Sustainable Development Law & Policy

Volume 8
Issue 3 *Spring 2008: Environmental Change in Polar Regions*

Article 11

Supporting Adaptation: A Priority for Action on Climate Change for Canadian Inuit

James D. Ford

Supporting Adaptation:

A Priority for Action on Climate Change for Canadian Inuit

*by Dr. James D. Ford**

Introduction

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

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

Canada's Inuit Population

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

Figure 1: Inuit Regions of Canada with Locations of Inuit Communities[7]

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

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

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

[15] James D. Ford et al., *Climate Change and Hazards Associated with Ice Use in Northern Canada* (forthcoming 2008); *see also* INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON CLIMATE CHANGE, FOURTH ASSESSMENT REPORT, WORKING GROUP II REPORT "IMPACTS, ADAPTATION AND VULNERABILITY" (2007), *available at* http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg2.htm (last visited Mar. 26, 2008).

[16] Watt-Cloutier, *supra* note 4.

[17] Center for International Environmental Law, Global Warming and Human Rights Gets Hearing on World Stage, http://www.ciel.org/Climate/IACHR_Inuit_5Mar07.html (last visited Mar. 26, 2008).

[18] Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, *available at* http://lois.justice.gc.ca (Ottawa 1982).

[19] Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, s. 25(b).

[20] Davin Budreau & Gordon McBean, *Climate Change, Adaptive Capacity and Policy Direction in the Canadian North: Can We Learn Anything from the Collapse of the East Coast Cod Fishery?*, 12 MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES FOR GLOBAL CHANGE 1305 (2007).

[21] ASSESSMENT, *supra* note 2.

[22] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1771 U.N.T.S. 164 (1992), *available at* http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf (last visited Mar. 26, 2008).

[23] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22, art. 2.

[24] AVOIDING DANGEROUS CLIMATE CHANGE (H. J. Schellnhuber et al. eds., 2006).

[25] Timothy M. Lenton et al., Tipping Elements in the Earth's Climate System, 105 PROCEEDINGS NAT. ACAD. SCI. 1786 (2008).

[26] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22.

[27] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22, art. 4.1(b).

[28] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22, art. 4(e).

[29] UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, (1998), p. 21.

[30] Saleemul Huq et al., *Linking Climate Adaptation and Development: A Synthesis of Six Case Studies from Asia and Africa*, 36 IDS BULLETIN 117 (2005).

[31] UNFCCC, Bali Action Plan (2007).

[32] James Ford et al., *Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change in the Arctic: The Case of Nunavut, Canada*, 60 ARCTIC 150 (2007).

[33] R. Ambrose, Notes for an address to the UNFCCC Workshop on the Adaptation Fund (Edmonton, Alberta 2006).

[34] Ford et al., *supra* note 32.

[35] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22, art. 2.

[36] IPCC, *supra* note 1; *see also*, T. M. L. Wigley, *The Climate Change Commitment*, 307 SCI. 1766 (2005).

[37] Lenton, *supra* note 25.

[38] Budreau & McBean, *supra* note 20; *see also*, John Newton et al., *Climate Change and Natural Hazards in Northern Canada: Integrating Indigenous Perspectives with Government Policy*, 10 MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES FOR GLOBAL CHANGE 541 (2005).

[39] James D. Ford et al., *Climate Change in the Arctic: Current and Future Vulnerability in Two Inuit Communities in Canada*, 174 GEOGRAPHICAL J. 45 (2008).

[40] G. Laidler, J. Ford, W. A. Gough & T. Ikummaq, *Assessing Inuit Vulnerability to Sea Ice Change: An Example from Igloolik, Nunavut*, *available at* http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/projdb/pdf/168d_e.pdf (last visited Apr. 10, 2008).

[41] James D. Ford et al., *Vulnerability to Climate Change in Igloolik, Nunavut: What We Can Learn from the Past and Present*, 42 POLAR REC. 127 (2006).

[42] Ford et al., *supra* note 32.

[43] STAR Logistics Information, Storm Studies in the Arctic website, http://www.starnetwork.ca/ (last visited Apr. 10, 2008).

[44] Ford et al., *supra* note 39.

[45] Ford et al., *supra* note 32.

[46] Shari Gearhead et al., *"It's Not that Simple": A Collaborative Comparison of Sea Ice Environments, Their Uses, Observed Changes, and Adaptations in Barrow, Alaska, USA, and Clyde River, Nunavut, Canada*, 35 AMBIO: J. HUM. ENV'T, June 2006, at 203.

[47] Ford et al., *supra* note 32.

[48] Budreau & McBean, *supra* note 20; *see also*, John Newton et al., *Climate Change and Natural Hazards in Northern Canada: Integrating Indigenous Perspectives with Government Policy*, 10 MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES FOR GLOBAL CHANGE 541 (2005).

[49] UNFCCC Bali Action Plan, *supra* note 31.

[50] J. Ford, *Emerging Trends in Climate Change Policy: The Role of Adaptation*, 3 INT'L PUB. POL'Y REV., Mar. 2005, at 5, *available at* http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ippr/download/volume-3-2/Ford.pdf (last visited Apr. 10, 2008).

[51] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22, art. 4.1(e)

[52] Budreau & McBean, *supra* note 20.

[53] UNFCCC, *supra* note 22.

[54] Ford et al., *supra* note 39.