

Sheila Watt-Cloutier
University of Winnipeg Honorary Doctor of Laws
Address to the 2006 Graduating Class
Spring Convocation, June 4, 2006

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. President, honoured guests, my fellow Inuit and fellow Indigenous people, graduates of the class of 2006, ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply honoured to receive this honorary Doctorate of Law and to be given the opportunity to address you today.

Having grown up very traditionally and travelling only by dog team the first ten years of my life, I could not have imagined where my life has since brought me. I could not have imagined standing here today.

However, if there is one thing I learned while growing up in my ancient culture, it is that everything and everyone is connected. This connectivity is what opens up all possibilities in front of us – even those we cannot imagine. Connectivity gives all of us unlimited potential for a wondrous life journey.

My work has been about reminding people of their importance in the web of existence on this planet. For the last eleven years, my work has focussed on reminding the world that, even though they may be geographically far removed from the Inuit homelands in the Arctic, they are nonetheless strongly connected to us. I will give you a couple of examples.

Some years ago, it became clear that, although the Arctic has hardly any industrial development, we were becoming home to the highest levels of toxic contaminants on the planet. By working with dedicated scientists we were able to track these dangerous chemicals back to their sources, sometimes halfway across the planet where they were being used. By exposing this link, Inuit helped mobilize countries through the United Nations to tackle the elimination of the so-called ‘dirty dozen’ persistent organic pollutants through the rapid creation of the United Nations Stockholm Convention.

Believe me, when we began this work, we had many sceptics who denied that 155,000 Inuit of the world could move some of the most powerful nations and industries to action. They did not count on our strong commitment to protect our way of life and on the wisdom and power of the ancient Inuit culture to bridge huge gaps between, not only countries but hemispheres and on our understanding of our connectedness to the rest of the planet.

My recent work has focussed on climate change.

The Arctic is the world's bellwether for climate change. The impacts of global warming are being felt first and hardest in the Arctic. For over twenty years now, our Inuit hunters and Elders have been reporting climate related changes to the Arctic environment.

In large part because of the persistence of these reports from our communities, in October 2000, the Ministers of foreign affairs of the eight-nation Arctic Council met in Barrow, Alaska and authorized an Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA). By the way your President of the University Dr. Lloyd Axworthy was instrumental in the creation of the Arctic Council.

The ACIA was prepared over four years by more than 300 scientists from 15 countries with the close co-operation of Inuit, Sami, Gwich'in, Athabascans, Aleut, and Indigenous peoples in Russia. When released in November 2004, it shocked many people, and gained global attention. Newspapers in Africa, Southeast Asia, North America and Western Europe all featured photos of melting glaciers, disappearing summer sea ice and stressed wildlife.

The ACIA confirms what our Elders and hunters were seeing, that climate change is happening in the Arctic **now**.

The ACIA goes further, however, and makes careful scientific projections of climate change into the next 100 years. The ACIA concludes that climate change is quickly going to get **worse** and that climate change in the Arctic has **global significance**. Again the issue of connectivity.

That the impacts of climate change on the Arctic have repercussion for the rest of the planet should not be of any surprise. After all, three years ago the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) passed a resolution urging greater global attention to the Arctic, as it is a 'barometer' for the global health of the planet.

The Inuk hunter is the sentinel, the guard if you will, not only for the Arctic environment but also for people who have never even thought about the Arctic.

The question is: how much longer will Inuit be able to be the planet's sentinels?

I will read two conclusions of the ACIA. As I do so please remember that Inuit are an ancient people with a hunting culture based on the sea and sea ice.

Marine species dependent on sea ice, including polar bears, ice-living seals, walrus, and some marine birds, are very likely to decline, with some species facing extinction.

And

For Inuit, warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy their hunting and food sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible, and possibly become extinct.

Faced with such dire scientific projections, let me ask you: how you would react?

Many told me that Inuit could do nothing about it. That we simply had to adapt as best we could and that we were most likely doomed to become a footnote to globalization.

I could not and cannot accept such a conclusion and act as powerless victims over the matter. From a position of strength not hopelessness we started to take the lead on climate

change. We have lived sustainably for a millennia without yet depleting any species of animals and since we know much about balanced sustainability we felt a sense of responsibility to fill this deep void in leadership in this climate change debate.

Some four years ago, I set out to put the Inuit face at the forefront of this issue during my mandate as Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

It was, and remains, a daunting task. How does a small under-funded organization representing 155,000 Inuit in a world of billions remind decision-makers of the consequences of climate change on Inuit and the Arctic?

By putting the human face, in this case the Inuit face, front and central. By changing the international discourse on climate change from a dry technical and economic discussion to discussions about human values and human rights. By reminding people far away from the Arctic, that the Inuk hunter falling through the thinning ice is connected to the cars they drive, to the policies they make, to the laws they choose to enforce.

Climate change is, perhaps the biggest challenge we face as a human collective. It is overarching, complex, and requires urgent and immediate action. It is easy to look at the challenges climate change poses and simply become overwhelmed and give up. Yet, when I look out into the crowd here I see a generation of hope, a generation not yet mired in short term and small picture thinking. A generation that has the potential to change the course of action in addressing environmental degradation of this planet we call home: Earth.

As you start your journey into the fast moving world out there called life, if there is one thing that you take away with you today, I would suggest that you never forget that the people and planet are one.

Poised from where I am now, receiving an honorary doctorate and blessed with having been borne into an ancient culture, the Inuit culture so challenged by globalization and

attempting to warn the world, I urge you to look to the Arctic as the early warning, the canary in the mine so to speak.

Use the Arctic/Inuit story to connect us all and to remember our shared humanity. Do not put limitations on what you can achieve and never underestimate the power that connects us all.

Thank you.