuit leaders must find a way to ensure they can move into the future.

They should not only succeed in the new economies and societies that we today embrace, but must lead the way to preserve and protect our Arctic environment and societies.

Given these imperatives we have to think creatively to shift the dialogue and experiment with new approaches for drawing attention to serious problems and, hopefully, contributing to solutions. I might add I think Thor Heyerdahl did exactly the same thing during his scientific career, shifting the dialogue and contributing to innovative solutions.

One of my important and most demanding roles as an Inuit leader has always been to ensure that Inuit are directly involved in these discussions and that our knowledge systems and world views are part of the dialogue. It has not always been easy.

Indigenous knowledge can be said to contrast with western science or more "international" knowledge systems which purport to transcend cultural and national boundaries. Indigenous peoples, and I believe non-Indigenous peoples, increasingly understand the fact that our indigenous knowledge systems are based on our culture.

Our knowledge systems are inextricably linked to family and community-based life experiences and the languages which permit an interpretation and analysis of local phenomena.

When these local systems and cultures are shaken - and shaken they have been - there can be a consequential rapid loss of knowledge. If active use of the land and resources disappears over time so will the information that is required to support an understanding of the natural environment and the skills required to use living resources.

As use and related information disappears so will the synthesis of this information into knowledge systems required for decision-making disappear.

Indigenous knowledge not only has value for the cultures within which it has evolved, but it can also contribute to an improved understanding of environmental and ecological processes.

Indigenous knowledge reflects an elaborate interrelationship between information and culture and as such can vary in detail and complexity from group to group and region to region. Working with indigenous knowledge is a commitment to a process which respects it as a knowledge system and cannot be separated from the cultural context within which it operates.

As a knowledge system, indigenous knowledge is vital, dynamic and evolving. There is no doubt, however, that many of the pressures and changes of the past several decades have served to diminish its importance and erode peoples' confidence in its relevancy. This is particularly true among our youth.

The effects of globalization and climate change require the development of new approaches to turn knowledge into actions that will increase human well-being, and enhance the sustainability of Indigenous communities and lifestyles.

Meeting the economic needs of Indigenous peoples while respecting sustainability principles, including environmental protection, human health, and respect for cultural diversity will continue to challenge us all.

Now I will move on to the internal challenges we face adapting to external drivers

My travels to other parts of the world, and my work promoting Indigenous rights in various international processes, has shown me the determination and capacity of Indigenous Peoples to hope and work for a better future. Many do so facing often life-threatening obstacles and hardships.

For many indigenous peoples in the world, very basic human rights and a legal basis for resolving conflicts are simply not available to them. Some survive horrendous physical, social and political circumstances.

Viewed from the perspective of many other groups in the world, indigenous peoples in northern Canada are in an enviable position.

There are approximately 55,000 Inuit living in Canada, spread from Labrador in the east, to the Northwest Territories in the west. We live in the largest geographic region covering one third of Canada's land mass, with 50% of Canada's shore line. Inuit are the majority of the permanent population in most Arctic communities.

The Arctic is our homeland. We have occupied this vast territory for thousands of years. We have developed a culture and language rooted in our physical surroundings – our land, seas, and skies, and the wildlife that they support. The Arctic defines who we are. In turn, our presence and way of life help define the Arctic.

There are 53 Inuit communities ranging from populations of more than a 1,000 to as small as 200.

With few exceptions, there are no road connections to the rest of Canada. Transportation is by air and sea. The cost of living in the Canadian Arctic relative to southern Canada is staggering. A litre of milk would cost about five times that of any grocery store in the South.

I can fly from Ottawa to Hong Kong twice for the same price that it costs to fly from Ottawa to the Arctic.

Inuit in the Canadian Arctic face significant difficulties in their daily lives. Their health and socio-economic status is significantly below that of mainstream Canada. The average lifespan of an Inuk living in the Arctic is the same as that of mainstream Canadians in 1947.

We struggle every day to ensure our children stay in school and we struggle to preserve our Inuit language. These are issues that occupy much of my leadership time.

That said there have been dramatic improvements for Indigenous peoples in Canada over the past 25 years, particularly regarding Land Claims Agreements, and the extent to which we govern ourselves. Armed with this success and experience, Canada's Indigenous Peoples have an important role to play in promoting the rights of Indigenous Peoples around the world.

Given our relative position in the world of Indigenous affairs, I would argue we have a responsibility to do so.

Good governance has become a major theme of international relations in the post Cold-War period. This reflects the recognition that, in the face of globalization, there is a pressing need to create the means to control events rather than be controlled by them, and to direct energies efficiently to achieve shared goals.

A respect for democracy provides a sound basis for cooperation to ensure that all northerners enjoy an assured right to the benefits of democracy. This will provide a basis for supporting the efforts of all northern Indigenous peoples to secure their rights.

As mentioned, all our Inuit regions have achieved comprehensive land claims agreements. These are Constitutionally protected treaties between Inuit and the Government of Canada.

Land claim agreements provide us with a set of tools for shaping our lives, and developing our lands and resources. Collectively, Inuit own large parcels of land outright, some with full subsurface rights, and share in the management and benefits from natural resource development.

We have access to investment capital and are using it. We own air and marine transport companies, fishing companies, service industries for oil and gas development, and are joint venturing in many business enterprises.

These land claims agreements – modern treaties - have opened a new chapter in northern development. They govern how development will take place and define a role for us in that development.

They provide a more predictable and inclusive business environment. There is a great desire in the Arctic to achieve economic self sufficiency in ways that build our cultural values into the new economy.

## Conclusions

This week I had an opportunity to visit your museum here in Oslo that displays so graphically and successfully the philosophy and achievements of Thor Heyerdahl. I believe the parallels between his philosophy and thinking and that of many Indigenous leaders in the circumpolar world - including myself - are quite striking.

He believed in disproving myths and establishing the truth through personal observation and testing the boundaries.

We Canadian Inuit leaders have been and continue to disprove the myth once prevalent in Canadian society that we would continue to live on the margins of Canadian society in the distant reaches of the Arctic. We now have taken a centre stage place in the vibrant life of Canada's Arctic, and we have achieved a remarkable degree of self-determination.

We are the glue that holds the Arctic together. We are the people who populate the farthest reaches of the Arctic and we are central to Canadian Government positions on Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

We have observed over the most recent decades that to prosper as a people and society we must build and protect our own culturally relevant socio-economic institutions and we must nurture them through our own governance systems. We have done it in the past and are continuing to do precisely that.

We have been on a voyage similar to Thor Heyerdahl's and we have proven that we together with our non-indigenous partners of many backgrounds and cultures can work together and prosper together for the good of all mankind.

Tusen takk / thank you