



# Climate Change Security and Indigenous Peoples Inuit in Northern Canada

## Wilfrid Greaves

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**In the Arctic, Indigenous peoples are increasingly seeing their own survival as threatened by environmental change. In this respect, the small Inuit community of Clyde River, Nunavut in Canada represents an interesting case.**

On November 30, 2016 the Supreme Court of Canada [heard](#) a highly anticipated legal appeal on behalf of residents of the small Inuit community of Clyde River, Nunavut. The town of 1,100 – supported by interventions from groups like Greenpeace and three organizations representing Inuit people across Canada – argues that the federal government, specifically the National Energy Board (NEB), failed to adequately consult them before granting a license for a Norwegian-based business consortium to conduct seismic testing in nearby coastal waters. The license was granted in 2014 even though [consultations](#) with nearby communities exposed significant local concern over the project's potential impacts on marine mammals such as seals, whales, and other aquatic species, which local residents rely upon for food and cultural practices. The NEB's initial decision was [upheld](#) by a Federal Court in August 2015, but in October of that year Clyde River was granted leave to appeal to the Supreme Court, which offers the last judicial option to stop the seismic testing and protect the marine ecosystem from possible irreparable harm.

The case of Clyde River has attracted national and [international](#) media interest because it reflects a familiar and sympathetic narrative: a small Indigenous community, with support of environmental activities and high profile [celebrities](#),

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fighters for its survival against a corporation abetted by a neo-colonial state committed to extracting hydrocarbon resources for sale on the global market. But the struggle over seismic testing in a tiny community located higher than 70° N latitude represents the intersection of three powerful issues within Canadian and global environmental politics: Indigenous peoples identifying non-renewable resource extraction as a fundamental threat to their survival and well-being; the growing legal and constitutional recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples to make decisions over resource extraction and other industrial projects within their traditional territories; and emerging alliances between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous environmental groups to stop such projects. Together, these issues form the latest chapter in the interrelated struggles for human and environmental security, self-determination for Indigenous peoples, and steps towards decarbonizing the global economy.

### **Indigenous Peoples' Insecurity and Climate Change**

Indigenous peoples in Canada and elsewhere have, for decades, resisted various non-renewable resource extraction projects on the grounds that these often proceed without adequate consultation with local communities or the Indigenous governments on whose lands they occur. Local environmental impacts have worsened as these projects have grown in size, but greater public awareness of the dangers of human-caused climate change have added a new dimension to these struggles. In the Arctic – where [climate change](#) is occurring twice as fast as in more southerly regions, causing a range of [negative consequences](#) for humans and other animal populations – activities enabling hydrocarbon extraction that will directly contribute to climate change have been met with particular scepticism. In recent years, dozens of Northern organizations, including some representing Indigenous peoples, have signed

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a *Joint Statement of Indigenous Solidarity for Arctic Protection* calling for a moratorium on oil drilling in the Arctic. In 2011, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which represents Inuit in Canada, the United States, Greenland, and Russia, released the *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Resource Development Principles*. The declaration reserves the right of Inuit to benefit from resource development on their traditional territories, but stipulates that “Inuit and others – through their institutions and international instruments – have a shared responsibility to evaluate the risks and benefits of their actions through the prism of global environmental security” (s. 5.1).

In fact, Inuit have increasingly framed their arguments around climate change and hydrocarbon extraction in *explicitly security terms*. Survey data *indicate* that large majorities of Northern Canadians consider the environment to be the most important issue for Arctic security, followed closely by maintenance of Indigenous cultures. For people who rely on traditional country foods for sustenance, and whose culture and identity are premised on reciprocal connections between humans, non-human animals, and the land itself, climate change and local environmental damage are not merely worrisome issues. They are existential threats to the survival of Inuit *as Inuit*: an Indigenous people defined by their unique environment and the methods of survival and subsistence they have developed over thousands of years of continuous habitation in their Arctic homeland.

Inuit leaders have articulated the clear and present threats they currently face as a result of environmental changes. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work raising awareness of Arctic climate change and pursuing legal remedies on behalf of Inuit under international law, has *stated* in no uncertain terms that “climate change is threatening the lives, health, culture

and livelihoods of the Inuit.” Terry Audla, who until 2015 was president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national organization representing all Inuit in Canada, has [written](#) that “climate change at a rate and of an intensity that appears unprecedented, and well outside Inuit cultural memory, creates insecurities of an entirely new nature, generating concerns about the sustainability of large aspects of our inherited and acquired patterns of life ... Our very sense of who and what we are as Inuit.” Mary Simon, another former president of ITK, [echoes](#) the threat of Arctic climate change: “The urgency surrounding mitigating the impact of climate change grows with the almost daily news of unprecedented developments in our Arctic environment ... Arctic ice is melting three times faster than models had earlier predicted – and the earlier predictions were alarming. The Arctic is melting, with dramatic consequences for all of us.” In articles, books, speeches, interviews, policy statements, and testimonies before Parliament, the [message](#) from Inuit leaders in Canada is clear: climate change is the gravest threat confronting Inuit and all peoples living in the Arctic and beyond, and proposed industrial activities that contribute to climate change should be viewed with the highest concern.

### **New Laws and New Allies in Indigenous Environmental Struggles**

These examples of Inuit security claims are recent, but as a phenomenon they are not new: Indigenous peoples have [long argued](#) that their wellbeing was undermined by the actions of settler-colonial governments which served to perpetuated their poverty and disenfranchisement. For decades, little changed as politicians and the courts consistently declined to respect or enforce the rights of Indigenous peoples; despite Aboriginal rights being enshrined in Section 35 of the Canada’s *Constitution Act 1982*, environmental damage affecting nearby communities was considered a cost of doing business and a

routine part of Canada's political economy. In recent years, however, several developments in law and politics have altered the landscape, such that the rights of Indigenous peoples to be consulted about, and possibly consent to, industrial activities on their territories have been established, if not yet fully implemented. Most notable among these is the ruling in the 2014 *Tsilhqot'in* case, in which the Supreme Court first recognized Aboriginal title over their traditional territories, and the federal government's 2016 decision to implement the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), which codifies international standards for the individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples, including the rights to land (though the Liberal government's position on UNDRIP has wavered, with different Cabinet members expressing *different views* of how, or even whether, UNDRIP can be incorporated into Canadian law). As the case of Clyde River *demonstrates*, these developments are in the process of being interpreted by policymakers and tested before the courts to establish the new distribution of authority and governance over land use on Indigenous territories.

The judicial empowerment of Indigenous legal claims in Canada and elsewhere has led to a recognition by many non-Indigenous environmental groups that cooperation and engagement with Indigenous peoples offers the best route to stop extractive projects which they believe will harm local environments, contribute to global climate change, or both. These partnerships have been *described as* "the native rights-based strategic framework", an advocacy and campaigning strategy that links the legal and constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples with their normative claims to sovereignty and justice and the fundraising and operational resources of non-Indigenous advocacy groups. Major environmental NGOs have worked to repair relationships with Indigenous peoples that have been harmed by environmentalists' campaigns targeting

certain Indigenous cultural practices, such as Greenpeace indicating its desire to “make amends” for its past opposition to the Inuit seal hunt. Long opponents over their differing views on environmental stewardship and land use, NGOs and Indigenous peoples have increasingly made common cause through their shared view that, with respect to hydrocarbon extraction in particular, “these fights were all life and death situations, not just for local communities, but for the biosphere.”

## Conclusion

The case of Clyde River is one example of how the threats posed by climate change, now and in the future, are front and centre in the political and legal engagements of Indigenous peoples and environmental organizations. It reflects the fact that many communities are increasingly seeing their own survival as threatened by environmental change, and thus articulate conceptions of what security means to them which highlights the human-caused environmental dangers they face. Such local and Indigenous security claims – statements of what should be protected against certain, identifiable threats – are now part of a global political context where the meaning of security is deeply contested. Longstanding security practices and discourses that privilege states and their national interests are today in direct contradiction with a complex series of security claims made by groups that have been historically and remain adversely affected by the state and its actions. Moreover, in the context of a rapidly changing global environment due to human-caused climate change, struggles to define what security means have deep implications for the future. Environmentalists and others concerned for the prospects of human survival and wellbeing on a warming planet are increasingly prepared to use all available tools at their disposal to secure a

stable and sustainable future for themselves and their children. As reflected in recent and ongoing cases of Indigenous peoples and their environmentalist allies resisting the expansion of hydrocarbon extraction and infrastructure – such as the [Keystone XL](#) and [Dakota Access](#) crude oil pipelines – that struggle continues. In the case of the Arctic, it is currently focused on the small hamlet of Clyde River, and the legal battle over who gets to make decisions over how much environmental damage will be borne to facilitate resource extraction, and what powers Indigenous peoples possess under the law to defend themselves and define the conditions necessary for their own survival.

Image (cropped) by [Emmanuel Milou/Flickr](#).

**Wilfrid Greaves, PhD, is Lecturer at the University of Toronto. His doctoral research examined how in/security and environmental change have been conceptualized by states and Indigenous peoples in the circumpolar Arctic region. An Ontario Graduate Scholar, SSHRC Doctoral Scholar and DFAIT Graduate Student Fellow, he is author of multiple peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and working papers. He has also taught undergraduate courses in International Relations, global security, peace and conflict studies, and Canadian foreign policy at Ryerson University and the University of Toronto. A graduate of the University of Calgary and Bishop's University, his research interests include security theory, human and environmental security, natural resource extraction and climate change, Arctic and Indigenous politics, Canadian foreign policy, and complex peacebuilding operations.**

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