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A Regional 2005 Climate Impact Report from the Gwich'in Athabascans of Fort Yukon, Venetie, and Arctic Village

SUMMARY

This is an exhaustive research project on climate change done among the Gwich'in Athabascan people in the summer of 2005 and an updated study in 2020. This is the first publication in 17 years. Though it is 17 years old, the report is still the first of its kind and more relevant than ever. The report contains extraordinary insight into the intimate relationship Gwich'in Athabascans have had with the climate and land since time immemorial. The Gwich'in Elders had *so* much to share.

There are vast amounts of knowledge with which the Gwich'in entrusted me in this report.

The Gwich'in became the most vocal Alaska Natives on climate change, when the great effects were first being felt across the world in the early 2000s. Among the Athabascan groups in Interior Alaska, the Gwich'in were the first to speak out about it. They also offered solutions and their amazing knowledge of the ecosystem that stunned even senior scientists at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. They documented the drastic changes not only to their hunting lives but to their village lives as well.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge, or TEK as it's become known by, has become more and more relevant and important to climate change science and adaptation in general, especially to the remote areas of the world.

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The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) 2005 Report became the world-famous book on climate change, and it will be cited throughout this book. It recognizes TEK in the beginning: "Occasionally used and less frequently credited prior to and during most of the twentieth century, indigenous knowledge from the Arctic has received increasing attention over the past couple of decades" (AMAP, 2005, p. 64).

The main western scientific sources on climate change were used for cross-referencing the Elder knowledge in this book, but western science reports are hard to use for two reasons. First, western science is departmentalized and separated, whereas Native knowledge is wholistic and simple. Second, the vastness of the project is a problem. Almost every single thing Gwich'in people said could be cross-referenced, but I'm only one person, so I did not have the time nor the resources to accomplish such a momentous feat, and I also did not want the report to become too scientific, because there are already mountains of western science books on climate change.

Regarding Native knowledge, familiar with the Gwich'in in Arctic Village myself, I took the liberty of putting the thoughts together, categorized themes, stringed together discussion topics, combined testimonies for common themes, deconstructed the unique syntax of "Gwich'in English" for western readers, and broke down complicated Elder insights for better understanding.

I also drew pictures and graphs, designed diagrams, and connected small testimonies to show the ecological changes on the bigger scale. The main purpose of the summary is to consolidate common observations among the three main Gwich'in villages.

The knowledge of climate change proved very challenging to me in terms of sub-sectioning the knowledge into topics and categories. In my opinion, it weakens the integrity of the knowledge, but it was necessary for better understanding. The knowledge was also difficult to interpret and organize, because there were mountains and mountains of knowledge.

Villagers had their perspective of climate change and felt it to differing degrees, but the dire concern was the same. For example, in Arctic Village, where the terrain is rougher than Venetie and Fort Yukon, less snow in the fall made travel harder. Therefore, it proved a grave concern in Arctic Village for traditional seasonal fall hunting activities. Nevertheless, in Venetie, where the land is flatter and easier to travel upon, it was actually *helpful*. So, the extended benefits of summer conditions into winter months were helpful to some villages and detrimental for others. Gwich'in Elders' also

knew chain reactions of climate impacts. Their awareness of region-wide changes includes Porcupine caribou herd migrations, runaway forestation of their tundra lands, and salmon migration changes as well as small changes such as migration timing of birds. Caribou have been the mainstay of the Gwich'in since the beginning, so changes to their migration routes and timing have been disconcerting.

The Elders mentioned they were fighting a two-front war: climate change and a disappearing culture. They feel their culture is their people's best chance of responding to climate change. As one Elder cleverly stated, "The world has to become like Gwich'in to resolve climate change." However, their very own youth has drifted away from this culture, and they fight a war to maintain it. They compete with the luxurious cultures of the modern world. The Gwich'in Elders know their culture will see them through the climate chaos to come.

The Gwich'in Elders and hunters wanted to give context by defining their old life first—a life before contact with the modern world, when Alaska was settled. With contact came the near extinction of hunting and fishing methods, decline of game, loss of language, foods, activities, social lives, and the health and happiness of their culture. "A hunting culture destroyed by food stamps," as the late Harry Thomas firmly stated.

It is from this standpoint that the Elders want people to know they are working from a broken system to respond to climate change, and it is important to fix that system first. The revival of culture and hunting and fishing practices is paramount and critical. It has to begin immediately.

THE 2005 REPORT

In April 2005, a month before graduating college, I won a National Student fellowship award from the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) to conduct climate impact studies among the Gwich'in. After graduation and moving home, I immediately began the region-wide research among the three main Gwich'in communities: Arctic Village, Venetie, and Fort Yukon.

The research started in June 2005, and I was lucky enough to find the best people to interview. I got the right help from the right villagers. I did my best to find the most traditional hunters, trappers, berry-pickers, and Elders in the villages. I wanted people who were always on the land. I interviewed twelve people in Arctic Village, five in Venetie, and eight in Fort Yukon.