

# People of the Arctic Council **Indigenous Participants Give the Arctic Council a Unique Voice, but the Cost to Them is High**

By Rudy Yuly, UW Creative Consultants Network

Since its work began in 1996, the Arctic Council has been recognized as a unique and influential international body. Part of its influence may rest on the fact that it's the only intergovernmental forum on the planet to permanently include indigenous peoples as nearly equal representatives alongside governmental representatives.

"There's absolutely no doubt that having the Arctic Council formulated this way has led to a very different approach to Arctic issues," said Jim Gamble, Executive Director of the Aleut International Association (AIA), one of the earliest indigenous organizations to gain permanent status on the Council. "In order to make the best decisions, you have to have the best information and that includes the best scientific, traditional, and local information. And the Council has used that approach to produce a tremendous amount of really high-quality work."

That work includes groundbreaking studies and monitoring of Arctic contaminants, marine wildlife, biodiversity, social issues, search and rescue, disaster response, oil pollution preparation and response, and climate change.

"We have members of the Arctic Council that are also members of the European Union. Russia and the U.S. are on the UN Security Council," said Joe Linklater, Chairperson of Gwich'in Council International, which has been a Permanent Participant on the Council since 2000. "They bring forward issues from the Arctic Council at other international forums. From the very grassroots levels of indigenous peoples sitting at these tables, we're able to influence the decisions that are made."

Its influence and the importance of the Arctic globally, particularly regarding climate change, has led the Arctic Council to tackle an ever-increasing workload. For the indigenous participants, this has meant increased costs and that's challenging for indigenous participants, who generally work with extremely limited resources.

"Every year we take on more and more projects so the human capacity and the financial capacity becomes a challenge, especially for smaller organizations like the Gwich'in Council International," Linklater said.

Chief Michael Stickman, Chair of the Arctic Athabaskan Council, agrees. "Knowledge is only good if you can share it. But you can only share it if there's

money to share it. Each culture has its own power of knowledge. We have all the knowledge, we have all the people—we just don't have the money.”

“We're small organizations and we're trying to do a lot with very little,” Gamble explained. “Literally every declaration that's come down from the Arctic Council every two years talks about supporting the Permanent Participants. It's been talked about for 20 years and nothing's been done about it. That element is a bit frustrating.”

“Everyone would like to do more, especially when it comes to issues such as climate change,” Linklater said. “It's not always just a dollar thing. It's also the human capacity of finding the proper expertise and streamlining the work we do and managing expectations so that we're not taking on more than we need to be taking on. The work is progressing very positively but it's becoming more and more of a challenge to be able to meet the needs.”

“We know that having indigenous input produces a better work product,” Gamble said. “It produces a more complete picture and adds traditional knowledge which is often a way of finding out information that's impossible to find out any other way. We just need to come to grips with how to support the six Permanent Participants so we can fully engage and do the best possible job.”

### **About the Arctic Council**

Founded in 1996, the Arctic Council is an intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation between Arctic states and Arctic indigenous peoples with an emphasis on sustainable development and the environment.

Sitting alongside rotating chairs include Canada, the U.S., Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden; they are six permanent participants on the Council representing the interests of approximately half a million indigenous people in the Arctic. They are the [Aleut International Association \(AIA\)](#), [Arctic Athabaskan Council \(AAC\)](#), [Gwich'in Council International \(GCI\)](#), [Inuit Circumpolar Council \(ICC\)](#), [Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North \(RAIPON\)](#), and the [Saami Council \(SC\)](#).

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