



## 16

# “My Father Was Told to Talk to the Environment First Before Anything Else”

## *Arctic Environmental Education in the Language of the Land*

Derek Rasmussen and Tommy Akulukjuk

*Derek Rasmussen and Tommy Akulukjuk are friends. Tommy was born in Iqaluit Nunavut, and grew up in Pangnirtung, including many seasons spent out on the land with his family. After 2 years of college and 2 years working as an environmental researcher in “the South” (Ottawa), he returned North to “Pang” to hunt with his father. At the time of editing, Tommy was advising the territorial government on the new Inuit Cultural School for Nunavut. Derek lived in Iqaluit, Nunavut, from 1991 to 2001, and he worked as a policy advisor to Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), the representative body for the Inuit of Nunavut Territory in Canada. Derek advised NTI on economic and social policies, including education policy. The following exchange between Tommy and Derek is compiled from their conversations, e-mails and telephone calls over the past 2 years.*

Hi Tommy:

It seems to me that if we’re going to talk about environmental education then we ought to be asking what language the environment speaks (and whether students, teachers, researchers, and scientists speak the environment’s language).

In Nunavut, the land speaks Inuktitut.

What I mean is that the land (and sea) evolved a language to communicate with (and *through*) human beings, namely an indigenous language that naturally “grew” in that area over thousands of years of interaction between the elements and the human and plant and animal beings. Now, this might sound like an obvious point for Inuit to discuss, but it isn’t that obvious to most folks like me who grew up in the South without any intimate or necessary interaction with the nonhuman environment. Instead, we southerners usually take for granted a view of language as a dislocated phenomenon that develops in an isolated way inside the brains of human beings without any necessary influence from their environment.

What environmental vocabulary and grammar arose from the indigenous interaction with the land? I recall that when I first started working with NTI, the then-executive director, Hagar





Idlout-Sudlovenick told me of an Inuktitut program with the elders of her hometown, Pond Inlet. The twist in this program was that the elders would only teach Inuktitut out on the land—not in a classroom. The elders from Pond said that too many of the Inuktitut terms were disappearing, and that the only way to resuscitate the appropriate vocabulary was out on the land where the objects to be named could be found.<sup>1</sup>

The elders know the wisdom encoded in the environment; they speak the language that evolved there. They know that “nature [is] the very source of voices” (Kane, 1998, p. 190). Shouldn’t environmental studies at universities be teaching the languages and epistemologies of the people indigenous to the particular biocultural region under study? In fact, doesn’t it seem odd that this isn’t already an automatic practice in environmental education? Doesn’t it seem odd that a biologist would want to study “arctic char reproductive stages” and not first make an effort to learn the words and stories relating 4,000 years of teaching about char encoded in the language and knowledge systems of Inuit? Why is it an anathema to suggest that the “hard” sciences (biology, geology, chemistry, and environmental studies) should learn the language of the eco-culture system? The hard sciences seem to insist on the universal ability of English, French, Spanish, German, and Mandarin to provide complete explanatory frameworks for every event and context in the Arctic, but indigenous languages that evolve in particular biocultural regions have nuances and explanatory power superseding the globalizing languages.

Studying the languages and epistemologies of the indigenous people is deeply sensible, because “languages encode a culture’s way of understanding relationships and attributes of the participants in both the human and natural communities, [therefore] maintaining the diversity of languages is essential to preserving the renewable characteristics of local ecosystems” (Bowers, 2005, p. 7). For example, linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas said that in Finland, “fish biologists have just ‘discovered’ that salmon can use even extremely small rivulets leading to the river Teno as spawning grounds—earlier this was thought impossible.” Pekka Aikio, the president of the Saami Parliament in Finland, told her that “the Saami have always known this—the traditional Saami names of several of those rivulets include a Saami word which means ‘salmon spawning-bed.’ This is ecological knowledge inscribed in indigenous languages” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002, p. 13). Moving from the Arctic to the tropics, the professor warns that “nuances in the knowledge about medicinal plants and their use disappear when indigenous youth in Mexico become bilingual without teaching in and through the medium of their *own* languages—the knowledge is not transferred to Spanish, which does not have the vocabulary for these nuances” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 13; also Maffi, 2001).

According to the Tucson Biodiversity Institute, “about 50% of all humans speak and think in one of ten globally dominant languages. That means 0.2% of languages hold sway over 50% of the human species and likely upwards of 85% of the globe’s land surface” (Suckling, 2000, p.19). The institute’s director, Kieran Suckling (2000), pointed out that “these are the language cultures primarily responsible for the global extinction crisis and the eradication/assimilation/marginalization of indigenous cultures. One percent of the human race, meanwhile, speaks 50–60% of all human languages. This one percent and all its wealth of knowledge is being driven to extinction at an unprecedented rate” (p. 19). Watching indigenous languages disappear is like watching someone set fire to half the world’s libraries. Environmentalists should be on the front lines, protecting and resuscitating the languages that are deeply woven into the land.

This should hold special importance for environmental educators: for biodiversity and linguistic diversity are intertwined. “If you’ve got a society that has lived in the same place for hundreds or thousands of years, they’ll be changing the species composition by selective hunting and use of plants,” said conservationist David Harmon from Terralingua.



Because humans modify their environment as they adapt to it and *then transmit their knowledge through language, ecosystems and languages co-evolve*. In turn . . . when indigenous languages die out, there’s a self-reinforcing downward cycle: The language is not spoken, and people are not as intimately involved with the local biodiversity. So they are not going to take care of it and value it the way they did, and it will be more vulnerable to development. (Harmon, 2004, p. 43. See also Harmon, 2002; Muhlhausler, 1996)

Indigenous “languages represent vast reservoirs of intellectual knowledge stretching back thousands of years,” said B.C. Shuswap chief Ron Ignace, adding that “the English language is an infant relative to our languages. In my view, the loss of these languages in our country will rival the great ecological disasters of the world, such as the destruction of the rainforest. It has that potential” (Philip, 2000, p. 1). Chet Bowers, an education professor from Oregon, said that if we are going to find solutions to the climate change crisis we’ll need environmental education that “understands the vital connections between linguistic diversity and biodiversity” (Bowers, 2005, p. 5). This is what Bowers called “ecojustice education” because it “highlights the connections between viable interdependent ecosystems and viable interdependent communities—and that our future depends on maintaining the widest possible diversity in cultural approaches to sustainable living” (Bowers, 2005, p. 148).

The southern scientific obsession with protecting and studying the nonhuman animals and environment need not deafen us to the language of the land—spoken through the culture and language of the humans who have lived there for thousands of years. Culture is the canvas, language is the paintbrush; together they display the ecological intelligence of a place.

—Take care, Derek

*Hey my white Bro,*

*I feel like a real Eskimo this spring, finally with a great tan with a raccoon face. Finally this year, the name of my tan is not a farmer’s tan—wooo hoo! I’m having a great spring.*

*Anyhow, I think it’s a great idea that we talk about the lack of Inuktitut in any science or biology courses. These subjects talk the most about the environment around us and how it supposedly works. These subjects shape the attitudes we have towards the place we live in.*

*The Qallunaat (European-Canadians) have a strange concept of their environment. For instance, the term “wildlife” is used to separate themselves from their home and separate their community from the natural environment. They do not realize that they’re part of the wildlife; They were wild once and will be part of the wild forever, but they like to exclude themselves from anything the natural world provides. Inuit do not have such a word in their language, we are part of nature and cannot to be excluded from it. (The word “Inuit” itself means “living beings”; it does not connote any sense of superiority.)*

*Sometimes you can read southerners describe the Arctic regions as “daunting” and they write about how Inuit survived in the “inhospitable” Canadian north. I don’t think there is anything daunting about where I’m from. I think this paints a bleak picture of Inuit, as if we are always struggling to survive. I have never heard my father talk about “survival” and he’s practically a full-time hunter; he doesn’t think of himself as “surviving” when he is out hunting, it’s just what he does. Actually it’s not nature, but the dominant southern culture that threatens our survival as Inuit, with its insistence that education exclude the use of Inuktitut in the so-called “hard sciences,” whether or not Inuktitut offers valuable information. What threatens our survival is the manner in which English is treated as the only legitimate way of describing the works of nature.*

*The English language is a language of money and economics. Most indigenous languages are languages of interacting with their environment. When I went home to Pangnirtung this spring,*

*I realized Inuktitut, the language I hadn't used for a while, was so sophisticated in describing its surroundings. I forgot many of those words. I had to keep asking my father what he really meant when he would explain the whereabouts of an animal. Even the names of different animal parts I forgot (that was embarrassing). Inuktitut, when spoken, is so descriptive. . . . Students should learn as much of the material that is being taught to them through actual experiences and actions, rather than making through theory. When I was hunting this spring, I felt something that I had been missing—to be part of the environment and the food chain again, to feel that human beings are not superior in this world but are just part of it like any other being.*

*Going back to Pangnirtung, I had seen the cycles of nature again and how good it felt. Inuit do not have four seasons; we have many seasons. To many southerners, it may seem that there are just two seasons in the arctic: winter and a brief summer. But in Inuktitut there are many seasons: winter, before spring, spring, summer before fall, fall, before winter, and winter again. I am sure that an elder could explain it better, but that is what I learnt when I was growing up. I remember when one of our schoolteachers asked us what was our favourite season. What is an English word for “just before the actual summer”? These are the words you learn when you are immersed in the language of the environment; these are the words that help you appreciate nature and wildlife.*

*Take care,  
your brown brother.*

*Hi Derek,*

*While I was reading the e-mail, I thought of how the names of animals, especially birds, are after the sounds they make, not after some guy who wrote about them in a book or after the area where they live. Take, for example, the Canada Goose: it is called nirlq. Next time you see one, listen carefully to the sounds it makes, and you'll notice that it sounds like it is saying “nee-r-leek.” You see, when Inuktitut is spoken, the emphasis seems to be more on the feeling of the senses, like what the person felt when he went to a place, or how it looked when he went through there or how it looked when he shot the animal. Like Ross said, native languages are more energy-based. And I have to say too that when my father or other hunters describe an experience, they never make it feel like it only happened to them, even if they have never seen anyone do the same thing; they always leave a room for someone else and the possibility that someone else can do the same thing.*

*I think one of the huge differences between young Inuit and older Inuit now is that we, the younger generation, have been taught that Inuktitut needs rigid guidelines or things to follow. We have become more dependent on books, and, how to say, Inuktitut is put into books—taking away the real essence of the language. Imagine: my father learning everything through listening and experiences of his language, never being told that the language is supposed to be this way. And here I am, just one generation away, having been taught highly through books and instruction about the workings of my language. Through southern eyes, I am supposed to be better educated and have more knowledge because I was taught through something they consider solid, but if an Inuk compares my language with my father I am at an infant level. School (as it seems) taking away kids into schools for most of the day from their parents, to teach Inuit Inuktitut has more eroded the actual language and made it into phrases and small talks rather than being the teacher of senses and experiences like the real language is. (This is what the elders in Pond Inlet were realizing: losing the real essence of the language.) Inuktitut, to me, is to feel the working of the nature; through Inuktitut I can feel the weather, the warm sun, and describe it that way.*

*When I had to translate the TV weather forecast for my father, it really made me feel that I was taking away the feeling of the weather, instead putting it into numbers (“it's going to be this warm . . . its going to have this much wind,” and they all associate with numbers). All these questions about the weather and nature and the world are supposed to be answered by TV, by an electronic item, which gives us an impersonal and such a fake feeling for the world. And the weather forecasters*



*only welcome the weather when it is going to be sunny and warm, and they are usually negative about it when that doesn't happen. Back home most of these questions are answered differently. I was living in "the south" for a few years; but I come from a small, scenic community of 1,200 in Nunavut: Pangnirtung. I'm proud to say that I grew up in the great outdoors. Since birth, I have been interacting with the environment; my father's generation even more so. My father grew up in an isolated camp with no playgrounds, no television, no VCR, no DVDs, and no negative discussions about his surroundings. His playground was the environment around him; his television, VCR, and DVDs were his family and the activities they did. He is aware of his surroundings; with his keen ability to see the intricateness of the weather; it allows him to see the big picture. He looks at the clouds, snow, water, the horizon, and he feels the temperature, wind speed, the texture of the ground that he walks on and he can predict what nature is trying to say to him. When he—my father—was growing up, he was told to go outside his dwellings as soon as he woke up: talk to the environment first before anything else. As he was growing up, his elders would talk generally about the environment, not as if it disconnected their lives, but as if it was part of their everyday lives. He was not shown numbers, he was not shown pictures of snow or rain, he was not shown how long it might last nor how much wind, snow or rain it was going to be. (Again, I think this connectedness is what the elders in Pond wanted to produce after a successful outing.)*

*He had to learn the complicated weather system, how it behaves in different seasons, how much it affects snow and ice, what different cloud shapes and colours mean, and many various subjects about the weather. Not only that, he had to apply his knowledge to his hunting skills to feed my siblings and our extended family. Which means, he had to follow the seasons, not in terms of migrating to different places, but in terms of watching the environment closely; so that he would know: When is the snow going to start melting? And when it does melt, what is the texture of the snow, and when and what kind of snow is safe to drink? When he travels on the ice, he has to know where the shoals are, to predict where the ice is going to be rough and where it might be thin. Whenever he has to cross Cumberland Sound, he has to look far to the horizon to predict if it is going to be safe to boat. He knows what the colours of the clouds mean and what kind of snow, rain or wind they might bring. He doesn't look at all these things as if they are all separate links, but as connected links: whenever something behaves this way, it might be that way over there. He has to know when the tide goes up and down, and how much. When he sees an animal, it is not just food, but it also tells you the state of the surrounding environment. How is that seal acting on top the ice, sunbathing? And does the color of this caribou skin seem different from the year before? These observations are essential for "survival," but they also give a person a glimpse of the connectedness of animals, humans, and the environment to themselves. (Which impatient scientists miss often, to see the correlation that many things have to be waited out to get the correct results. A hunter/"understand-er" has to be patient.) To my father, weather is life: It restricts him, but it also makes him excel in hunting when the weather is right. In certain seasons, the weather acts like this and that, and if the weather changes, it is going to affect the animals; so it is important to know and learn the weather, not through TV or other sources of communication, but to interact with it, be one with it.*

*Having said that, Inuktitut should be the main vehicle of teaching in all the schools if we are to have a culture of our own. Unfortunately, we can turn Inuktitut into a language of English. What I mean is, that we can use the workings of English and have them translated into Inuktitut, but are they really Inuktitut words, or are they just a transfer of English into Inuktitut phrases and sounds? Is it really Inuktitut, do they really capture the language and the feeling of what is being said? My father made predictions of the weather that I would have never thought of and that goes for all the Inuit hunters; they can make predictions that I'll never fully understand. It is their understanding of the world around them that makes them Inuktitut professors. They understand more about their environment than any scientist will ever know: the intricate workings of the environment complement their language and vice versa.*





*To use English as the main language in schools will further erode our culture and take away the importance of our language. Inuktitut has strong roots in describing the workings of the natural environment around Inuit. English has strong roots in detaching the student from their environment and putting them into a hypothetical environment. English, to me, was a language of imagining, not a language of action. When we were taught any subject in school, they took us into a fantasy place and made us imagine what it would be like there. Inuktitut, when it is spoken, takes you to the place, and the sounds of those words make you feel as if you belong there. (In school, through school, trying to understand such concepts and ideas, thinking becomes troublesome and hard to the imaginer without the correct tools of Inuktitut to help fix it. The more the imaginer has trouble, the more he/she is going to have a hard time remembering the words in Inuktitut.)*

*I remember when we had science projects in school, we never really studied Inuit science, maybe because we were never taught that there is such a thing; but we always had projects about tornadoes, formation of mountains, etc. It is as if we neglected our culture and traditions because the language of the science projects was always in English, never in Inuktitut. No wonder Inuit felt inferior in front of English-speaking teachers; English has strong commanding words that institute that there is no other good language to teach how the nature works. Even the word theory is completely different from the way young Inuit see it and understand it. Theory (as most young Qallunaat students know) is theory, something not really proven. In my class, theory was something that couldn't be changed. For us it was hard to challenge a theory—maybe it had something to do with our strong-headed teachers that couldn't really take criticism about their knowledge. To me, that is what English brings: the feeling of inferiority. And just imagine all those young Inuit students that don't have a good footing in the works of any language. They fail because English makes them scared. (In turn we become subject to "dominant" English words and phrases, further eroding the real essence of our language.)*

Hi Tommy;

Unfortunately (as you know) Inuktitut is taught in the formal school system only up until Grade 3; then children have to switch to English. This means that they don't get a good grounding in any one language and so Inuit children usually do not end up with very good skills in English or in Inuktitut (Berger, 2006). In fact, even though 75% of Nunavut residents list Inuktitut as their mother tongue, there is no K–12 schooling in Inuktitut anywhere in Nunavut. It's all English (except in Iqaluit where there is a new \$7-million French school). Even though Canada's Nunavut Act of 1993 requires the new territory to function in three languages, Inuktitut gets nowhere near the same level of funding and protection as English and French: \$3,480 is spent per every francophone (600 citizens) in Nunavut, versus \$48 for every Inuktitut-speaking person (23,000). In other words, the francophone community receives twice as much money from the federal government than the Inuktitut-speaking community, even though the Inuit outnumber francophones by 40 to 1.

But it's funny how governments never seem short of money to translate from English into Inuktitut, to "help" equip Inuktitut conceptually to describe economics and technology—money for translating "important" words from English into Inuktitut—words like *satellite*, *computer*, and *accounting*. And yet I am not aware of a single government dollar going into translating Inuktitut into English (to try to illustrate/illuminate the beauty and the uniqueness of it), or of a single program to celebrate the breadth and utility of Inuktitut to Inuit and European Canadians.

Now, obviously terms like "kayak" or "igloo" are just what they are; there's no need to replace them with clumsy expressions like "covered canoe" or "snow house." But what other Inuktitut terms and concepts might enrich our understanding of the world, if only we chose to ask?

I remember hearing Norman Hallendy on the radio telling a story of his conversation with Kenojoak Ashevak, the great printmaker in Kinngait (Cape Dorset). The gist of it was





that they had a long chat (through translation) about art, but when he asked her to write the word for “art” in Inuktitut syllabics, she said she couldn’t, because there was “no word for ‘art’ in Inuktitut.” Admitting to some frustration, he then asked “what was it that we’ve been talking about?” Kenojoak answered (through translation): “that which takes something real and makes it more real than it was before.”

Isn’t that beautiful and clear? I’ve mentioned that phrase to art teachers at several universities and they all think it is one of the most succinct definitions they’ve ever heard in any language. The gift of Inuktitut thinking.

I think this could be the other benefit of braiding Inuktitut into environmental education: helping the dominant society appreciate the indigenous concepts and attitudes that grew from these lakes and lands.

*Hi Derek,*

*I think you are absolutely right that governments are spending a huge amount of money on translating English words into Inuktitut. The official translations that the government did on climate change (Inuktitut Climate Change Glossary) seem to point that out are a good example of this. The work was done over a couple of years with consultations with elders all over Nunavut and many Inuktitut translators participating. I don’t mind the book that they produced, what I dislike is that the words are from English. The term in English is given first and then they translate those English words into Inuktitut. It’s as if they didn’t trust what Inuktitut can say about the change in the environment and then translate that word into English with all its meanings. I don’t think Inuktitut is given the room to make some new words of its own. Inuktitut, and Inuit as well, had always been seen as the poor cousin by many languages, especially European-derived languages. Little do they realize that Inuktitut has the full ability to make sense in this so-called modern world of ours—to make it positive.*

*Inuktitut captures what the nature has said to Inuit. Even what seems to be a simple word in Inuktitut is so difficult to translate into English. A word like kajjarniq. Kajjarniq means “to reflect positively about our surroundings.”<sup>22</sup> We usually use that word when we like the weather. And because people like all sorts of weather, we say kajjarniq to refer to different kinds of weather. It can even refer to indoors, when people experience what they remember and have that positive outlook on it. I guess it’s like nostalgia.*

*And I don’t think we can really understand a language through books only. Books are very far from our actual feelings and senses. To know a language is to be immersed in it and take part in it. Languages are not about books—they’re about feelings and experiencing what those feelings bring to the individual. To understand an environment a person has to understand the language of the environment.*

*An Inuk (well actually any human being should feel what it is to have such a wonderful body) has to become a person first, before you put stuff inside him or her with school. With school, they start filling you up with things, thoughts, ideas, but you’re not even a person yet (not a full person yet, you are still realizing what your body can do and feel). You need time to become a human being, to just feel what it’s like to have fingers (to have ears, taste, and see), to have senses—to know what it’s like to touch this table right now, you know what I mean? To feel the edge of the table on the ridges of the skin of your finger—that’s amazing! How much time do we spend actually learning this—watching—paying attention to this? To what it feels like to have a human body? (I wish that I could feel what my ancestors felt when they went outside first thing in the morning wearing only skin clothing.) And then what it feels like to be in the cold, or in the weather, in the environment, out on the land, to eat certain foods, to be happy (to be thankful that we have such a life, no matter how hard it gets). Just to notice these things.*

*Instead the School tries to fill us up with history about Napoleon and so on—things, “facts” that don’t really mean anything to us—things that aren’t necessarily helpful—when we haven’t even had*





*the time to become a Person yet. To become a Person we need time: time with our family, time with our elders and community, time out on the land, and time with ourselves—to reflect on our actions. Instead, the Qalunnaat government puts us in school—away from the land, away from our family, our community, our elders. In many ways school takes away the very thing it is to be a human being: to feel and love the Earth and what it provides. (But the more we learn Western ideas, the more our feelings become inferior to the extraction of resources in our lands.) Instead it makes us look forward to an artificial world of economics. Makes us think about what job we want, how much money we want. In many ways, we look forward to an uncertain future, full of doubts about what we are capable of. When I think about Inuit long time ago, they knew what they could do and how much strength they had, they knew what their body could do. One needs a lot of knowledge about one's abilities to wait patiently for hours by a seal hole just to hear a seal breathing and splashing in that tiny hole. When I think about it, it is like meditating—focusing on yourself and the environment around you to accomplish a task.*

*My mother always says that the best therapy is to be out on the land, to clear your mind and think positively about yourself. She can let her negative feelings out by just being on the land. To be out on the land is to let civilization's materialism out of our bodies, to let the burden of trying to make a living go out of your body—to put it simply—to be free. (To know what your body is capable of is a huge stress-reliever because the body acknowledges the environment around you and it does the same to language, they embrace each other. A great big symbiosis!)*

Hi Tommy,

Do you remember when you and I and David Joanasie went to see beluga (*qilalugaq*) in the aquarium in Vancouver? I remember there was a biologist there, a beluga expert, she was so proud of these animals in their enclosure in the aquarium. I remember when you and David talked to her, I think the first thing you said was how seeing beluga made you hungry. (“The sweet taste of *maktaaq* is unforgettable after the first bite. To explain the texture of *maktaaq* would be to give away the magic of the whale.”) She seemed to get pretty upset by that; she seemed to be quite keen on separating beluga from their environment. In a way, she could have asked you guys so many questions (like you asked her)—but she didn’t—after all, you’ve seen beluga in their environment. And those of us who’ve eaten beluga (you more than me) are—in one way of speaking—part beluga: we have beluga inside us, in our cells. Talking to you guys is like being able to talk to beluga, in a way; but the biologist didn’t show any sign of knowing that, nor any interest in that. “Eating confirms my selfness with what I consume” is the way historian C.L. Martin puts it (Martin, 1992, p. 86). There’s a beautiful one-sentence explanation that I once heard Louis Tapardjuk (now the Nunavut Minister of Culture, Elders and Youth) deliver to a room full of wildlife biologists in Iqaluit: “It’s wildlife that manages Inuit, not the other way ‘round.” George Wenzel, one of the few southern scientists I know of who speaks Inuktitut, used to quote Ortega y Gasset’s statement, “I am I and the environment,” as a synthesis of “the kind of meaning Inuit impart when they speak about *nigituinnaq*—a unity of environment, community, and human identity” (Wenzel, 1991, p. 191). Wenzel says “harvesting is not just the means by which food is extracted from the natural environment, but also the critical medium through which the human and animal communities are joined together” (Wenzel, 1991, p. 137).

Scientists and experts, however, tend to prefer “locationless logic” because it “makes societies legible” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 15; Scott, 1998, p. 2). In the Yukon, the Kluane people complain that “Biologists, at least in their official capacities, talk about animals as ‘things.’ They are not interested in individual moose but only in ‘moose’ in general . . . [F]or them, moose are not individual beings with thoughts and feelings; they are merely representative instances of an abstract quantity . . .” (Nadasdy, 2003, p. 111).







Though no biologists would ever suggest using these techniques (aerial surveys, radio-collaring) to learn about people, they have no qualms about using them on animals, whom they do not view as persons but simply as objects of study, as non-sentient beings with whom social relations are impossible. Many Kluane people, however, refuse to make such a distinction between the proper treatment of animals and people. Unlike biologists, they are very concerned with what animals think and feel in response to such treatment. One man summed up his concerns by stating that he would like to collar all the biologists and watch what they do for a while. Then, he said, they would know what it feels like to be treated that way. (Nadasdy, 2003, p. 110)

Perhaps making Inuktitut a co-requisite for environmental study and research in Nunavut would help scientists appreciate “the size and importance of the gap between general knowledge and situated knowledge” (Scott, 1998, p. 318). Maybe another way of talking about this is what Chet Bowers calls the difference between “low-context” knowledge, and “high-context” knowledge (Bowers, 2005, p. 147). High-context knowledge includes traditional oral wisdom, the type of wisdom that Cruikshank calls “sentient knowledge;” wisdom that doesn’t try to “pry nature away from culture and fragment it into data,” but rather a wisdom that permeates a person only after a long immersion in the local context (Cruikshank, 2002, pp. 12–13).

Low-context knowledge might be called “thin,” like the paper it is generally written on, but it is “high status” knowledge, and this is drilled into all of us who are processed through the formal school system (de Castell, 1990, p. 30; Steele, 1999). Schools also teach us that any knowledge that you can’t write down or externally record in some way is “low status” knowledge—including hunting and navigation, and “personal talents and skills expressed in communal activities ranging from growing, preparing, and sharing food . . . to musical performances, healing, and repairing the material forms of culture [tools] . . . encompassing the organic complexity of orally based cultures” (Bowers, 2005, pp. 146 & 155).

For 16 years, the federal government’s Northern Science Award, for example, was always given to researchers from Southern universities—not until 2000, when the Igloodik’s Inullariit Elders Society received it for their audio recording of traditional knowledge. They didn’t win the award for *developing* traditional knowledge (for 4,000 years), or for speaking it; they won it for *recording* it (for 10 years). During those 10 years of recording, 30 of the elders recorded on the tapes have died. This is the urgency: The older generation has learned out on the land, the youth have learned in the classroom. We have to build a bridge (oral, experiential) before the gulf between generations becomes too wide to span. We can tape record knowledge all we like, but as James Hillman says: “Nature dies *because* culture dies” (Hillman & Ventura, 1992, p. 238). Building this bridge between the generations could be as simple as insisting that Inuktitut be made as one of the school and college requirements for environmental education in Nunavut.

Perhaps if there were a requirement that Inuktitut fluency and training be part of the licensing of research in Nunavut, then more Inuktitut-fluent Inuit would be hired onto research teams. And if a significant portion of Arctic environmental education was required to be conducted in Inuktitut, that would probably precipitate a sharp rise in Inuktitut-speakers entering the environmental programs (as well as generally increase the respect for Inuktitut within Nunavut). Environmental education conducted in the language of the eco-culture system would also likely involve more elders and increase the recognition of, and respect for, elders’ knowledge and land-based learning.

—Regards, Derek

*Hi Derek,*

*I keep forgetting to write about how important it is for environmental educators, scientists, and biologists to affiliate with Inuit organizations. This should be a central objective to researcher*



and scientist alike. Curricula, course materials, reports, and documents should be communicated in Inuktitut first and foremost. Inuit organizations are representatives of their Inuit beneficiaries in their regions and provide a connection to each community. With affiliations to Inuit organizations and Inuit communities, teachers and researchers gain a certain respect, and a better response from the community is a likely to be given. Inuit hiring priorities should be established by environmental education programs to help them better represent the environment and its inhabitants. Hiring more Inuit researchers would help the researcher publish more accurate reports of their findings; and reports should be reviewed by the communities first, before they are released to the public, as the people being researched have a huge stake in these studies. And if a scientist wants to research in the Arctic, wants to study the Arctic, then to make valid conclusions, he or she has to be part of the natural Arctic environment and not consider themselves apart from their studies. The scientific research done by most researchers is not accurate as they are not one with the environment they study. Inuit know that this world is not to be owned, and my guess is that the scientists who come up here think that they own the animals and plants and they own the world and that is why I think many indigenous people do not like or trust scientists.

Scientists and biologists say they do their job because they care for the plants and animals to save them. (Why is “saving” something always part of Western culture?) But if they have that goal, then why do they do things like tag animals and interrupt their natural behaviour. If my father sees a scientist tagging a polar bear or any other animal, he feels sorry for the animal, and he asks questions like: “Why are they doing that?” He never understands: If they are trying to help them, then why are they hurting them? I agree with the Kluane people that biologists don’t seem to think animals have feelings, but they really do. My father always told me that when I hunt that I should never show disrespect towards the animals in any way; or else, he said the next animal I try to catch will know that I did something bad to another animal and won’t allow itself to be caught. We know that animals have feelings just like us. Respect for any animal is paramount in our culture. We can feel it when we skin or eat a caribou: they know they are helping us Inuit. Knowing these small things about the environment gives us human beings a better understanding of our world, and it allows us to respect and to love the world the way it is, and to accept that animals move and that they never stay in the same area. To accept that some animals will never be here in the same condition. We have to be educated in Inuktitut and through Inuit so we have a better understanding of this world.

Today, as I occasionally do, I was reading John Amagoalik’s essay “Will the Inuit Disappear From the Face of This Earth?” This is a very serious question for any Inuk. This question scares me everyday, and I deny the question and never want to hear it verbally, although reading the question seems to be acceptable and does not sound so strong. John A (as he is known) says: This question brings a great sadness to me. To realize that we Inuit are in the same category as the great whale, the bald eagle, the husky and the polar bear brings me great fear. To realize that our people can be classified as an endangered species is very disturbing. Is our culture like a wounded polar bear that has gone out to sea to die alone? What can be done? (Amagoalik, 1977).

These words were written in 1977 by a very intellectual Inuk, called, by some, the “Father of Nunavut.” The first paragraph speaks to me like an elder does when they tell their grandchildren myths and legends. Even today, the question would still scare Inuit (many of them elders), maybe even more than it scared them in 1977. I think many of us do not realize that adjusting to a dominant society has its limits. At what point do we know that we have lost most of what is precious to a strong culture? An Inuit identity is on the line: a way of life and a language so unique that it is in its own league.

I wish that Inuit had the opportunity to document their ways not through paper but by listening to their elders and to people who want to make a difference. I say now that the sound of our mouths has a huge effect on the state of mind and heart. Orality is important for my culture, but I am also the tool that is taking that away.



*As I write these papers, I realize that I am also part of the system that produces papers and documents. The more I write, the more I realize that I go against what I have written so far about the degradation of a culture by an onslaught of "paperistic" materials. I am a tool in the documentation of our world.*

*I feel guilty in a way that I was taught English. I wish that I were uneducated, unable to write, but instead be traditional in the sense of the word. I want to be a traditional Inuk—ESKIMO.*

*But what is an uneducated human being? Is "uneducated" the right word to use; to explain that I want to contribute traditionally to the Inuit worldview? I am haunted by the fact that I advocate for a traditional way of life, but I am unable to realize that I am not traditional. To be uneducated means that I do not know the world: to not have knowledge and a sense of going forward. But I have to say that there is no such thing as an uneducated being. Animals learn to live by being educated by their environment and after all, are we not animals?*

*To educate through books about the environment is to belittle the environment, to make it less than us: and makes us think that we are the kings of this world and we hold the fate of this world. Little do we know that the environment holds us rather than us holding it.*

*I love education and don't take me wrong when I say that books belittle the environment. But life seen through books is reduced to a set of truths and facts; when learning about life is supposed to be flexible and confusing.*

*Many people think that to be educated is the only way to make a decent living, to have a job, to be able to make tough decisions, to be able to speak the English language, to have a financial capacity to look at budgets and other more complicated systems of control. Inuit see human life and how the body works differently from English. English reduces things to "a fact." In Inuktitut it's not a "fact"—life doesn't lie to you—but it's a huge truth that takes your whole life to figure out: what love means, what truth means.*

*Inuktitut taught me the feelings towards hunting. The English language can be full of love and care but love and care are only possibly effective and felt by your surroundings when you advocate fair and loose attitudes of respect for all living things, whether plants, animals, or us little human beings. And you can't separate the Inuktitut language from hunting and interacting with the environment; it would never work.<sup>3</sup> To keep and teach a language is a goal of mine and I will keep on doing what my language commands me to do. Inuktitut made sure that I care for the trees and grass and bees and insects of the south even though our language is not really made for the southern climate, but the respect the language teaches is inseparable from your own personal surroundings so I felt I had no choice but love the environment given me.*

*My language is so respectful that I learnt to respect every other race and being on this earth, no matter what they have done. But I'm only human and I might say a few things in English that might be taken wrongly because my understanding of the environment was shaped in Inuktitut and sometimes the English words don't really mean what I think (but they come out that way in English).*

*I hope you have a great spring and summer and I'll write more this weekend.*

—Tommy.

## NOTES

1. Tommy: I found this paragraph was very important throughout the essay. What the elders were trying to say is the point I would like to have made. Might as well do it out on the land to get the best results right? Derek: Hugh Brody's (2000) book *The Other Side of Eden* (especially the first chapter, "Inuktitut," pp. 9–64) makes this point really well. Also helpful for this is Jean Briggs' (2002) writing, for example her essay: "Language Dead or Alive: What's in a Dictionary?" In it the Inupiat elder Neakok says:





“a word is different when it is used by different people . . . When an Inupiaq reads a word, he’ll be thinking that somebody else said something completely different” (p. 69).

2. Joanasie Akumalik is the former mayor of Arctic Bay and currently director of government relations for NTI; here is part of an e-mail he wrote us after reading our conversation: “First of all, qungapassi” [I smile at you all].

Smiling is part of the Inuit culture. It is a facial expression to express forgiveness, showing appreciation; welcoming, introducing, and just indicating happiness within. When Inuit are introduced or meet the first time with a person, usually just smiling is enough. The Canadian-European, on the other hand, will start expressing who they are and what they do and position themselves. For Inuit, it takes a while for us to come and say what we do. It’s just that, we are not very expressive verbally, and would not want to “brag” about us what we do at the first introductions. Inuit do not position themselves at the beginning. So I smile at all of you.

I read the excerpts by my *inuuaqatiga* Tommy Akulukjuk and my ivory brother Derek Rasmussen and I totally agree with their concept of putting environment and language all together. It was interesting to see the different excerpts by a *qadlunnaq* and a young Inuk. Tommy seems to be very much in tune with his culture, by that I meant he knows how to express his way of being an Inuk.

I will try to attempt to explain my culture (I came from the “high arctic” region of Nunavut) and the way I see the both worlds of Inuit and the Canadian-European. I’ve done some schooling in a southern institute when I was young, in a Canadian city, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and where a lot of First Nation people are in large numbers. I have been involved in community developments and did one term as a mayor in Arctic Bay. I have facilitated a number of conferences whether it is of economic issues, wildlife, climate change and or just educational gathering.

I was born in a sod house. A sod house in the high arctic is a structured house like dwelling unit for a family, build with some sod, big rock (boulders, if I may) canvass, some wood beams, if not traditional caribou antlers, narwhale tusks, whale bones or some scrap of washed up old trees found along the shore. I was born in a high arctic dead winter in February. That is the coldest winter month up there. But I was adopted out to a family and I do associate a lot with my biological brothers and sisters to date. Both of my biological parents have passed away but I did stay and hunted with them a number of times. That is an Inuit way, to know and have full contact with your biological parents.

My father taught me to wake up early when I was about 11 or 12. I soon realize why I had to be up early, just like the farmers down south, so that you have the time to get to do what you have to do and hunt while there is still light. In the high arctic region, our sun disappears around the month of October and comes back up around the second week of February. To hunt in the twilight, and should the caribou be far (130 miles by snowmobile), you have to leave early enough to get to your destination and along the way, hunters can hunt seals and set up fishing nets. Once at the destination, you hunt the next day or two depending on how much you need. On the way back, hunters usually then check the fishing nets, if lucky, then hunters bring some caribou and fish home. This is done in the dead winter. It is different scenario, in the other seasons.

Inuit are very much tied to the environment up in the arctic. We have to, otherwise life of an Inuk and or entity would become false. Assimilation is the word I think I am looking for.

When Tommy indicated that his father was told go outside to “read” the weather as soon as he wakes up, that is so true. This is part of our exercise; to get the taste of the environment first thing before doing anything. I think it is like having your first coffee or shower in the morning before you do anything in Canadian European way. The way I understand it is that when I wake, I want to see the light, feel the temperature and if not smell the environment, hear the environment and just absorb the environment first thing. I have to disagree with Tommy with his attempt to explain “*Kajjaanaqtuq*.” This word encompasses so many meanings. I agree that it’s to reflect positively but it goes beyond that. It touches your inner soul thereby providing serenity to one’s self. Have you ever got up in the early morning by yourself and felt serene? The twilight, the slowness of things starting to move, the place you are in, hear the clock . . . I cannot translate it.

At home in Arctic Bay area, we have a traditional seal hunting season. That particular season we call “*qulaitigru*” meaning “the seal breathing holes ‘covers’ are opened” season. That is when we hunt all





night long. The sun is up 24 hours a day. What is caught is all used up and or carcasses. For me, it's the season I love the most. While waiting for a seal, I can hear the snow melting. I can also hear the wind; feel the warmth of the sun and the smell of the environment. I have always said: Gas for the skidoo: \$40.00, Stainless steel traditional harpoon: \$75.00, Carton of cigarettes \$100.00. Seawater going up and down in the seal hole: priceless!"

3. David Joanasié, an environmental researcher with Inuit Tapariit Kanatami (ITK) also wrote to us (in Inuktitut, translated by Tommy into English): "You are right, this paper you've written with Derek is good news and fun to read and made me want to read it again even after I've read it. I agreed with you guys about our language and the connectedness with the environment. It is true the knowledge that Inuit hold is really connected to the land and the weather. . . . I have always heard our elders, like your father, how they were told to get out of igloo each morning and feel the *sila* and take observance of it and feel it. It is like meditation as well. . . . Sometimes I think about the past and how they had expert knowledge of the land and were professionals at hunting and gathering animals and plants because they understood the land. They had so much knowledge that they could make clothes from sealskin and caribou skin and other tools from animals because they understood them. But today we do not understand/misunderstood our clothing and we live in houses now. We wear prefabricated clothing too much that we don't understand our environment anymore (as in how much we need to wear). Even right now I work in a huge building on the fifth floor with walls that have no connection to the outside world and the environment. I am physically far from the *Nuna*. I have no idea what the state of the land is and what wildlife it holds or what plants is underneath the cement. Many lives are now disconnected from the *nuna* (land)."

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Serenna Romanycia (2005)

There are nine different words in Maya for the color blue in the comprehensive Porrúa Spanish-Maya Dictionary but just three Spanish translations, leaving six butterflies that can be seen only by the Maya, proving beyond a doubt that when a language dies six butterflies disappear from the consciousness of the earth.

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