

# InfoNorth

Reflecting on 17 years of working together:

Notes from a presentation to the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic

by Theo Ikummaq and Gita Ljubicic

**O**N APRIL 3, 2019 WE SAT TOGETHER in a lower hallway of 1 Wellington Street in Ottawa, waiting to be called in to present our testimony as evidence to the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic. We were both incredibly nervous, feeling hot and uncomfortable in our dress clothes. We had spoken in many large and small public meetings before, both individually and together, but in preparing to present as witnesses to a Senate Committee we felt honoured and intimidated at the same time.

Theo grew up on the land between Iglulik (Igloodik) and Sanirajak (Hall Beach), and his experiences in residential school, losing both parents to tuberculosis while being away at school, and efforts to reclaim his language and land skills profoundly impacted his life and work. Gita grew up in Ottawa, and after camping for two months on Boothia Peninsula during her Masters research she has been dedicated to learning from and working with Inuit on environmental and cultural issues in Inuit Nunangat (Inuit homelands). Theo and Gita met during Gita's first visit to Igloodik in February 2003, as she was doing preliminary meetings to explore community interest in a project to document Inuit knowledge and use of sea ice. Theo is a skilled hunter and interpreter, and was recommended for his experience on the sea ice as well as in communicating with Elders and hunters. Over the course of eight years we worked together on the sea ice project in Igloodik, beginning with Gita's doctoral research, then as part of an International Polar Year project, and with follow-up work as Gita started her first academic position at Carleton University. Theo's research role quickly evolved from being an interpreter to being an advisor, a facilitator, a research coordinator, a guide, a community liaison, and a long-term mentor to Gita (Laidler and Ikummaq, 2008; Laidler et al., 2009, 2010, 2011; Pearce et al., 2009). We have kept in touch between various research projects, and our work continues today as part of a new project attempting to understand Inuit community uses and needs for weather, water, ice, and climate information and services.

Accepting the invitation to present to the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic felt like taking on a new level of responsibility, and we put a lot of thought into the points we wanted to make. The Committee had identified

a number of topics they were interested in to build on the Arctic Framework Discussion Guide. We, among others, were asked to consider the significant and rapid changes to the Arctic and the impacts on original inhabitants. Of the six themes identified by the Committee related to environmental conservation and Arctic science, based on our experience we felt comfortable speaking to the following three topics: the role of science and Indigenous knowledge in conservation decision-making processes; the consideration of Arctic communities' knowledge needs (mental health, housing, food security) in research priority-setting and funding; and the access to post-secondary education and research opportunities for Arctic residents. To view our full presentation, visit the following link (our session begins at 12:06): <https://sencanada.ca/en/Committees/ARCT/NoticeOfMeeting/518635/42-1>

We are not unique in our efforts to work together, to address community priorities, and to explore approaches to bringing Inuit and scientific knowledge together in complementary ways; there are a number of strong community-research partnerships that have evolved across Inuit Nunangat in the past 30 years or more. We are also not unique in being invited to present to the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic, as approximately 133 witnesses appeared before the Committee (with many additional witnesses appearing during the Committee's fact-finding mission or providing written submissions). For us, however, this was a unique opportunity to reflect on our years of working together, what we have learned, and what key messages we wanted to share with the Committee. In the end, we were only able to present for 45 minutes (this time was shared with another witness), and we did not manage to discuss all the points we had hoped to raise. The Committee compiled and analyzed the evidence provided from all witnesses, and published their report *Northern Lights: A wake-up call for the future of Canada* in June, 2019 (Senate of Canada, 2019).

Although some time has passed since our presentation to the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic, we have been reflecting on this experience and would like to share the speaking notes we had prepared for the Committee (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Speaking points prepared for the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic.

Considerations	Key messages
Community context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize that the effects of residential schools, forced settlement, taking people south for tuberculosis treatments, among others, are colonial legacies that have lasting impacts today on family relations, language, hunting capacity, food security, mental health, education achievement, and other social determinants of health.</li> <li>• There is access to post-secondary education and research opportunities for community members, but their Nunavut education equivalencies do not prepare them adequately for college or university, so it can make the transition difficult.</li> <li>• Important programs are already being delivered to strengthen qualifications and confidence, and more can be done in these areas.</li> <li>• Cultural school and land-based learning opportunities in Nunavut are strong, and more community-led cultural programs with consistent multi-year funding are needed.</li> <li>• Research training to enhance community capacity to lead research is increasingly incorporated into research design and funding, and more of this is needed in accordance with community-identified priorities.</li> </ul>
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language shapes the way we think and understand the world.</li> <li>• Respect and emphasize local Inuktitut dialect.</li> <li>• Recognize the limits to translation between Inuktitut and English (and vice versa).</li> <li>• Recognize <i>verbatum</i> vs. conceptual interpretation, do not take translation at face value. It is important to understand the underlying concepts being conveyed to improve mutual understanding and avoid misinterpretation.</li> <li>• The structure of Inuktitut is being affected by English thinking.</li> <li>• The importance of land-based learning is reflected in the experience of forgotten words or aspects of language coming back to you when on the land, or for example, in the acts of travel, hunting, igloo building etc. “The land speaks to you.”</li> <li>• The land (environment) governs culture and language.</li> <li>• Learning the language and documenting terminology contributes to language retention and revitalization, but it cannot replace experience and practice (i.e. speaking and being on the land to which the language is connected).</li> </ul>
Working together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work as a team every step of the way.</li> <li>• Researchers need to work with knowledgeable community members who can help guide and facilitate the research according to local priorities and appropriate methods, as well as in identifying relevant people to be involved based on questions being asked.</li> <li>• Collective effort means collective credit (e.g. co-authorship).</li> <li>• Support Inuit self-determination in research, including diverse approaches to partnership, mentorship, and leadership.</li> <li>• Support the implementation of the National Inuit Strategy on Research <a href="https://www.itk.ca/national-strategy-on-research/">https://www.itk.ca/national-strategy-on-research/</a>.</li> <li>• Working together effectively is based on shared goals and values.</li> <li>• A number of long-term community-based monitoring initiatives (instrumental monitoring and through year-round land use) have been established in Nunavut, and there is great value in ensuring continuity to understand trends in long-term environmental changes.</li> <li>• Sharing the results of research is important, and seeing these results being used in the community is most rewarding (e.g. posters being used regularly for reference in schools). It is important to consider different ways of sharing the outcomes of research for community organizations and other important audiences (e.g. researchers, government).</li> <li>• Some kinds of research are very sensitive (e.g. on certain wildlife species, or health issues), so it may not always be appropriate to share results with certain audiences, and this sharing needs to be carefully discussed with community members and researchers involved.</li> <li>• Recognize and respect cultural beliefs; some topics are considered inappropriate to discuss based on the belief that it will cause that kind of event/animal encounter/danger to happen.</li> <li>• To work together you need to be able to listen, learn, and laugh together – it has to be enjoyable.</li> </ul>
Decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is important to respect and value Inuit and scientific knowledge, each in its own right.</li> <li>• Recognize different ways of sharing knowledge, assessing credibility, asserting leadership, and providing training based on different knowledge systems and values.</li> <li>• Honour Inuit decision-making practices. It works well when governments listen to knowledgeable community members and develop policies accordingly (bringing in science where relevant). When decision-makers only listen to scientific perspectives, it does not always work.</li> <li>• Learn about and respect Inuit governance structures.</li> <li>• When emphasizing evidence-based decision-making, it is important to consider how to effectively and equitably account for oral and experiential knowledge. What is valued as “evidence” may vary according to Inuit and scientific knowledge and, therefore, <i>who</i> is making the decision matters greatly.</li> <li>• Feeling and intuition are critical considerations in making decisions, and these are difficult to account for in formal processes or bureaucratic structures. This is why the hands-on experiential aspects are so important, not just theory.</li> </ul>

In sharing these notes more broadly, we hope these points may be considered and tailored according to diverse experiences and community contexts across Inuit Nunangat.

We continue to work together and independently. To learn more about Theo, visit <https://www.arcticfocus.org/stories/arctic-life/> and to learn more about Gita, see <https://straightupnorth.ca/gita-ljubicic/>. For more information on our work together please visit the following websites:

<https://straightupnorth.ca/ice-through-inuit-eyes-2/>,  
<https://straightupnorth.ca/inuit-sea-ice-use-occupancy-project/>  
<https://straightupnorth.ca/nunavut-sea-ice-weather-forecasting/>  
<https://straightupnorth.ca/community-wwic-uses-and-needs/>

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