

Arctic Council Permanent Participants: The Gwich'in Council International March 2003

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The Arctic Council is the only high-level international forum in which Indigenous peoples' representatives sit at the same table as governments. Called Permanent Participants (PPs), each of these organisations has its own history, concerns and unique voice. Working together as Permanent Participants at the Arctic Council gives northern Indigenous peoples the opportunity to speak directly to the governments of the circumpolar states. Each issue of IPS Update will provide a brief sketch of one of the six Permanent Participants.

The Gwich'in Council International: An Interview with the Chair Joe Linklater

The Gwich'in people have been living, and still live today, in the geographical area of northeast Alaska in the U.S. and in the regions of north Yukon and the Northwest Territories in Canada. According to their own stories and beliefs, the Gwich'in have occupied that area since time immemorial. Academics believe the Gwich'in have been in the area for between ten and twenty thousand years. The Gwich'in life and culture has traditionally been based on the Porcupine Caribou herd, as a main source of food, tools and clothing. Fish and other animals to be found in the area have supplemented this diet. The Gwich'in lived mainly a nomadic lifestyle within the same geographic area up to the 1870's, when the fur traders coming to the area established forts, which were basically trading posts, and became the first settlements in the area. There are approximately 9,000 Gwich'in today.

What is the Gwich'in Council International?

The Gwich'in Council International (GCI) was created to ensure that all the regions of the Gwich'in nation are represented at the Arctic Council. The organization gives the Gwich'in status as one of the six permanent participants at the Arctic Council.

The GCI is an important council for the Gwich'in nation, because it facilitates our involvement in the Arctic Council, and also brings us together to discuss a whole range of other important issues that are not necessarily related to the Arctic Council.

What are the Gwich'in Council International's main priorities?

The Gwich'in Council International has a number of priorities that relate to the environment, youth, culture and tradition.

When we speak about environment we are referring to the protection of the land and the animals. GCI wants to ensure that animal habitat is not destroyed, and that animals do not become extinct or get driven away from their natural territory. We are aware of the need for certain development to take place on the land, but that is balanced by our concern about development impacts on the land as well as on the livelihood of people in the communities. The goal for GCI is to protect the environment from activities that would destroy the land, and in turn affect the animals that live on the land. We have concerns about climate change since we already know about the impacts climate change is having on the land, animals and people.

In terms of priorities for our youth, GCI recognizes the need to involve our young people in activities that will assist them to continue learning. A priority is to develop international internship programs for Gwich'in youth. Participation in such programs will help the youth to develop work skills that they can bring back to their communities. The knowledge the youth get from international programs will also benefit the GCI as an organization, because it will give the youth the skills and experience they need to become leaders.

Promotion of the Gwich'in culture and tradition is another priority for GCI. We are meeting this priority by developing traditional knowledge projects to educate people about the Gwich'in tradition and culture. Since the language is a strong component of the Gwich'in culture, GCI recognizes the need to encourage the younger generation to learn Gwich'in if we are to retain the language. One of the priorities of the traditional knowledge project would be to have the Gwich'in language taught in the school system. If we are to retain our language, we must promote its use on a daily basis in the workplace, the home, and community. When this starts to happen naturally then we will see a definite retention of the Gwich'in language.

GCI recognizes there are still many issues under housing and education that need to be addressed. Participation in the Arctic Council meetings will allow us to assist in the development of policy in these areas and we hope that any change in these areas will positively affect the Gwich'in. We also recognize the ongoing struggle Gwich'in face in terms of having control over their environment so they could maintain normal living situations in their communities. These are just some of the priorities that come to mind and I'm sure more will be identified during our formal meetings.

How is the Gwich'in Council International organised?

The Gwich'in Council International has board members from the Northwest Territories, Yukon and Alaska. There are two members from the Northwest Territories, two from the Yukon and four from Alaska.

Each region chooses its members by asking for interested people to put their names forward. The chairmanship of GCI rotates between the Yukon and Northwest Territories every two years, and each region determines who the Chairperson will be. The vice chair is always from Alaska.

GCI Board Members hold our meetings on the telephone, since our funds are limited and it would be costly to bring all our members together throughout the year. The GCI meets formally once every two years when the chairmanship is being transferred from one region to another. During this meeting we will discuss our accomplishments, new priorities and other ongoing work from the previous two years.

Since the Arctic Council has several working groups and committees it is the goal of GCI to choose different representatives from the three regions. Over the years this has been one of the big challenges for GCI, due to all the other issues requiring work at the community, regional, territorial, national and international levels. GCI has recently had four new board members from Alaska appointed, which provides us with the opportunity to delegate some work. This makes the workload more feasible since we now have specific members following specific files.

Does the Gwich'in Council International have a permanent secretariat?

The plan is to establish a secretariat in Old Crow, Yukon that will be housed within the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation office. Presently we have one person based in Whitehorse, Yukon who manages the GCI file and carries out the secretariat functions.

This individual is responsible for the distribution of all material relating to the work of the Arctic Council and its working groups, coordination of all GCI activities as they relate to the Arctic Council, and proposal writing to access project funds.

After March 2004 the Gwich'in in the Northwest Territories will manage the file. It will be up to the Board Members there to determine where the secretariat will be housed.

How is the Gwich'in Council International funded?

As permanent participants the GCI receives funding from the Canadian Government to participate Arctic Council activities. Some funding is received from the U.S., through the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, to support Gwich'in that are U.S. citizens. To supplement that, the GCI applies for money to take part in specific projects.

What is the Gwich'in Council International's relationship to other organisations working on Gwich'in issues?

In each of the three regions, the Gwich'in belong to several coalitions and they have relationships in particular with all the first nations surrounding the Gwich'in nation. Some of them are business-type relationships; some are to work on common issues. The Gwich'in in the Yukon and Northwest Territories also have a strong working relationship with the Canadian and Territorial Governments in the Yukon and Northwest Territories

Does the Gwich'in Council International cooperate with any of the other Permanent Participants?

Of the Permanent Participants, it is natural to have closest contact with the Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC), as some of their members and some of our members are part of the Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) in the Yukon. The contact is mainly through their head office in Whitehorse, Yukon, which is on an informal basis, through communication and information sharing on similar issues that affect the Gwich'in or Arctic Athabaskan membership.

How would you describe your work with the Arctic Council?

There are very committed people in the Arctic Council and because of that, the GCI has the potential to play an important role internationally as it becomes more and more established over the years. The issues that the Arctic Council deals with can have environmental, social and economic impacts on the people who live in the Circumpolar North. I would describe our work with the Arctic Council as positive. GCI is given an opportunity to affect change at the international level and we know any change at this level will eventually filter into our communities. Our work at the Arctic Council prepares us for these changes as we are provided with awareness about the changes so we are then not overwhelmed when these changes happen.

The recognition of the Indigenous peoples and the role that they play is also an important aspect of the Council. I would like to take this opportunity to commend Canada for its leadership role in recognising the role of indigenous peoples, and the support the Canadian government has given to permanent participant organisations based in Canada. Participation in the Arctic Council meetings and its working groups has been a real learning experience for a lot of the other countries. I have seen changes and shifts in attitudes towards indigenous peoples and towards the impacts that global warming has had in the circumpolar north.

The Arctic Council has given indigenous peoples an opportunity to actively participate in policy changes that will affect those of us who choose to live in the Arctic. There is a genuine recognition of the role indigenous peoples can play at the Arctic Council meetings. As indigenous peoples we bring to the table a vast amount of valuable knowledge and we are able to contribute effectively to the discussions on the environment, health, education and social impacts since we are the people who live in the ever-changing circumpolar north. Our input needs to be valued because we are going to be the people who are always there, we watch and see the changes in our regions on a daily basis and we know about impacts on our lifestyles because we live with these impacts on an ongoing basis. The challenge, however, will be to find sufficient human and financial resources to cover all the work of the Council and its working committees the GCI is invited to participate in. How this challenge is met, however, will depend on the Member States and Permanent Participants working together to come up with a plan to supply enough financial and human resources to allow us all to be effective participants in the relevant working committees.

More about the Gwich'in nations:

<http://www.olderow.yk.net>

<http://www.catg.org>

<http://www.gwichin.nt.ca>