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ABSTRACT: BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

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Connections between Arctic Peoples and Their Environment

The natural world in the Arctic provides materially and spiritually for the peoples of the Arctic. The relationship between humans and their environment is deep and multi-faceted. In the worldviews of indigenous people, it is a two-way relationship, with obligations and expectations for all beings that are part of the system. Most often in scientific work, we focus on the material connections between people and their environment. Those connections are vital, deep, and fascinating. But the spiritual connections are also vital, deep, and fascinating, even if they are harder to discover, assess, and address.

Indigenous knowledge can contribute greatly to the monitoring of biodiversity, ecosystem services, and the host of social and cultural implications they have. There are many examples around the Arctic demonstrating the detailed knowledge that local residents have and the depth of cultural experience that inform that knowledge. In Savoonga, Alaska, for example, one family resumed the tradition of bowhead whaling after several decades, using knowledge that had been handed down for generations even though no one still living had participated in whaling at their traditional site. In addition to providing the know-how and skills to sustain Arctic communities and peoples, indigenous knowledge has contributed greatly to scientific efforts around the Arctic. It is important that we maintain and increase our efforts to engage the holders of indigenous knowledge, involving Arctic residents not just as the subjects of study, but as full collaborators in joint research, monitoring, analysis, and action.

In doing so, we will inevitably also touch on the spiritual connections that are so important for Arctic peoples. At times, the spiritual dimension of understanding may seem at odds with scientific understanding. For example, Athabascan people in Alaska have a powerful relationship with the moose. Moose are taken for funeral potlatches, a rare instance of a spiritual practice that is recognized in state law, as people can take moose for potlatches when they need them rather than waiting for the usual hunting season. Athabascans believe that the number of moose in the world is constant, with moose offering themselves to worthy

hunters and then coming back again. Scientific counts of moose make little sense in this worldview, because the moose may choose not to be visible to the counters. Discussions about moose abundance, a key “ecosystem service” in one worldview, have a large cultural gap to cross before they can make sense to both groups participating in those discussions.

It is important to recognise such differences in viewpoint, not to sweep them aside and hope they do not reappear. Instead, collaborative approaches can help find common ground for discussions about past, present, and future, and a chance to learn other ways of seeing and knowing the Arctic. Much has been made lately of the difficulties faced by traditional people in applying their knowledge to a changing world where the patterns and lessons of the past no longer hold true. But there are also values and traits that endure, such as patience, humility, and adaptability. These values are closely tied to a deeper view of how people can and should relate to their environment. A good starting point to learning about and caring for the Arctic environment is first to learn from and about one another.

Recommendations:

- Study the ways that indigenous peoples have been adaptable—physically, psychologically, culturally, socially—to environmental change and variability. We need to understand more than the fact that they *are* adaptable. We need to understand how the skills, values, and traits that have been adaptive in the past may continue to be so into the future, and how some aspects of modern life have in fact reduced adaptability.
- Abandon the sectoral approach to understanding people and their environment and instead address the entire system as a dynamic, interacting whole. “Cumulative impact studies” are a start, but just a start. Both the natural world and the social world in the Arctic are dynamic and responsive; neither can be understood without the other, and neither can be understood if the other is treated as static or simplistic.
- Involve Arctic peoples, formally and informally, in collaborative management at all levels of planning and decision-making concerning the Arctic and its future. At present, major policies are typically set elsewhere, with Arctic peoples involved only in implementation, if at all. Greater involvement typically leads to less conflict and better decisions and outcomes.