

Sustainable Development Law & Policy

Volume 8


Issue 3 Spring 2008: *Environmental Change in Polar Regions*

Article 11

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James D. Ford

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Recommended Citation

Ford, James D. "Supporting Adaptation: A Priority for Action on Climate Change for Canadian Inuit." *Sustainable Development Law and Policy*, Spring 2008, 25-29, 64.

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SUPPORTING ADAPTATION:

A PRIORITY FOR ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE FOR CANADIAN INUIT

by Dr. James D. Ford*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is having profound impacts in the Canadian Arctic. Temperatures are increasing at twice the global average, recent years have witnessed a dramatic reduction in summer sea ice cover, and extreme weather conditions appear to be increasing in both magnitude and frequency.¹ Widely believed to be at least partially attributed to human emissions of greenhouse gases, climate change is having dramatic implications for Canada's Inuit population who are dependant on the biophysical environment and the resources it provides.² With future climate change projected to be greatest in the Arctic,³ communities, governments, and Inuit organizations have expressed concern. Inuit political leaders have even argued that climate change is a fundamental human rights issue, violating the ability of Inuit to practice and enjoy the benefits of their culture.⁴ Clearly, action on climate change is urgent for Arctic regions; failure to act could threaten the very existence of the Inuit way of life.

This Article reviews the evolution of climate change policy in an international context in general and Canada in particular. The review provides a basis for asking the question: what constitutes appropriate action on climate change for Inuit in the Canadian Arctic? The central argument is that while reducing greenhouse gas emissions is an important goal globally, adaptation to reduce vulnerability to climate change should be a priority for Inuit regions. The paper finishes by identifying key action areas at a Canadian and international level to help Inuit adapt. While this Article focuses specifically on the Canadian Inuit experience, the arguments developed are generally applicable for Inuit across the circumpolar north.

CANADA'S INUIT POPULATION

Inuit are indigenous peoples inhabiting Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia), numbering approximately 155,000 people. The 2001 Canadian census found 45,070 people who define themselves as being Inuit; 22,560 of whom live in Canada's newest territory of Nunavut—see the table and figure below. The other 22,510 live in three Inuit settlement regions: the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories, Nunavik in the province of Quebec, and Nunatsiavut in the province of Newfoundland & Labrador.⁵ Together, Inuit administered regions cover thirty percent of the Canadian landmass, and have a climate characterized by very cold, long winters, and short, cool summers.⁶ Sea ice is an integral part of Inuit life, providing a transportation

link between communities and a hunting platform for over seven months of the year in most areas.



FIGURE 1: INUIT REGIONS OF CANADA WITH LOCATIONS OF INUIT COMMUNITIES⁷

The majority of Inuit in the Canadian north live in small, remote coastal communities only accessible by air or winter ice roads, with economies composed of waged employment and subsistence hunting.⁸ Many Inuit retain a close relationship with the environment and a strong knowledge base of their regional surroundings, with traditional foods derived from hunting having social and cultural importance.⁹ Hunting also continues to supply the principal elements of the Inuit diet. In recent surveys in Nunavut, for instance, forty-one percent of Inuit respondents identified that more than half of the meat and fish they consumed was locally harvested.¹⁰ Other studies have demonstrated that the economic value of the traditional food sector is at least equal to the cost of food imports from Southern Canada.¹¹

* Dr. James D. Ford specializes in climate change vulnerability and adaptation research in Arctic regions. A postdoctoral fellow at McGill University, he has collaborated with Inuit communities on climate change projects, advised northern governments on climate change policy development, and participated in media debates surrounding climate change. A contributing author to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report, he was recently awarded a Young Innovator Award by the Government of Canada for his contributions to the field. He can be reached at james.ford@mcgill.ca.

The author would like to thank Inuit of Canada for their continuing support in his research activities. This article benefited from contributions of Christina Goldhar, and Figure 1 was kindly provided by Meghan McKenna of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. Funding for the research was provided by ArcticNet, SSHRC, and the International Polar Year CAVIAR project.

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