

The Arctic Council at Twenty

Early Vision, Current Reality

By Rudy Yuly, UW Creative Consultants Network

Before the Arctic Council began its work, University of Toronto Professor, Franklyn Griffiths, and Inuit leader, Rosemarie Kuptana, traveled across the vast Canadian Arctic gathering local opinions from its widely scattered inhabitants on how the Council should be structured.

“We wanted a body that would bring together all the Arctic countries and allow them to learn from each other and cooperate—to stop each of them from having to reinvent the wheel on a wide range of issues,” Griffiths said. “The planning panel we served on also wanted to ensure indigenous voices were heard. We felt this was vital because indigenous people are the most vulnerable and exposed to external decisions.”

It was a compelling vision that bore fruit. When the Council, an international, intergovernmental forum that operates on a consensus basis and does not have the power to make law, began its work in 1996, Arctic indigenous peoples had permanent seats at the table, alongside rotating chairs Canada, the U.S., Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

Early issues facing the Council included uniquely Arctic challenges like distant medicine, search and rescue, and education in remote locations. Perhaps most importantly, it included monitoring the Arctic’s fragile environment where the Council has focused the bulk of its attention over the years.

According to Griffiths, one of the Council’s brightest achievements, which he witnessed as an outside observer, was its release in 2004 of a comprehensive groundbreaking study, the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment.

“It drew the attention of the world to the rapidity of climate change in the Arctic region and its global implications,” Griffiths said. “And today, in 2015, as people are meeting in Paris, people are still paying attention.”

Evidence that people are paying attention to the work of the Council can also be seen in the growing number of states (currently 13) and other international organizations seeking observer status on the Council. It’s also reflected in the dozens of work groups, reports, programs, and assessments issued by the Council, which are widely cited internationally, particularly on issues of climate change, and have been used by member countries to shape policies, which do have the force of law.

One issue that has never been on the Council’s agenda, due to U.S. and Canadian opposition and contrary to the early vision of Griffith, Kuptana, and

their colleagues, is military cooperation and security. It's an issue both Griffiths and Kuptana would still like to see the Council address today.

“While security at one time implied military issues, thinkers today recognize that security could be food, housing, and clothing,” according to Kuptana. “Some of our communities unfortunately are experiencing a less than average quality of life. The Arctic region is a very fragile and important part of the earth’s ecosystem and what happens in the Arctic will impact other parts of the earth. I’m hoping that the Arctic Council will not forget about the people when they are making policy for the Arctic.”

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