

Gwich'in Council International



The word "Gwich'in" means "people of the land", and it refers to a people who have lived in the Arctic since before the political boundaries were drawn on maps dividing Alaska and Canada. Gwich'in have occupied this area since time immemorial, or according to conventional belief, for as long as 20,000 years and counting.

In 1999, the Gwich'in of the United States of America and Canada acting through the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments in Alaska, the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in the Yukon and the Gwich'in Tribal Council in the Northwest Territories have formalized its association called Gwich'in Council International.

GCI represents Gwich'in living in fifteen town, villages and hamlets across northeast Alaska to northern Yukon and the Northwest Territories in Canada. There are approximately nine thousand Gwich'in people who make their home on or near the migratory route of the Porcupine River Caribou Herd in communities in Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

As a Permanent Participant of the Arctic Council, the Gwich'in collectively and collaboratively, through GCI, work together, to protect and promote their interest on an international level. A main focus for the Gwich'in is sustainable development as they continue to adapt to, understand and accept economic development, social development, environmental protection and cultural diversity.

The Arctic Council is a high level forum to provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common arctic issues, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic. (The Council does not deal with matters of military security.)

In Ottawa in 1996, the Arctic Council affirmed its commitment to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Arctic, including special recognition of the special relationship and unique contributions to the arctic of indigenous people and their communities;

The Arctic Council also recognized the traditional knowledge of the indigenous people of the Arctic and their communities and taking note of its importance and that of Arctic science and research to the collective understanding of the circumpolar Arctic;

And desiring further to provide a means for promoting cooperative activities to address Arctic issues requiring circumpolar cooperation, and to ensure full consultation with and the involvement of indigenous people and their communities and other inhabitants of the Arctic in such activities;

The category of Permanent Participation was created to provide for active participation and full consultation with the Arctic indigenous representatives within the Arctic Council.

At the territorial level, in the document “A Northern Vision: A Stronger North and a Better Canada” Under the heading “Speaking with a Northern Voice” an excerpt reads: Circumpolar forums are rapidly becoming more important in the global discussions around economic development, environmental protection and transportation. The voices of Aboriginal northerners have often been the first to speak in these forums. Northern issues must be addressed by Northern voices. We need to build on Existing cultural, societal and trade ties with our circumpolar neighbours. It goes on to say, “We need to meet more frequently with the Canadian Aboriginal representatives to better understand common issues and priorities that will better inform the federal government in its dealing with our international neighbours.

Closer to home, the Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement between Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada and the Gwich'in as represented by the Gwich'in Tribal Council provides Gwich'in with self governing instruments such as Environmental and Resource Boards in the Northwest Territories. These Boards act as Institutions of Public Government and perform as quasi-judicial administrative tribunals that permit or advise on undertakings and allow residents of the Gwich'in Settlement Area (GSA) an opportunity to comment and intervene on such undertakings within the GSA. One of the main environmental regulatory creatures of the Gwich'in Land Claims Agreement was the establishment of the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board. Half of the MVEIRB's members are nominated by First Nations through the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated, the Tlicho Government and the Deh Cho First Nations, whereas the Crown and Territorial Government nominate the other half. The federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs appoints all MVEIRB members and funds MVEIRB operations. It is important to note that although MVEIRB receives it's funding from the Crown it is not an extension of Indian and Northern Affairs and acts as an independent administrative tribunal where Board members represent the interests of all residents of the Mackenzie Valley when they deliberate on a development and not the interests of their sponsoring groups.

The International community, along with GCI, is of strong current belief that there is little understanding in advances of Indigenous education and the opportunities and barriers of Gwich'in focused curricula. This opinion, partnered with an expected surge in oil and gas development in Mackenzie Delta region and crumbling municipal infrastructure in Canada's north, demonstrates the need to inform and engage Youth and Adult Learners in the fields of environmental science and engineering (including the role of climate change). GCI feels that environmental science and engineering should effectively incorporate and integrate Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge (TK) in a manner that is sensitive, authentic and fully representative.

Developing scientific capacity, through TK Holders and Scientists, will allow Gwich'in to most actively participate in Board proceedings such as Public Hearings held for the Oil and Gas Undertakings or Federal and Territorial sponsored municipal infrastructure capital projects and exercise regulatory initiatives set within the GLCA.

Climate Change is one of the most pressing problems facing the Gwich'in and other Indigenous Peoples. Climate Change threatens the ability of Gwich'in to live off the land as they are hunters, trappers, gatherers and fishermen. Changes in temperatures and rainfall are radically altering natural patterns, making Gwich'in strangers in their own land. Our Chairperson Joe Linklater reported: "The Vuntut Gwitchin are "peoples of the lakes" there are 2000 lakes in Old Crow flats and lakes are now draining. Land is being degraded increasingly rapidly. There is uncertainty around the traditional way of life. So what good is traditional knowledge if people are uncertain about the future? Technology is changing and adaptation creates STRESS in the community. How do we adapt and use our traditional knowledge?"

Climate Change is bringing immediate threats to the safety and security of the Gwich'in, not only through concerns known as "acts of God" but also the affect it will have on our caribou. Caribou is our life. It's our main food source, it our shelter and clothing. The Gwich'in feel more vulnerable to the effects of climate change as it compounds many other threats such as: substandard housing, our health systems, increasing development and exploration degrading traditional lands and waters which affects their resilience.

As the Arctic receives increased attention and its local, territorial, international, and global importance emerges so does the need for Northern Indigenous Peoples and Arctic governments to undertake research and policy development.

Policy development needs to be community based. The community has to be empowered to run their own processes in order to address climate change on a concrete basis. Policies developed by outsiders tend to frame the issues in terms foreign to the community people and in turn will be ignored by the people.

Policies developed by the community needs to be supported and endorsed by the political leadership in order for the people to see the value of their participation which in turn will drive future participation and demonstrate political will.

As all levels of governments consult and engage Gwich'in and other Indigenous People of the circumpolar Arctic in decision-making and policy development on adaptation to climate change; increased economic potential and new political realities the challenges and threats have the potential to be more manageable and tolerable. With the exclusion of the Gwich'in and Indigenous Peoples comes the risk of social, cultural, environmental and economic disruption and disparity.

The inclusion of traditional Indigenous Knowledge also leads to the ability of the Gwich'in and other Indigenous People to adapt to changes within their communities. For future certainty traditional Indigenous knowledge and scientific findings must be used together and given equal consideration. For the Arctic and its communities to remain sustainable the Gwich'in and other Indigenous Peoples must be actively participating and fully consulted throughout the policy development processes.