

# The Protection of the Indigenous Arctic Peoples

\*\* In the real world, The Arctic Council has only 8 member states who can vote. But, for the purposes of the simulation, both member states and observer states will have full and normal voting powers \*\*

## History of Contact between Indigenous Arctic Peoples and Non-Indigenous

The exact date of the arrival of humans into the world's Arctic region is disputed, but there is evidence that humans migrated to the Siberian Arctic around 45,000 years ago, motivated by woolly mammoths who were a crucial food source.<sup>1</sup> The North American Arctic began to be populated around 3,000 B.C., with humans moving from the Siberia Arctic.<sup>2</sup> These humans lived in isolation, before dying out. Subsequently, waves of other communities repopulated the North American Arctic, developing distinct customs and traditions from the original inhabitants.

While these groups continued to trade with other non-Arctic communities, they existed in relative isolation until Europeans began to make contact with them. In the Scandinavian Arctic, there was constant contact between the native Sami people and Europeans from 800 onwards.<sup>3</sup> In the North American Arctic, European contact began with the Vikings in 985 along the Greenlandic coast, and continued until the 1400s.<sup>4</sup> However, intensive contact did not begin until the European Age of Discovery, beginning with John Cabot's expeditions in 1496 and 1498.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the Russian Arctic saw contact starting in 1585, with the most intensive period of colonization ending when they reached the Pacific Ocean 54 years later; eventually reaching Alaska where they established relatively peaceful ties with indigenous groups.<sup>6</sup> In all of these cases, the main impetus for the exploration of Arctic regions, and thus contact with the indigenous groups already living there, was economic and territorial concerns. The Russians were pushed to colonize Siberia and Alaska for potential economic benefits, whereas the British led expeditions to the Canadian Arctic to try and

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<sup>1</sup> "Humans were in the Arctic 10,000 years Earlier Than Thought." *Smithsonian Magazine*.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/humans-were-arctic-10000-years-earlier-thought-180957819/>.

<sup>2</sup> "The First People to Settle Across North America's Arctic Regions Were Isolated for 4,000 Years." *Smithsonian Magazine*.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/isolated-culture-thrived-arctic-4000-years-180952505/>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Early Period of Sámi History, from the Beginnings to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century." *University of Texas*

<https://www.laits.utexas.edu/sami/dieda/hist/early.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> "Why Did Greenland's Vikings Vanish?" *Smithsonian Magazine*. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-greenland-vikings-vanished-180962119/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Cabot: 1497, 1498." *Princeton Library, Kane Collection*.

[https://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual\\_materials/maps/websites/northwest-passage/cabot.htm](https://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/northwest-passage/cabot.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Skripnik, Oleg. "How Siberia became part of Russia." *Russia Beyond the Headlines*.

[https://www.rbth.com/arts/2016/10/24/how-siberia-became-part-of-russia\\_641779](https://www.rbth.com/arts/2016/10/24/how-siberia-became-part-of-russia_641779).

find the Northwest Passage (a shipping route that would have generated a great amount of wealth for the British Empire) to Asia. For example, from Cabot's first expedition until Roald Amundsen's successful navigation from 1903-1906, nearly 20 different explorers tried to find and navigate the passage.<sup>7</sup> Economic interests have continued to grow interest in the Arctic Circle, with the potential oil and mineral deposits the main source of attraction. For example, it is estimated that 5.9% of the world's known oil reserves are contained in the Arctic.<sup>8</sup> Often times in the pursuit of economic



wealth, the well-being of the indigenous Arctic peoples is forgotten or minimized. The Arctic Council is in a unique position to take advantage of its structure and priorities to improve the lives and conditions of Indigenous Arctic communities.

## Arctic Council and Indigenous Arctic Peoples

Established in 1996 by the Ottawa Declaration, the Arctic Council was formed to promote cooperation and coordination among Arctic states while involving Arctic indigenous peoples.<sup>9</sup> The member states are: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russian Federation, and United States of America.<sup>10</sup> There are also 13 observer members who can participate in debate, be represented on the Council, suggest projects to working groups, but cannot vote in the proceedings.<sup>11</sup> The Arctic Council lacks an operating budget, so all projects must be funded by member states on a volunteer basis. Moreover, the Arctic Council can produce recommendations, but cannot force any country to take an action. Additionally, the Arctic Council has 6 working groups that handle a majority of the Council's work. The Arctic Council primarily has concerned itself with issues concerning the Arctic environment, but its ties with Arctic indigenous groups give it a rare opportunity to address wide-ranging issues afflicting their communities.

### The Permanent Participants

Indigenous Arctic communities with at least 1 person in multiple member states or multiple people in 1 member state are entitled to representation on the Arctic Council as a Permanent Participant.<sup>12</sup> Aluet International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit

<sup>7</sup> "Major Northwest Passage Expeditions and Explorers." *Princeton Library, Kane Collection*.

[https://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual\\_materials/maps/websites/northwest-passage/expeditions.htm](https://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/northwest-passage/expeditions.htm).

<sup>8</sup> "This infographic shows how gigantic the Arctic's undiscovered oil reserves might be." *Business Insider*.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/how-gigantic-arctics-undiscovered-oil-reserves-might-be-2016-4>.

<sup>9</sup> "Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council." *The Arctic Council*. [https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/85/EDOCS-1752-v2-ACMMCA00\\_Ottawa\\_1996\\_Founding\\_Declaration.PDF?sequence=5&isAllowed=y](https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/85/EDOCS-1752-v2-ACMMCA00_Ottawa_1996_Founding_Declaration.PDF?sequence=5&isAllowed=y).

<sup>10</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions." *The Arctic Council*. <https://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/faq>.

<sup>11</sup> "Observers." *The Arctic Council*. <https://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/observers>.

<sup>12</sup> "Permanent Participants." *The Arctic Council*. <https://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/permanent-participants>.

Circumpolar Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and the Saami Council, are the current permanent participants, representing 500,000 indigenous peoples.<sup>13</sup> Permanent Participants can participate in the Council's decision making processes, working to represent the interest of indigenous Arctic peoples (interests that sometimes run counter to the interests of national governments).

## The Current Situation

### Economic Inequalities

The harsh conditions and remote nature of much of the Arctic has historically prevented large-scale economic exploitation. However, as temperatures have warmed (and are projected to continue to warm), industrial-economic activity will become more prominent. Mining in the Arctic is a key industry, but unfortunately it often comes at a high environmental and social cost. Precious minerals such as uranium, diamonds, coal, and nickel are the most commonly mined resources in the Arctic.<sup>14</sup> The majority of this mining occurs in the Canadian or Russian Arctic, with Canada rich in uranium and diamonds and Russia rich in diamonds, cobalt, and nickel.<sup>15</sup> The mining industry provides an important source of employment in economically marginal areas. However, this employment is not spread equitably between indigenous Arctic peoples and non-indigenous peoples, with many laborers drawn from the non-indigenous peoples. At the Snap Lake diamond mine in the Canadian Arctic, many of the laborers are not from the north, and of those employees from the north, very few are from indigenous groups.<sup>16</sup> When Snap Lake was closed in 2015, many of those laid off were from indigenous areas, with 30 employees from the Tilcho region, an Athabaskan group, laid off.<sup>17</sup> Although De Beers, the company that owned the mine, worked to provide services to all its laid off employees, it is difficult for companies and the government to provide support in remote areas that lack institutions, such as much of the Arctic.

Additionally, mines periodically open, only to quickly close. The De Beers Snap Lake diamond mine opened in 2008, and started to close in 2015.<sup>18</sup> While open, the mine provided important jobs in economically marginal areas, but its closure devastated the local economy, leaving behind broken families and a degraded environment, with Snap Lake's groundwater highly polluted from dissolved mineral salts.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, because the Arctic economy is a new frontier, it is heavily dependent, in many areas, on extractive industries. These industries make the region subject to global market conditions, when the market does poorly (as the diamond market has for the past

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Natural Resources." The Arctic-with the Support of the Russian Geographical Society. Last Accessed August 20, 2017. <http://arctic.ru/resources/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "N.W.T braces for economic Sting of shutdown." *CBC News*. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/snap-lake-shutdown-layoffs-1.3353295>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "De Beers considering Snap Lake Closure." *Mining.com*. <http://www.mining.com/de-beers-considering-snap-lake-closure/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Snap Lake had groundwater problems before closure." *Mining.com* <http://www.mining.com/snap-lake-had-water-issues/>.

several years), mines close and people lose jobs. Mine closures harm not only miners, but also other businesses in the economy as fewer money is entering these Arctic communities. It is important that to lessen existing inequalities that the Arctic economy is sufficiently diversified. While the Arctic rarely sees a majority of the economic benefits of mines, it is often stuck with the environmental costs. For instance, researchers working for the Canadian government found that a loophole in regulations, which mining companies had exploited, allowed mines to burn toxic chemicals, rather than mandating that they properly dispose of them.<sup>20</sup> The same report discovered that a lake near a mine in the Northwest Territories contained carcinogen levels, a byproduct of burning the toxic chemicals, which were ten times higher than an uncontaminated lakes.<sup>21</sup>

### **Political Inequalities**

The voice of Arctic indigenous communities has historically been stifled throughout the political system. In many cases, the number of indigenous peoples is not great enough for their voices to be heard by the national government. However, given that across the Arctic, indigenous people comprise nearly 13% of the population, the voices of indigenous communities must be heard. Even to the present day, indigenous communities experience inequalities in the political system. In Greenland, which is nearly 90% indigenous, Danish and European politicians have often ignored the political will of these people. A 2009 European Union ban on seal hunting exemplifies this. This ban was devastating for the indigenous communities who rely on seals for their meat, blubber, and their pelts.<sup>22</sup> While the devastation has an economic component, as seal pelts were exported globally, it also has been culturally and economically insensitive. For the Inuit, hunting seals is a traditional cultural practice; and although the ban allowed for an exception for subsistence hunting, the Inuit feel the ban was implemented with little concern for those it affected.<sup>23</sup> Ecologically, the lack of hunting of seals has allowed the seal population to explode, allowing seals to outcompete Greenlandic fishers (which is responsible for nearly 90% of Greenland's economic output), and making the seal population at risk for disease.<sup>24</sup>

### **Threats from Climate Change**

Ultimately many of the current threats facing indigenous Arctic people are caused by climate change. This phenomena directly threatens traditional means of life, such as hunting and fishing, has allowed increased economic activity which threatens to pollute a previously pristine environment, and will only grow worse as the planet continues to warm. Even at its most basic level, cold weather and permafrost are crucial for buildings in the Arctic and as the snow and permafrost melt, structures are beginning to collapse. Norilsk, in Arctic Russia, is one such town that has been severely impacted by

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<sup>20</sup> "Northern mines' toxins a growing threat: report." *CBC News*. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/northern-mines-toxins-a-growing-threat-report-1.1042922>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "Europe's ban on seal products has been awful for Greenland's Inuits, and for seals." *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/407924/europes-ban-on-seal-products-has-been-catastrophic-for-greenlands-native-communities/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

melting permafrost, with 60% of buildings impacted by melting permafrost in the mining town of 177,000 people.<sup>25</sup>

### Loss of Culture and Identity

The political and economic inequalities have slowly corroded indigenous culture and their identity, this loss will only be exacerbated as climate change worsens. Already, a warming climate is negatively impacting indigenous communities. In Alaska, some indigenous groups are depend on sea ice in order to catch walruses through a traditional hunt; but due to the lack of sea ice, they are successfully hunting fewer and fewer each year.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, because the ground is literally melting from under their settlements, some groups will be forced to leave their ancestral homelands.<sup>27</sup> Preventing cultural and identity loss is difficult, but, to its credit, the Arctic Council has worked to preserve indigenous Arctic culture. For example, it organized a study on reindeer herding and organized youth reindeer husbandry events across Norway, Sweden, Russia, China and Mongolia.<sup>28</sup>



### Case Study

#### Sami People of Scandinavia

The Sami are an indigenous group that settled the Scandinavian Arctic, an area comprising the modern countries of Finland, Norway, and Sweden, before European Scandinavians. The Sami share a deep and important connection with the land, adapting to the frigid conditions and using the sparse resources sustainably.<sup>29</sup> Contact with Europeans began in the 800s, when the Sami were forced to pay a tax of furs and other goods to Viking invaders.<sup>30</sup> This type of relationship continued until the 1600s, when the modern Swedish nation state, motivated by both economic and territorial aims, expanded into Lapland in order to prevent Danish and Russian incursions.<sup>31</sup> Upon the discovery of silver later in the 1600s, the Swedish

<sup>25</sup> “Slow-motion wrecks: how thawing permafrost is destroying Arctic cities.” *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/oct/14/thawing-permafrost-destroying-arctic-cities-norilsk-russia>.

<sup>26</sup> “Alaska indigenous people see culture slipping away as sea ice vanishes.” *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/dec/19/alaska-sea-ice-vanishing-climate-change-indigenous-people>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Youth. The Future of Reindeer Herding Peoples. Arctic Council EALLIN Reindeer Herding Youth Project 2012-2015. *The Arctic Council*. <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/408>.

<sup>29</sup> “The Early Period of Sámi History, from the Beginnings to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.” *University of Texas*

<https://www.laits.utexas.edu/sami/dieda/hist/early.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> “The Racist Legacy in Modern Swedish Sami Policy.” *Umea University*. <http://www3.brandonu.ca/cjns/14.2/kvist.pdf>.

government pursued an authoritarian policy to ensure the consistent production of silver from these mines, causing the destruction of the Sami reindeer herds, which formed the basis of their livelihood, and the depopulation of traditional Sami areas.<sup>32</sup> A process of colonization began, with the Sami lands increasingly controlled directly by the Swedish crown. The administration of the Sami lands was brutal, but this began to change around the Second World War. During the war, the Swedish government lost control on much of the region and the Sami developed a greater sense of autonomy.<sup>33</sup> The Swedish government sought to curtail this autonomy after the war, with the Sami placed under a system that denied their basic economic rights as citizens of Sweden.<sup>34</sup> While in the 1980s, the Sami gained greater control over their own economic well-being, business interests and ethnic Swedes united to try to end the right of Sami reindeer herders near Harjedalen as these groups wanted this land for their own economic use.<sup>35</sup> This case has bounced through the court system, with the most recent court ruling in 2016 granting a victory for the Sami.<sup>36</sup> The Swedish government opened the land to non-Sami in 1993, removing the control of the Sami people over their historical lands.<sup>37</sup> It is expected that the Swedish government will continue to appeal the decision reached by the court. The economic, political and social inequalities experienced by the Sami have been widespread, but through Arctic Council action, these historic wrongs can be corrected and the Sami people can see an improvement in their quality of life and strengthen their cultural identity.

### **Canadian Arctic Indigenous Communities**

In Canada, the economic isolation and marginality of Arctic indigenous communities plays a fundamental role in all areas of life. For example, food prices are much higher in the Canadian Arctic, with 33 items in Nunavut costing nearly 60% more than they would in the rest of Canada.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, while higher food prices could simply be dismissed as a result of the distance to major Canadian cities and food supply chains, other economic conditions are poorer throughout these communities. For instance, unemployment is drastically higher, with the unemployment rate in Nunavut, in the Canadian Arctic, at 17.9% in December of 2014 for the native peoples.<sup>39</sup> Nationally, the Canadian unemployment rate was only 6.6%.<sup>40</sup> Again, the difference in unemployment rates could be dismissed due to structural economic reasons, but unemployment is not spread evenly among Arctic residents; native residents are generally more marginalized than non-Native residents. Native peoples in Nunavut have a labor force participation rate of 52.7% compared to 88% for non-

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> "Sweden's indigenous Sami people win rights battle against state." *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/03/sweden-indigenous-sami-people-win-rights-battle-against-state>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Nunavut's hunger problem: We can't pretend it doesn't exist anymore." *CBC News*.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nunavut-s-hunger-problem-we-can-t-pretend-it-doesn-t-exist-anymore-1.2929573>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Natives.<sup>41</sup> This poverty exists as multibillion dollar mining operations occur all around Nunavut, leaving environmental damage and pollution, but no positive and lasting economic legacy for the indigenous communities.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, this economic marginalization contributes to a loss of identity, a loss of community, and a loss of culture. However, the solution is not to immediately end all extractive industries in the Arctic region, but seek to manage these industries in a way that more equitably spreads the economic benefits to indigenous communities in both the long and short term.

## Questions to Consider

- How can the Arctic Council promote greater political power for indigenous groups?
- To what extent can indigenous cultural be preserved if climate change continues to worsen?
- How can the demand for natural resources from developing and developed countries be balanced against economic and environmental sustainability?
- Can the Arctic Council be reformed in a way that better promotes and advocates for indigenous Arctic communities?

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Nunavut and the future of Canada’s Arctic.” *Al Jazeera*.  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2013/07/2013777142343933.html>.