



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

International Experts Meeting

**Climate Change  
and Arctic Sustainable Development :  
scientific, social, cultural and educational challenges**

3-6 March 2009, Monaco

## **ABSTRACT: CIRCUMPOLAR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

### **Duane Smith**

Inuit Circumpolar Council (Canada) President,

#### **The Sea Ice is Our Highway: The Importance of Sea Ice to the Inuit Way of Life**

Based on an ICC Canada report that examines the historical and contemporary use of sea ice by Inuit, Duane Smith's presentation will describe the importance of sea ice in the lives of circumpolar Inuit in order to explain the challenges caused by climate change and melting sea ice.

With few exceptions, Inuit settlements are located on sea coasts or on major waterways with easy access to the sea. The usually ice-covered sea is their highway, the only physical connection between many Inuit communities and the only way to access many of the animals they depend on for food.

Interviews conducted by ICC Canada in March 2008 indicate that despite the increased difficulty in finding and harvesting big game and sea mammals due to thinning and less predictable sea ice, Inuit communities are persistent in maintaining their traditional diets. When asked whether changes in ice conditions were affecting their traditional diets, respondents spoke of having to travel further or in a different month than usual; they spoke of dietary substitutions such as hunting more musk-oxen when the caribou migration shifted away from their area, or they explained how melting permafrost has made the natural ice cellars used to age and store meat less effective. Not one of them said anything to suggest they were giving up on hunting despite the considerable challenges some were facing in getting out on the ice and land.

Inuit hunters have reported many changes in the locations and times that their traditional animals can be found. In some communities this is reducing the territory that hunters need to cover, while in others they have to travel much further onto the sea ice than before in order to harvest enough food for the communities. This is why Inuit are very concerned that sea ice routes remain passable for hunters as well as the migratory game they follow, and that the entire Arctic environment be kept free from contamination – both in the areas they are now using regularly and in those areas where they may need to hunt in the future.

Duane Smith's presentation will expand on these points and provide more detail on the interviews held with Inuit hunters and elders regarding the importance of sea ice to their way of life.