

Reprinted from WORLD WATCH, January/February 2000

Coming to Terms with the Arctic

by Lisa Mastny

© 2000 Worldwatch Institute

 WORLDWATCH
INSTITUTE
1776 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
www.worldwatch.org
phone: (202) 452-1999 • fax: (202) 296-7365
e-mail: worldwatch@worldwatch.org

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE ARCTIC

By melding ancient hunting traditions with modern political technique, Arctic indigenous peoples present a baffling challenge to environmental diplomacy. As the Arctic ecology itself begins to change, the need for a common understanding is growing increasingly urgent.

by Lisa Mastny

Last July, the elders of Pelly Bay, an Inuit community on Canada's Arctic coastline, carefully packaged up six hand-carved marionettes and shipped them off to a master puppeteer in the U.S. state of Rhode Island, for fine-tuning. The dolls, which had taken a year to assemble, depicted Kiviuk and his companions, legendary travelers in the stories of the Inuit, the people long known in Western mainstream culture as "Eskimo"—a term now rejected as derogatory. The mythical travelers were slated to be the stars of a new video that would teach children in Nunavut, Canada's youngest and northernmost territory, about their Inuit heritage.

Just across the border, in Buffalo, New York, U.S. federal agents seized the packages and re-routed them to a lab in Oregon, where the puppets were subjected to forensic testing. The crime? Attempting to cross the border without a permit, according to officials with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for the seizure. The dolls, it turned out, had been carved from whalebone and clothed in seal skin, two substances specifically barred from entry into the United States under the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

The case of the impounded marionettes was just one of thousands that have crossed the desks of U.S.

wildlife enforcement officers. As far as the officers were concerned, that case was closed when the dolls were shipped back to Pelly Bay. But for the Inuit, the interrupted odyssey of the marionettes is part of a much larger saga. Most traditional Inuit products—whether craft work like sealskin slippers or foods like mattak, a delicacy made from raw whale blubber—are derived from animals. But in recent decades, growing concerns about declining wildlife populations have led governments to pass a number of laws like the MMPA, which are preventing many of these products from reaching world markets.

This increasing exclusion of their products comes as a blow to many Inuit communities, who are struggling to find ways to jumpstart their economies after centuries of social and cultural devastation. Early explorers like Samuel Hearne, an English trader with Canada's Hudson's Bay Company in the late 1700s, had scoured the North for furs, ivory, copper, and other goods to feed eager markets back home. These efforts opened the way for colonial settlement, which would permanently scar Inuit and other indigenous Arctic peoples. The new colonial governments systematically dismissed local land claims, relocated or assimilated nomadic groups, and disparaged traditional ways. Outsiders also brought measles, smallpox, and influenza—European diseases against which

natives had little immunity. “The days of the Inuit are numbered,” wrote the American explorer Charles Francis Hall after visiting the Frobisher Bay area of Canada in 1861. “Fifty years may find them all passed away, without leaving one to tell that such a people ever lived.”

Fortunately, Hall’s prediction never came true. Despite suffering a major blow to their numbers, some 150,000 Inuit survive in scattered communities across northern Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, and the Chukotka region of eastern Siberia (see map, page 26). Together, these Inuit make up barely 4 percent of the Arctic’s total population of 3.8 million, the majority of whom are ethnic Russians who moved north during the Soviet era. In all, nearly 50 distinct indigenous peoples inhabit the Arctic, but the plight of the Inuit, who have occupied the region for some 5,000 years, is in many ways the best single barometer of the far North, as both a political and a geographic space.

In recent decades, the Inuit have regained a high degree of control over their lands and experienced widespread cultural and political renewal. They now have what may be a unique opportunity: a chance to create a self-sustaining economy in a region relatively insulated from the intense population and resource pressures that jeopardize indigenous cultures in so many other parts of the world. In this respect, the Inuit represent a “best case” scenario for indigenous development. And yet the tumultuous social changes, the controversial politics of hunting (the Inuit’s primary economic activity), and the uncertainties of resource exploitation in the delicate Arctic environment—all of these factors make the Inuit cultural renaissance still a very uncertain affair. That uncertainty is compounded by global environmental pressures, which are now working fundamental changes in Arctic ecosystems. In both cultural and natural terms, the far North may be on the verge of profound transition.

CULTURE SHOCK

In 1922, Robert Flaherty, a surveyor for Canadian railways and mining companies, attracted an international audience with his film about a year in the life of an Inuit hunter named Alakarialak (“Nanook”) and his family. The first feature-length documentary ever, *Nanook of the North* fed the popular imagination a rare glimpse of Inuit culture—of a people who seemed hardened by nature, willing to endure the chill of an igloo and the gloom of a sunless winter’s day. The film awakened the world to a culture apparently isolated from “civilization.” The only evidence to the contrary was a brief shot of the protagonist biting at a mystifying gramophone record during a visit to a trading post.

But even by the early 20th century, “Nanook’s” isolated world was rapidly disappearing. For some 200 years, European commercial whalers and their North American counterparts had hired skilled Inuit hunters to serve as guides on trading expeditions or as crew members on whaling vessels.

While many Inuit welcomed this new employment, their communities suffered greatly from European diseases. In 1900, the arrival of



THE INUIT LANDS

All the outlined areas are traditional Inuit territories. (Some smaller territories are not shown.) Most of these territories now have a special legal status, as noted below.

AREA	LEGAL STATUS	INUIT POPULATION (rough estimates)
CHUKOTKA	no special legal status	2,000
Parts of ALASKA	includes settled land claims	50,000
INUVIALUIT Region	includes settled land claims	7,000
NUNAVUT	autonomous jurisdiction within Canada	23,000
NUNAVIK	includes settled land claims; additional negotiations underway	8,000
Parts of LABRADOR	land claims agreement pending	4,000
GREENLAND	autonomous jurisdiction under Denmark	55,000



a single whaling ship carrying influenza sparked the deaths of more than 200 Inupiat (the Inuit group living near the Beaufort Sea), who were trading their goods at Point Barrow. In the Inuvialuit region of western Canada, the Inuit population fell from around 2,000 to only 40 in the first 20 years after contact. In Greenland, the entire Inuit population fell by one-half. Disintegrating Inuit communities were dealt another painful blow in the early 1900s, in the form of widespread unemployment, when world markets for whale oil and baleen collapsed following the development of petroleum products and new synthetic materials.

Efforts to assimilate the Inuit into mainstream national life proved equally disastrous. When the Danish government began to colonize Greenland in the early 18th century, missionaries encouraged the island's nomadic Inuit groups to convert to Christianity and move to fixed settlements, which were often poorly supplied for the winter. The Canadian government did much the same thing in the 1950s and 1960s, luring igloo- and tent-dwelling Inuit into settlements with promises of housing, food, medicine, and education. These relocations, though mostly well-intentioned, disconnected many hunters and fishers from their customary ways of life and fostered a paralyzing loss of self-respect. Robbie Tookalook of Nunavik, in northern Quebec, was only 14 years old when Mounted Police rounded up his father's sled dogs and shot them, ostensibly to stem the spread of diseases like rabies and distemper. Yet he remembers the consequences clearly: his father could no longer reach traditional hunting grounds and, like other hunters, was forced to turn to government assistance to purchase the supplies needed for settlement life. Once the dogs were gone, the barren life of the settlement enclosed them completely. Entire communities suffered this fate, and many are still hoping for an official apology from the Canadian government.

On the Russian side of the Bering Sea, in Chukotka, a region about the size of France, the assimilation was far more thorough. As early as the 1920s, the Soviet government began to integrate Arctic indigenous groups into its elaborate schemes for industrializing the Russian north. As in Canada, the authorities systematically replaced nomadic ways of life with centralized settlements and modern houses, schools, and hospitals—in large part to lay down the infrastructure required for further development of the region. The Inuit and other indigenous groups like the Chukchi were viewed as a ready source of labor to feed the growing industrial machine; they were “granted” employment in the new state-owned fisheries and reindeer farms. But many native workers ultimately lost their jobs to ethnic Russians and other immigrants who were attracted by the higher wages

and early pensions offered in the North.

Today, Inuit communities across the Arctic are only beginning to recover from this cultural upheaval. Recent decades have brought new political and cultural prospects, and in all of their homelands but Siberia the Inuit have come a long way toward winning greater legal authority over their resources. One of the earliest milestones was the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, in which residents with at least one-fourth native ancestry were granted financial compensation for appropriated land, and collective rights to 11 percent of the state's territory. Eight years later, in Greenland, decades of political activism and worker's strikes culminated in the Home Rule Act of 1979, bringing the Inuit there what many regard as the greatest degree of political autonomy enjoyed by any Arctic native group. In Canada, the Inuit have been party to five different federal land-claims agreements since 1975. Last year, one of those settlements served as the basis for the founding of Nunavut, a vast Inuit-controlled jurisdiction that includes what was formerly the central and eastern part of the Northwest Territories. Last year also saw the signing of the Nunavik Political Accord, which establishes a procedure for native self-rule in Nunavik, the Inuit region of northern Quebec.

Throughout their homelands, the Inuit remain largely a hunting and fishing people, deeply connected to nature. Most Inuit communities still rely on the sea to satisfy spiritual and nutritional needs. But Inuit hunters have long welcomed technologies that make their job easier. In the 18th and 19th centuries, contact with nonindigenous commercial whalers led many Inuit to cast aside their stone-tipped harpoons and skin-covered kayaks for the more efficient (and usually more humane) tools of their colonizers: telescopes, rifles, and high-powered harpoon cannons. (In Siberia, the Soviet government forced this transition, banning the use of traditional boats and weapons in large hunts and imposing a system of state-run whaling—a move which led to much loss of traditional hunting knowledge.) Today, many Inuit hunters use motorboats and sometimes even small planes to reach their hunting grounds. Radio transmitters are used to track harpooned whales, and snowmobiles have replaced dog sled teams. Residents of the Canadian village of Kangirsuk, 160 kilometers northeast of Montreal, now resort to their own “Dog Shooting Days” to reduce populations of strays that scrounge garbage and carry disease.

Like all indigenous peoples attempting to come to terms with mainstream consumer culture, the Inuit must balance the benefits of modern life with the problems that accompany it. In Nunavut as elsewhere, Inuit families watch sports on TV, play video games, use computers, and invest in stocks and bonds. They also drive cars. Nunavut's capital, Iqaluit

(formerly Frobisher Bay), is home to only 4,500 inhabitants and 40 kilometers of roads, yet it boasts some 1,500 vehicles—one of the highest vehicle per capita ratios in the world. Defunct cars are simply abandoned or junk-piled because no effective system of metal recycling exists that far north. Iqualuit also generates an overwhelming 13,000 cubic meters of trash each year, most of which ends up smoldering in the open-air dump—the first thing visitors notice as they fly into town.

As with other indigenous groups in the midst of enormous cultural upheaval, the Inuit have extremely high rates of smoking, alcoholism, and suicide—far higher than in the general populations of their countries. In Greenland,

Mounted Police rounded up Robbie Tookalook's father's sled dogs and shot them, ostensibly to stem the spread of diseases like rabies and distemper. His father could no longer reach traditional hunting grounds and, like other hunters, was forced to turn to government assistance.

84 percent of Inuit men and 78 percent of Inuit women smoke. The island's suicide rate is also probably the highest in the world, says Peter Bjerregaard, a member of the Greenland Health Research Council. In Nunavut, 25 percent of the population are classified as heavy drinkers, three times the national average for Canada,

and one of every 145 people commits suicide annually, a toll six times the national rate. Paul Okalik, the territory's new premier, knows these problems well. He is himself a former alcoholic, served jail time for a break-in, and had a brother who committed suicide.

Inuit social and health problems are compounded by the poor living standards that continue to plague many Arctic communities. Life expectancies have risen in all Inuit areas to about 67 years—except in Siberia's Chukotka, where they have fallen to 40 to 45 years. But even 67 years is still well below the figures for nonindigenous populations. In 1993, the Alaska state legislature attributed the lower health status of natives to a lack of basic water and sanitation services. Some 40 percent of rural households still have no access to safe drinking water and rely on outhouses or honey-buckets for disposal of human waste. The situation is worse in Chukotka, where water must often be hand-hauled from an untreated source, usually a hole in the ice.

Social improvements have been hindered by the

weakness of the local economies: Inuit communities remain heavily dependent on their national governments. Denmark, to which Greenland still officially belongs, provides roughly half the Home Rule government's annual revenue. In Nunavut, the dependency is even greater. The Canadian government has agreed to cover 95 percent of the new territory's \$410 million annual budget, at least until Nunavut becomes self-sufficient. But this is unlikely to happen anytime soon: high transportation expenses make the cost of living in the territory's 28 scattered communities 1.6 to 2 times higher than in the rest of Canada. Two liters of milk (about half a U.S. gallon) costs around \$4.80. Average household income is only \$21,527, and comes mostly from hunting and handicrafts. Some one-third of the territory's 25,000 residents are on welfare, and in several communities, unemployment tops 50 percent (it stands at 21 percent overall).

Conditions among Chukotka's Inuit are even more serious. The Russian economic crisis has essentially severed the Arctic north from the rest of the nation. Government aid to the region has fallen from an estimated 2 percent of the GDP during the Soviet era, to 0.1 percent today. Many of the state-owned fisheries, reindeer herds, and fur farms have also collapsed or fallen into private hands, depriving the Inuit and other natives of the few wage jobs they had. Food and fuel are rationed, and the scanty supplies that do arrive rarely make it to the isolated Inuit villages along the coast, where winter temperatures can reach -20° to -30° Celsius. In Sireniki, a village of 650 Inuit and Chukchi, some hunters and reindeer herders haven't been paid for five years, and the 1998 collapse of a polar fox fur farm laid off 40 women. Economic and health problems have been compounded as more and more ethnic Russians, particularly doctors and other residents with technical skills, have returned south. Overall, Chukotka's population has shrunk by more than half over the past decade, from 185,000 in 1989 to 85,000 today.

SOUTHERN POISONS AND MELTING ICE

In the 1950s, pilots flying Cold War missions over the North American Arctic first noticed a thick haze blanketing the region. This turned out to be air pollution from industries far to the south—one of the earliest indications that Arctic peoples face "outside" environmental threats—threats they have played little part in creating and therefore have little hope of controlling on their own.

Scientists have since discovered that the polar regions are the destination for disproportionate quantities of contaminants, from heavy metals like mercury and cadmium, to the carbon-

based compounds called “persistent organic pollutants” (POPs), a category that includes certain pesticides, industrial chemicals like PCBs, and waste products like dioxins and furans. High levels of exposure to heavy metals and POPs can have serious health effects on both humans and wildlife, ranging from reproductive failure to disruption of the central nervous system.

These compounds rise from fields and factories as far south as the tropics and can reach the north pole in as little as five days—although the trip usually takes much longer. Once in the Arctic, the substances bioaccumulate in the food chain, their concentrations increasing as much as 10-fold from one “link” to the next. They reach their highest levels in the region’s top predators: marine mammals, seabirds, and humans.

Although the contaminants have been detected in communities across the Arctic, the Inuit have the misfortune of living in areas that tend to receive the highest doses. A study of Inuit women on Canada’s Baffin Island found that their breast milk contained levels of chlordane (a pesticide) ten times higher than women in southern Canada, and levels of PCBs five times higher. (PCBs are compounds used in plastics and electrical insulation; they have been largely phased out in industrialized countries but they are still common in the developing world.) In total, some 200 different toxins, including PCBs, DDT, dioxin, toluene, benzene, xylene, mercury, and lead, have been found in Inuit breast milk—a substantial share of that burden is typically transferred to infants dur-

ing the first six months through breast feeding. In some Inuit populations, PCB concentrations exceed even those found among residents of the Great Lakes region of the United States—considered one of the world’s most heavily PCB-contaminated areas.

Despite the health risks of contaminants, experts aren’t encouraging the Inuit to stop eating “country foods,” derived from the wild animals they hunt. For one thing, the alternative diet—composed of imported foods such as ground beef, soft drinks, and cookies—entails serious risks of its own. In recent years, many Inuit communities have experienced a steep rise in the incidence of “southern” ailments, such as diseases of the heart, liver, and kidneys. Scientists associate these increases with the shift to a more mainstream diet, high in fat and sugar.

Moreover, traditional foods such as whalemeat and blubber (mattak) contain substances like selenium, which may block the effects of the toxins, or provide some other benefit. Seal liver, for example, is an important source of Vitamin A, and beluga whale mattak contains nearly twice the protein of beef, but one-seventh the fat. Mattak is also rich in the polyunsaturated fatty acids that help prevent heart disease—including Omega-3, the same ingredient in much-touted fish oil supplements. According to Gerd Mulvad and Henning Sloth Pedersen, two Greenlandic doctors, “A seventy-year old who has lived on the traditional Inuit diet of seal and whale has coronary arteries that are just as elastic as those of a twenty-year old Dane.”



SCULPTURE BY JOE TALIRUNILI, PHOTOGRAPH BY DEPT. OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT, COURTESY OF THE INUIT ART FOUNDATION

There are also social reasons for supporting the traditional diet. "Inuit don't get a lot of identity out of eating beef," explained Michael Kusagak, a resident of Rankin Inlet in Nunavut. Contamination is therefore a cultural as well as a physical threat, because it could undermine the ritual sharing of the kill, an activity that is vital to the Inuit sense of community. Given the fear that contamination inspires, such consequences are unavoidable to some degree. In *Our Stolen Future*, their 1996 book about the health effects and global spread of POPs, zoologist Theo Colborn and her colleagues describe how neighboring groups uncharacteristically shunned one Canadian Inuit community of 450, severing

relations and discouraging intermarriage, because they heard it was home to "the PCB people."

But POPs are not the only global environmental threat the Inuit are facing. Many Inuit are making the unnerving discovery that their traditional storage cellars, cut into the permafrost, are

dripping water for the first time ever, an indication that the Arctic climate is changing—and fast.

Long before the human hand was implicated in global warming, climate experts predicted that if the Earth were to heat up, the polar regions would be the first to feel it—and at a pace significantly faster than the planet as a whole. Scientists with the United Nations Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change now estimate that the average annual temperature at the poles could rise by as much as 4° to 6° Celsius over the next 80 to 100 years, compared with the 1 to 3.5 degrees of warming forecast for the globe as a whole (assuming a doubling of the pre-industrial atmospheric carbon dioxide level). The poles are disproportionately threatened because the warming will reduce the "albedo effect"—the reflection of sunlight by the ice caps. Some 80 to 90 percent of the solar radiation that strikes the polar ice is reflected back into space, leaving the poles cool. But rising temperatures will melt the ice and expose more land and water, which will absorb more sunlight, creating a feedback loop that accelerates ice melt and the overall warming process.

The Inuit have particular reason to worry about the warming. Over the past 40 years, temperatures in the Arctic have risen by about 1° Celsius overall. But

northern Canada, eastern Siberia, and Alaska have warmed at least three times faster than that. In Fairbanks, Alaska, a summer day is now 11 percent warmer on average than it was 30 years ago, and winter temperatures now drop to -40° much less frequently than they once did. In Arctic Canada, ground temperatures have risen even faster than air temperatures, melting the tundra and rendering the landscape increasingly treacherous. The Geological Survey of Canada reports that the zone of continuous permafrost has retreated some 100 kilometers over the last century, leaving in its path areas of sunken, uneven land that destabilize houses, roads, oil wells, and other man-made structures.

The World Wide Fund for Nature recently estimated that at the current rate of warming, large areas of frozen tundra in the North American Arctic could disappear over the next 50 to 100 years. This would radically alter the habitats of the plants and animals essential to Inuit life. Some of the change could be positive: in parts of Alaska, the growing season is now up to 20 percent longer, raising the potential for new types of farming and higher yields. But native residents worry more about the negative effects of warming, such as the lower productivity of berries and green plants, and the decline in rainfall, which has left areas traditionally low in precipitation bone-dry. The warming has also affected northern animal populations, with some migrating north at least two weeks early, and others—dogfish, king salmon, moose, lynx, and even certain insects—expanding well beyond their previous ranges. In June 1999, Iqualuit resident Brenda Mowbray was shocked to find a red-breasted robin—a species that rarely migrates above treeline—on her outdoor bird feeder for the first time ever.

But it is the effect of warming on the polar ice cap that most threatens the Inuit. Between 1978 and 1996, Arctic sea-ice cover shrank by as much as 5.5 percent—a visible loss of almost 1 million square kilometers, according to satellite images taken at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. Other studies suggest that the Arctic ice cap is 40 percent thinner on average than it was in the 1970s. The retreat has been so rapid, says Douglas Martinson, a scientist at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, that at its present rate the pole's summer ice cover could completely vanish within the next 350 years. Other computer models suggest a more accelerated loss, with the thickest, most stable portions of the ice vanishing in half a century.

Loss of the sea ice would likely doom many marine species the Inuit value, like the Pacific walrus, which subsists wholly on food found at the edge of the ice pack. The walruses also depend on the ice as a place to rest and bear their young, says George Divoky, a wildlife scientist at the University

Between 1978 and 1996, Arctic sea-ice cover shrank by as much as 5.5 percent—a visible loss of almost 1 million square kilometers.

of Alaska's Institute for Arctic Biology. But these massive creatures may be reluctant to venture onto ice floes that could be too thin to support their weight, so as the ice weakens, the walrus feeding and breeding cycles will suffer. A major walrus decline would injure Inuit hunting. "For those who depend on marine mammals and fish, ice is a giver and supporter of life," says Caleb Pungowiyi, an Alaskan native and director of the Natural Resources Program of the Eskimo Walrus Commission in Nome. "When ice is late, hunting is late or sometimes does not fully materialize."

THE HUNTING ECONOMY

"Our aim is to preserve the best of the old as we adopt the best of the new.... The surest guarantee of long-term environmental protection and sustainable development in the Arctic is to have Inuit on the land, hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering—taking care of our homeland." This is how Aqqaluk Lynge, a native Greenlander and the head of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference outlined his vision for the Arctic in a speech to the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development in 1997. The ICC represents Inuit people across the Arctic, and Lynge's words resonate widely among his constituents, who look forward to strengthening their culture and achieving at least some degree of economic self-sufficiency in the coming decades.

Lynge and other prominent Inuit leaders hope to integrate the "mixed" Inuit economy, which combines cash and subsistence elements, with a development process that protects the Arctic environment and its natural resources. But this vision also includes selling local products, such as sealskin bags and whale meat, in global markets. The Inuit see global trade as essential for obtaining the equipment and other imported supplies that now underlie their hunting culture: rifles, boats, snowmobiles, outboard motors, and so on.

But this approach runs counter to one of the most powerful currents in wildlife legislation worldwide. In the United States, for example, the MMPA, the same law that thwarted the Pelly Bay marionettes, prohibits the import of any products that originate from marine mammals. (U.S. officials sometimes even impound the handmade clothing of Canadian Inuit visitors.) The MMPA was passed following intense lobbying by Greenpeace and other environmental and animal rights groups, who wished to sanction commercial sealers in places like Newfoundland, where large numbers of baby harp seals were being clubbed to death on the ice. (These commercial sealers were not Inuit.) The law was later broadened to cover all marine mammals.

Similar lobbying also spurred the European

Commission (now the European Union) to pass its 1983 Sealskin Directive, a trade restriction that has had even more serious—though unintended—consequences for the Inuit. The Directive only prohibits the import into Europe of pelts from two species, harp and hooded seals, neither of which the Inuit typically hunt. (The Inuit prefer ringed seals, which number an estimated 2.5 million in Canada alone.) The lawmakers even sought to safeguard the livelihoods of Inuit sealers by specifically exempting them from the ban. But this effort ultimately failed: European consumers came to see all seal pelts as environmentally suspect, and the market collapsed.

As the 1980s wore on, the European Directive began to undermine global demand for Inuit goods, and local economies in Canada and Greenland were devastated. In Canada's Northwest Territories, Inuit sealers went from selling more than 48,000 ringed seal pelts in the 1976–77 season to only 1,182 in 1993–94. The value of the pelt trade—the top source of Inuit cash income at the time—plummeted by 98 percent within just seven years. The collapse of the sealskin trade is thought to be the single biggest disruption to Canadian Inuit society since the forced relocations of the 1950s and 1960s—and a significant factor behind the high suicide rates, increased dependency on government handouts, and overall cultural decay.

The Inuit are trying to bring legal challenges against the MMPA and other trade restrictions, but so far to little avail. Their primary argument is that the MMPA represents an unfair trade barrier and thus violates the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the global "guarantor" of free trade. But thus far, the United States has refused to alter its ban, claiming it is necessary for protecting marine mammals. The Inuit counter that not all marine mammals are endangered, but the United States still won't budge. Inuit groups continue to push for an exemption for their products, and Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy has even raised the possibility of creating an "aboriginal trade network" to allow regulated trading among Inuit nations under the WTO. What the Inuit really want, though, is for the U.S. government to harmonize the MMPA with the 1975 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the international treaty governing trade in endangered plants and animals. More scientifically grounded than the MMPA, CITES prohibits trade in those species that are actually endangered, but permits regulated trade in those that aren't.

Some Inuit aren't waiting for international negotiators to resolve the problem. Two days before assuming his role as the first-ever premier of Nunavut, Paul Okalik donned a sealskin vest to greet reporters—an indication of how he hopes to jump-

start the new territory's economy. Already, Inuit regional development corporations in Nunavut and Nunavik have announced plans to revive the commercial ringed seal hunt, based on what they believe will be a sustainable annual harvest of up to 24,000 animals. Their idea is to market sealskins, ringed seal meat, and oil capsules containing Omega-3 and other vitamins to health-conscious Asian consumers, who value the nutritional benefits of marine mammal products. If successful, the plan will put an estimated \$1.2 million in the pockets of Inuit hunters.

WHAT IS "SUBSISTENCE WHALING?"

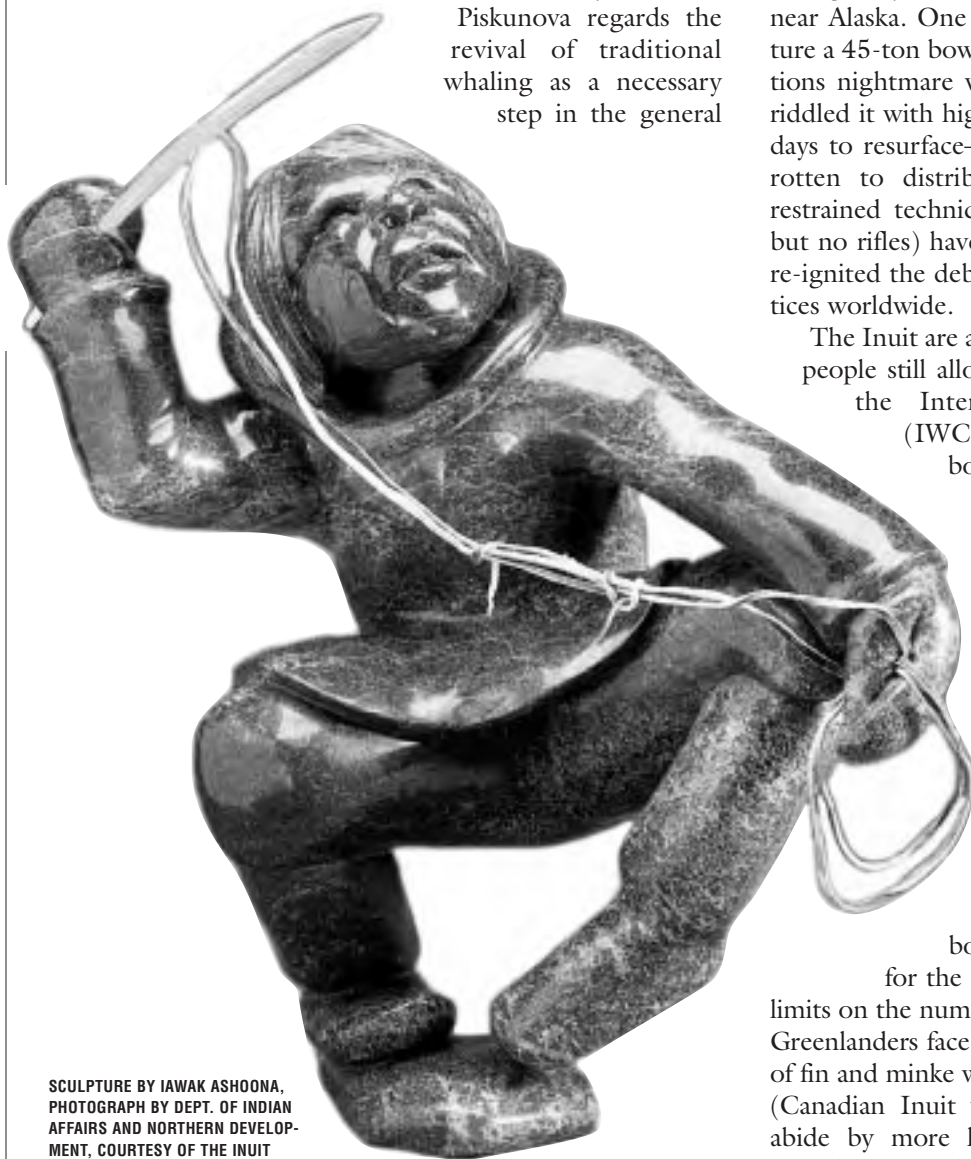
"Whaling should be developed today and preserved for the future," says Lyubov Piskunova, an Inuk (singular for "Inuit") from the Chukotka village of Lorino. "Whaling is essential to the preservation of the traditional culture."

Like many Inuit, Piskunova regards the revival of traditional whaling as a necessary step in the general

drive for cultural and economic renewal. In Canada and Siberia, recent efforts to revive the bowhead whale hunt in particular hold special significance for the Inuit. In a recent survey of some 257 hunters and elders by the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, almost all respondents agreed that the revival of the bowhead ritual would restore cultural value to Inuit communities, reinforce the spirit of sharing, and strengthen fragmented social relationships among young people.

The Canadian government restricted bowhead hunts in the mid-20th century after non-Inuit whalers, coveting the whales for their thick blubber and rich oil, hunted them to near-extinction. But under recent land-claims agreements, the government now permits Inuit groups to resume the hunt on a regulated basis. Conservationists have strongly criticized this move: the bowhead is still one of the most seriously endangered of the large whales, numbering only some 700 around Nunavut and 7,500 near Alaska. One Canadian village's attempt to capture a 45-ton bowhead in 1996 became a public relations nightmare when the whale sank after hunters riddled it with high-powered rifle bullets and it took days to resurface—by which time the meat was too rotten to distribute. Recent efforts using more restrained techniques (an explosive-tipped harpoon but no rifles) have proven more successful, but have re-ignited the debate about traditional whaling practices worldwide.

The Inuit are among only a handful of the world's people still allowed to kill large whales. In 1986, the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the 40-member international body that oversees management of the world's whale populations, imposed a moratorium on the commercial hunting of all great whales. But under its special "aboriginal clause," the IWC permits indigenous groups to hunt limited quotas of certain species, like bowhead, to satisfy local subsistence and nutritional needs, or to uphold long-standing cultural traditions. Inuit and other native groups in Alaska and Chukotka, for instance, are allowed to land a total of 280 bowhead whales and 620 gray whales for the 1998–2002 period, with additional limits on the number of whales taken in any one year. Greenlanders face similar restrictions on the numbers of fin and minke whales they can catch over this time. (Canadian Inuit whalers, meanwhile, only have to abide by more lenient national regulations, since Canada dropped out of the IWC in 1982 on the



SCULPTURE BY IAWAK ASHOONA,
PHOTOGRAPH BY DEPT. OF INDIAN
AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOP-
MENT, COURTESY OF THE INUIT
ART FOUNDATION

grounds that it could manage the whale hunt better domestically. Outside the Arctic, natives of St. Vincent and the Grenadines are the only other group with aboriginal whaling privileges under the IWC.)

But adhering to IWC guidelines will be increasingly tricky. Critics argue that the Inuit already strain the definition of what it means to be “aboriginal” because many now hunt with powerful rifles, snowmobiles, and helicopters, which can greatly increase the take. In 1995, the situation became even foggier when it was revealed that much of the grey whale meat caught by Chukotkan natives was actually fed to foxes on fur farms—a far cry from the IWC definition of “subsistence” use.

Many Inuit hunters *would* prefer to sell their whale meat and use the proceeds to buy other foods or goods. But current IWC rules do not recognize so indirect a form of “subsistence.” Such trade could put the Inuit in the commercial whaling category, potentially jeopardizing their right to whale at all. Already, Inuit whalers in Greenland must satisfy IWC officials that they are not selling too much whale meat even in regional shops and supermarkets.

The regulations smack of cultural imperialism, according to Arne Kalland, an anthropologist at the University of Oslo in Norway. Kalland argues that under current IWC rules, if the Inuit wish to retain their cultural right to whale, they must isolate themselves from the global market and remain a static, traditional people. Representatives from the Inuit Circumpolar Conference echoed similar concerns in their opening statement at the IWC’s annual meeting in Grenada in May 1999, when they announced, “We will not allow ourselves to become ‘live museum displays.’” Instead of using black-and-white categories like “commercial” and “subsistence” whaling, the ICC would like the IWC to return to its original mandate of managing, rather than prohibiting, global whaling.

For now, at least, indigenous groups in most of the Arctic do appear to be whaling at sustainable levels, according to Henry Huntington, an independent expert on aboriginal subsistence whaling. But Huntington concedes that this has been difficult to verify, because scientists can’t always tell whether hunting or some other pressure is causing a whale population to decline. And he agrees that creating a market demand for whale meat could be problematic, since it would give native hunters an incentive to essentially convert whales into cash.

Paul Watson, director of the anti-whaling Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, based in California, has similar concerns. He is worried that indigenous hunters will contract with commercial whaling vessels to actually kill and process the whales the IWC allots them, especially since a kilo of whale meat and blubber can fetch up to \$300. Watson argues that all

whaling in defiance of IWC mandates is “outlaw” activity, whether it is commercial whaling or Canada’s renewal of the bowhead hunts, which the IWC has formally opposed. Watson also sees the increasingly broad interpretation of the IWC aboriginal clause as part of a larger ploy to revive commercial whaling by countries like Japan and Iceland, which don’t have aboriginal whaling people yet continue to claim a “cultural” right to whale. The tensions between conservationists and the Inuit intensified in February 1999, when the ICC charged that it had obtained a confidential Greenpeace memo outlining a plan to end all whaling, including indigenous hunts. Greenpeace denied the charges and affirmed that it was only opposed to commercial, and not native, whaling—although it concedes that these categories are increasingly blurred.

At stake is a fundamental, and not easily resolved, conflict between protecting whale species (not all of which are as threatened as the bowhead), and upholding the right of an indigenous group to retain its cultural heritage. While many Inuit communities still rely on whales for food, others don’t—but claim that losing the traditional hunt will weaken their identity. The Inuit see the IWC member states (or at least those that support the IWC’s current regulations) as hypocritical, because they support indigenous self-determination at the global level, but then oppose whaling. And animal rights and environmental groups, the Inuit argue, are city dwellers who don’t understand the subsistence life. In Nunavut, a “Greenpeace” is a derogatory term for someone who has a purely emotional bond with animals, and doesn’t recognize northerners’ dependence on them. Over the next few years, the IWC Scientific Committee hopes to develop a new, more scientifically rigorous framework for addressing aboriginal whaling. Anti-whaling activists hope this will mean stricter catch limits on indigenous hunts. The Alaskan Inuit fear they could lose their bowhead quota forever.

BLACK GOLD IN A WHITE LAND

As Inuit groups face the realization that they may never be able to pursue what they most want to do—expand trade in their traditional products—they are increasingly looking to other economic possibilities. But the most lucrative alternative could also be among the most environmentally destructive: development of the Arctic’s extensive mineral, oil, and gas resources. If not carefully regulated, such activity could threaten wildlife—and conflict with one of the Inuit’s few other economic opportunities: tourism in the Arctic’s remaining pristine natural areas.

In Canada, ironically, it was resentment of government oil and gas exploration that, during the 1960s, first incited the Inuit fight for greater control

of their lands. In the 1980s, Inuit activists succeeded in blocking the planned Arctic Pilot Project, a massive natural gas development that would have brought ice-breaking supertankers into their main seal, walrus, and whale hunting grounds. But now that they have attained some degree of control over their resources (at least in Alaska, Canada, and Greenland), the Inuit have shown greater interest in developing them. A new search for oil is underway in Greenland, and the newly formed Bureau of Minerals and Petroleum is inviting the world's oil companies to invest in "one of the few frontier areas with a potential for giant oil and gas fields." In 1996, Greenland's Home Rule government (which includes Inuit representatives) awarded the first offshore exploration and production licenses for the island since 1979, to an industry consortium led by Norway's Statoil. Last summer, the first offshore exploration well in more than 20 years was to be spudded in West Greenland.

In the Canadian Arctic, where oil extraction has proven prohibitively expensive, the focus has turned to mining—although this hasn't always been the preferred development path. In the late 1980s, Inuit land claims agreements interrupted plans for what would have been the world's biggest uranium mine, in the then-Northwest Territories—a project that would have brought major landscape disruption to the area. A variety of smaller lead- and zinc-mining operations took its place. But now that the Inuit have subsurface rights to some one-tenth of the land granted to them under the 1993 Nunavut Agreement—including many of the region's most geologically-promising areas—minerals exploration is attracting favorable interest. Copper, gold, silver, lead, zinc, iron, and diamonds are among the possibilities (but not uranium, which is considered too risky). Some residents see mining as crucial to the territory's future: "Real economic growth in Nunavut will not be achieved without accelerating the current pace of mineral exploration and mine development," a June 1999 op-ed piece in the territory's *Nunatsiag News* proclaimed. One project in particular is being heralded as key to the development of northern Canada. The international mining giant Rio Tinto plans to spend \$1.28 billion to develop the Diavik diamond project on a 2,000-hectare site 300 kilometers northeast of Yellowknife. Elsewhere, low mineral prices have frightened off many would-be prospectors; last summer, for instance, Nunavut saw only two gold exploration projects, both scaled-down versions of earlier plans. Other nickel, copper, diamond, and gold projects have been suspended indefinitely—for the time being, at least, too expensive to pursue.

Alaska's North Slope, in contrast, has seen some of the most active resource development of any Inuit

territory. Around some of the older oil fields like Prudhoe Bay, the effects are readily apparent. Spills and pollution, road and pipeline construction, seismic testing, and routine oil production—all of this has taken its toll on wildlife and the landscape in general. But oil development has also done much to improve the living conditions of Alaskan Inuit relative to other Arctic native groups: in 1971, each of the 80,000 native people enrolled under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement was given 100 shares in one of 13 regional public for-profit corporations, plus collective mineral rights to their lands. And since 1980, every Alaskan has received an annual share of state oil royalties; in 1998, every man, woman, and child received a dividend check for \$1,540. Public revenue from oil development has paid for the construction of modern high schools as well as water infrastructure and other improvements.

As a result, Alaskan Inuit have generally supported and even invited oil development on their lands—particularly when a gallon of gas costs over \$2.50, says North Slope Borough Mayor Ben Nageak. "Today, the oil industry is no longer seen as an adversary by the Inupiat people," Nageak proclaimed in a 1998 speech. "It is now viewed as a partner.... Revenues from oil development have been directly responsible for the revival of our traditions, language, and dance."

After years of gradually declining production, Alaska's North Slope oil fields are now in a boom period, spurred by lower costs resulting from technical advances and more cost-efficient management. In 1998, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt agreed to allow limited oil development on some 1.7 million hectares of the National Petroleum Reserve, a 9.3 million-hectare expanse of tundra on the Beaufort Sea near Barrow, Alaska. State politicians and oil executives, eager to prospect in the area, had convinced him that the drilling wouldn't damage pristine ecosystems like Lake Teshekpuk and the Coleville River, or compromise the hunting culture of the reserve's 6,000 residents, 90 percent of whom are Inuit.

But in the reserve's four Inuit communities, support for the new oil development is mixed. For example, in Nuiqsut, a village consisting of little more than several prefab houses, a store, and a school, the ambivalence has been easy to read, even though the local publicly-owned Kuukpik Corporation would get a share of any oil royalties. "I understand it would [bring] more tax dollars," resident Bernice Kaigelak told Babbitt at a 1998 town meeting, "but are we going to pay the price? We are the people of the land and we'll continue to be the people of the land. The oil will come and go and we'll still be here." But other Inuit, like Warren Matumeak, former planning director for Alaska's North Slope Borough, support

the move, believing that the oil industry and wildlife can co-exist in the area as long as proper permits and restrictions are in place.

To the dismay of many environmental groups, the majority of Alaskan Inuit also support the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—a 600,000-hectare wilderness area on the Beaufort Sea. The area is home to two Alaskan native corporations, the Kaktovik Inupiat Corporation and the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, which own 38,000 hectares of the Refuge's coastal plain, and favor development of the Refuge's rich oil deposits. The local Inuit hope to use oil revenues for such amenities as flush toilets, police and fire protection, and treatment of drinking water. But they face unanimous opposition from another of Alaska's native groups, the Gwich'in Athabascan Indians, an inland people numbering 7,000. For the last 12,000 years, the Gwich'in have depended almost exclusively on the caribou herds that migrate through the Refuge, and their way of life is more likely to suffer from development than the coastal-dwelling Inuit.

But as oil development—and climate change—continue apace in Alaska, there are signs that even some Inuit may have had enough. In April 1999, two Yup'ik (members of a western Alaskan Inuit group) accompanied a Gwich'in representative and Greenpeace activists thousands of kilometers to London to tell company directors and shareholders at BP Amoco's general meeting that the accelerated drive for oil threatens native Alaskan culture and livelihood. In October, North Slope Inupiat groups filed suit against the U.S. Minerals Management Service to challenge BP's \$500 million Northstar project—the first Arctic offshore oil development. Northstar will require construction of a 9.6-kilometer pipeline beneath the frozen seabed near Prudhoe Bay. The proposed pipeline has never been tested in Arctic conditions, and an environmental impact statement issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimated that there is an 11 to 24 percent chance of a major oil spill over the project's 15-year lifetime. If the pipeline does rupture in the shifting ice, the leaked oil could threaten the 21 resident marine mammal species upon which the Inuit depend, including polar bears, bowhead whales, and ringed seals. U.S. federal agencies have already approved the project, which could produce as much as 145 million barrels of oil, and the state of Alaska was scheduled to rule on the pipeline in December 1999. So far, BP has begun construction only on the ice roads that will be used to haul gravel to shore up Seal Island, the man-made site of the offshore drilling facility—but development is expected to intensify in preparation for the start of production by early 2001.

AKISUSSAASSUSEQ

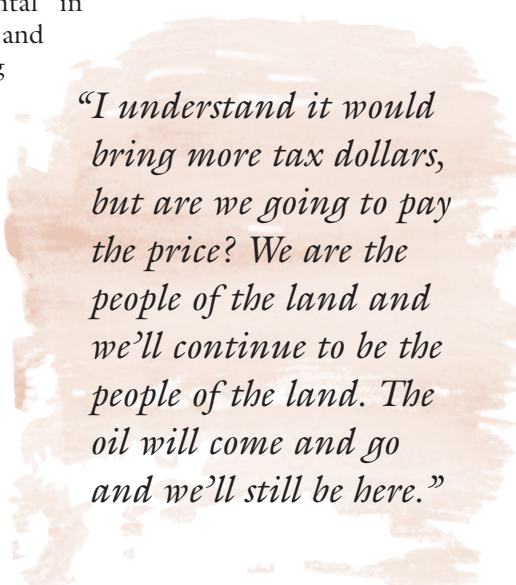
In the winter of 1998, a Canadian aid mission dubbed the "Inuit Express" delivered some 17 tons of food, medical supplies, and hunting equipment directly into the hands of nearly 1,300 Inuit and Chukchi residents in the eastern Siberian communities of Sireniki, Yanrakynnot, and Enurmino. The effort was jointly coordinated by the Canadian government and by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference which has joined other groups in bringing relief to crisis-stricken Chukotka in recent years. While the Inuit face many obstacles to achieving self-sufficiency, one thing is certain: despite their disparate homelands, they have a strong sense of unity.

Since its founding in 1977, the ICC has been instrumental in maintaining cultural and political ties among the Arctic's far-flung native communities (all Inuit are automatically members). For years, ICC officials kept an empty seat at the table during their meetings as a reminder of the absence of their Siberian kin, who were unable to participate in the group because of the Cold War. Following an emotional reunion in

1992—the Chukotkans were unaware the ICC even existed—the Siberian Inuit now voice their concerns to the group, although communication remains difficult.

The ICC grew out of the Inuit's recognition that they need to present a unified front against forces affecting them as a whole, including the spread of chemical contaminants, the anti-hunting lobby, and international trade restrictions. The group works at the global level to promote Inuit rights and interests, to protect the Arctic environment, and to seek active Inuit participation in a variety of international fora. For instance, the group has served as the Inuit voice at the United Nations since 1984. It has also played a major role in the U.N. Environment Programme's ongoing effort to negotiate a treaty on the global elimination of 12 of the world's most notorious POPs.

The ICC is one of four native groups with permanent (though non-voting) seats at the Arctic Council, which was established by the eight Arctic nations in



"I understand it would bring more tax dollars, but are we going to pay the price? We are the people of the land and we'll continue to be the people of the land. The oil will come and go and we'll still be here."

1996 to address environmental protection and sustainable development in the region. The Council has more formal indigenous participation than is typical of international institutions, but it's not yet clear

whether the Inuit will benefit from their involvement. So far, the Council has focused mostly on specific conservation concerns, and less on broader social problems. And the U.S. government, which is chairing the Council for the next two years, plans to block all discussion of marine mammal trade.

"Our culture existed when Babylon was built. The nations of India, Canada, China, or England, are mere children next to us."

Frustration with international bodies such as the Arctic Council and the IWC has led to a growing Inuit interest in local or regional alternatives. For instance, the ICC is investigating the possibility of creating an Inuit-only whaling commission to "insulate" Inuit whaling from the IWC. The Inuit also participate in another regional alliance, the North Atlantic Marine Mammals Commission, which was founded in 1992 to strengthen Arctic cooperation in the management of marine mammals not regulated by the IWC, such as small whales, seals, and walrus.

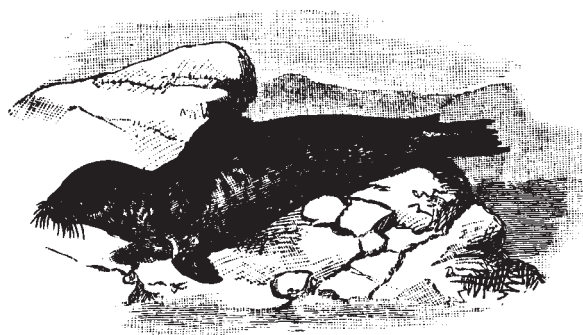
But the emergence of these organizations doesn't mean that the Inuit are committed to indiscriminate hunting. Last April, a group of native hunters living near Cook's Inlet, Alaska decided collectively to suspend their beluga whaling—an activity that, like the bowhead hunt, has long been a part of native Alaskan culture (see Endpiece, page 40). Beluga aren't covered under the IWC and there are no U.S. restrictions on the hunt at all. But many of the native hunters now want the state to set strict quotas for the

kill. They have good reason for demanding action: in recent years, commercial over-hunting by native peoples has caused the local beluga population to plummet. Since 1994, the number of beluga in Cook's Inlet has fallen by nearly one-half, to just 347 animals. The beluga hunt is lucrative—the meat sells for \$6 a pound in Anchorage markets—but the hunters can see that at its current rate, the take is clearly unsustainable.

It is this type of self-restraint that has allowed the Inuit to endure long enough to become one of the world's oldest peoples. "Our culture existed when Babylon was built," the Inuit-rights advocate Rachel Attituq Qitsualik wrote in a recent newspaper opinion piece. "The nations of India, Canada, China, or England, are mere children next to us." The Inuit lay claim to an ethic they call "Akisussaassuseq," a sense of responsibility toward the land, the water, and all the creatures that live there. The Inuit had achieved an environmentally sustainable society thousands of years ago—they had little choice but to do so. Today, of course, they can choose just like the rest of us. Choice—in all sorts of bewildering forms—is a sort of shockwave effect of the collision with mainstream culture.

In order to survive that collision, the Inuit must be freer to make their own choices than "southern people" have typically allowed them to be. It would be tragic to deny them the adaptive social space they so obviously need. But increasingly, the Inuit face the prospect of another kind of tragedy: the possibility that they will, in effect, choose to lay aside the old ethic, and destroy the resource base upon which their culture is built. Indigenous peoples are frequently credited with special knowledge of nature—of the animals and plants they live with so closely. But in their struggle for self-determination, they also have a great deal to teach us about human nature—and perhaps about the future of humanity as a whole.

Lisa Mastny is a staff researcher at the Worldwatch Institute.



Nineteenth century engraving of a bearded seal.