

Polar Bears International blog entry – April 26, 2013

## Revelations from the Desk of a Reformed Activist

by Moki Kokoris

*This blog post is written in the first person because it reflects my own views as they have evolved through time, experience and personal edification.*

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My previous entry titled “[Polar Bear Hunting Viewed Through Indigenous Crosshairs](#)” expressed a perspective I did not always have. In mentioning “flag-waving activists who categorically oppose all hunting,” I was also referring to myself in the past. With respect to the Arctic’s ecological interdependence of species, I knew little about the intricate aspects of a subsistence lifestyle prior to my direct interactions with indigenous people. That lack of understanding was evidenced by my vehement protests against the hunting of polar bears across the board. But for the sake of the future of Inuit hunter and polar bear alike, my views have fortunately changed, transforming me from the uninformed subjective activist I had been to the more objective advocate for indigenous rights I have become.

As my participation at annual Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues conferences at the United Nations over the past decade has offered me numerous opportunities to meet and speak with representatives of all indigenous populations around the globe, I grew to understand that these groups lay claim to an ancient ethic of responsibility toward the environment and all the creatures that thrive in it.

In direct contradiction with the accepted views of the industrialized world, to all indigenous peoples, their environment is not a “grocery store at the service of men.” Aboriginal people survived for millennia by respecting nature and living sustainably in a symbiotic relationship with it. They do not attempt to conquer the natural world nor mold it nor exploit it, and their cultural belief systems are fundamentally based on the interconnectivity with their surroundings.



Pipaluk Hammeken and Sara Lyberth in traditional Inuit fur clothing - Uummannaq, Greenland.

Regrettably, westerners have a tendency to believe that because we have been formally educated, it is somehow our responsibility to go forth and “civilize” those whom we view as more primitive. As I have gained broader perspective and look back at my own past actions, though any effort to “improve upon” age-old traditions may seem to be altruistic, I now know that it is nevertheless misguided. Why had I assumed that my values were superior? As well intentioned as my mission might have been, why was I imposing my ethics and philosophy on people to whose lifestyles I could not relate?

We must think about the inadvertent consequences of our activism. By prohibiting the Inuit to hunt seals or polar bears even within quota limits, we force them into living scenarios in which their only option is to rely on government subsidies, be it for food or clothing, all of which is imported and therefore prohibitively expensive. As I had zealously endeavored to save the seal and the polar bear, I was unwittingly condemning an entire culture to a lifestyle to which it cannot relate.

It is not the polar explorers nor the colonialists nor any of us environmental activists, but the Inuit people (and their counterparts in other territories of the Far North) who should be regarded as “guardians of the Arctic.” Their lives are directly intertwined with the ecosystem of which they are a crucial component and which is the source of the traditional knowledge that sustained them and which they sustained for thousands of years. They themselves call their relationship with nature “a common understanding of what life is about.” It is this mutualism that defines the Inuit spirit. And it is that spirit that I finally chose to honor.

The reason I speak on this topic with so much passion is because I feel it is critical that all of us examine the validity of our convictions before we decide to embark on a course of action that could be one-sided. While I still consider myself an environmental activist, and one who adamantly opposes trophy hunting of any kind, my personal evolution as it relates to indigenous practices has offered me a balanced perspective that is respected not only in wide societal circles but also by the Inuit themselves. Just as the Inuit respect and guard the Arctic and the animals with which they coexist, so I respect and guard their rights, cultural knowledge and inextricable relationship with the polar bear. \* \* \*



Indigenous peoples have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years, co-existing with polar bears and other wildlife.