I have a distant ancestral link to this place.

My great-great-great-great grandfather was First Lieutenant on George Vancouver’s Discovery as it circumnavigated the globe in the 1790s. Vancouver had been with Captain Cook on a previous voyage and had visited “Cook’s River” now known as Cook Inlet.

Vancouver returned with my ancestor, Joseph Baker, to complete the coastal surveys begun by Cook. Baker was in charge of mapping and drawing charts. One day, he climbed into a small boat with his crew, hoisted a sail, and headed up Cook’s River. A short trip confirmed that the river was an inlet and was not the entrance to the Northwest Passage.

That voyage and other British journeys into the Arctic were part of more than a century of imperial ambition which, thought they failed in the quest for the passage, succeeded in incorporating the Arctic into the global maps and imagination of the day. Exploration led to claims of possession, which led eventually to governance – control over resources and peoples.

Two centuries later, as we come here to discuss Arctic governance, we continue to use the maps, with modern modifications, and wrestle with the imagery and metaphors of the so-called Age of Discovery. What is different of course, is that we live in a post-colonial era. We are coming to terms, in different ways and unequally, with the legacy of the imperial designs of our European ancestors.

The Arctic has been described as an indicator region for global environmental health. It is a message that the Arctic Council took, for example, to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. It is a perspective developed and then promulgated by the Indigenous Peoples organization at the council, the Permanent Participants.

The founding statement of the Arctic Council, the 1996 Iqaluit Declaration, reads:
Affirming our commitment to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Arctic, including special recognition of the special relationship and unique contributions to the arctic of indigenous people and their communities;

According to ILO Convention 169, Indigenous Peoples are descendants of those who (a) lived in the area before colonization and who have maintained their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions since colonization and the establishment of new states.

There are six Indigenous Peoples’ organizations with what is called Permanent Participant status at the Arctic Council. Four of them – the AIA, AAC, GCI and ICC have Alaskan territories. The others are RAIPON and the Saami Council in Norway, Sweden, Finland and northwest Russia. The wider international role played by Indigenous Peoples is an important element in a long-term strategy for cultural survival. This strategy is key to how Indigenous Peoples will cope with the impacts of global change in the coming years.

I want to touch briefly on three concrete examples of this strategy and conclude with some personal observations about the Arctic Council.

1. Indigenous Peoples have played a key role in development of the Stockholm POPs convention and their perspectives and knowledge are integral to the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment to be released in November;

2. Indigenous Peoples are able to take political messages to international fora like the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biodiversity and the UN Permanent Forum, to name just a few examples; and

3. They continue to work to ensure that foundation stone for this strategy – the Arctic Council – continues to include indigenous knowledge, perspectives and issues in the work of the its work and evolves into something more than a “talk shop”.

Contaminants and Climate Change

In the mid-1980s, researchers were shocked to discover high levels of PCBs and other organochloride contaminants in the breast milk of Inuit women in Puuvirtuk in Arctic Quebec.

Those findings were one of the starting points for a major study on pollution in the Arctic Council’s Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program. Research from Arctic countries soon showed that far from being the clean, unpolluted land of everybody’s imagination, the Arctic was in danger of becoming one of the more polluted spots on earth. Air and water currents carry the chemicals to the Arctic. Once there, they tend to stay, becoming taken up by Arctic plants and animals, and ending up in the bodies of indigenous peoples who rely on local foods. Among these are a subset of industrial chemicals, byproducts and wastes known as persistent organic pollutants (POPs) – including PCBs, DDT, aldrin, chlordane, toxaphene, furans, dioxins, and others.
For Arctic Indigenous Peoples, contaminants are an issue of survival. Most people still rely on the land for a large portion of their nutritional intake. If they can’t eat country food – seal, walrus, fish, polar bear – there will be direct health consequences. Even with the current contaminant load, in most places, it is still better to eat this food than substitute fatty, high calorie but low nutrition store-bought foods. Study after study has confirmed the benefits to human health of wild food. And for the Inuit and other Arctic peoples, eating country food is an important link to their cultures and value systems.

Arctic Indigenous Peoples used the information gathered through the AMAP other studies to lobby for international negotiations. Their influence was important in the negotiation of two international environmental treaties -- the Århus Protocol on POPs, which was signed in Denmark in 1998, and the Stockholm Convention, signed in 2001. Both of these are now in force.

Arctic Indigenous Peoples formed an effective coalition that raised awareness, lobbied delegates and governments, and conducted an effective media campaign. The result was the Stockholm POPs Convention, the first international legal instrument to specifically mention Arctic and its Indigenous Peoples:

Acknowledging that the Arctic ecosystems and indigenous communities are particularly at risk because of the biomagnification of persistent organic pollutants and that contamination of their traditional foods is a public health issue,

During the negotiations that led to the Stockholm POPs Convention Arctic Indigenous Peoples successfully captured the moral high ground. The Chair of the Stockholm negotiations, John Buccini, described the role of the Indigenous Peoples as “putting a human face on what many people considered a scientific or abstract issue.”

The role Indigenous Peoples played in the POPs negotiations is being replayed on the issue of climate change.

Climate change will bring dramatic changes to the lives and cultures of Indigenous Peoples and the Permanent Participants have been involved in the ACIA since it was launched. Indigenous perspectives and knowledge form the basis of key chapters, and are woven throughout the document. A summary of the scientific report is being prepared. And all six Permanent Participants have been working with the eight Arctic countries in drafting policy recommendations that are supposed to guide action on climate change in the Arctic. They will continue their work and efforts – internationally through the UNFCCC in which some are regular participants; regionally through the Arctic Council and other bodies; and locally.

The role of the Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic climate assessment has been very important. The original direction from the eight Arctic Council states was to consider the “environmental, social, economic and cultural implications” of climate change.

In the coming weeks, Arctic Indigenous Peoples will launch an international campaign to raise awareness about the assessment, its results, and its recommendations. Needless to say, part of this campaign will be designed to put pressure on the very governments that
instituted the study – to get them to take the lead in negotiating new international agreements.

You may have read about some of the controversy concerning the development of these recommendations. The International Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference recently testified before Senator John McCain’s committee on transportation, science and technology in Washington. One of the concerns Sheila Watt-Cloutier raised in her comments was that the United States is moving away from its commitment in the Arctic Council’s 2000 Barrow Declaration to produce three documents – a scientific assessment, a summary or overview and a policy document.

There has been some media discussion about this and late last week Senator McCain wrote to Secretary of State Colin Powell. McCain said:

_We urge you to ensure that the terms of the agreement from the 2000 Barrow Declaration are adhered to. It is important that the entire impact assessment be made public in the agreed upon format. We further request that the State Department refrain from any activity that may be detrimental to the process of completing this important assessment._

**International Advocacy**

There is no need to go into much detail on this controversy. I raise it as an example of the ability of Arctic indigenous peoples to organize and deliver a message that is listened to. It is something that we saw at the WSSD as well.

In 2002, just before the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, Indigenous Peoples met in Kimberley, South Africa, in the homeland of the Khoi San. The indigenous Khoi San have been trying to convince the South African government that they exist, are a distinct people, and have indigenous rights. During the Apartheid era their fairer complexion saw them classified as “coloured” and their lives were governed in every aspect by apartheid. In democratic South Africa, where there is an effort to ensure that all citizens have equal rights, the Khoi San feel excluded.

So the meeting on their home territory was a major breakthrough. Several hundred representatives of Indigenous Peoples from 70 countries met for several days to plan how they would try to influence the final WSSD political statement and action plan. From South and North America, Asia, Africa and the South Pacific. Arctic peoples – the Aleut, Saami, Udege, Nenets, Inuit, Gwich’in, Athabaskan – came to deliver a number of messages. One was that co-operation at an international level was possible and indeed desirable. They pointed to the example of the Arctic Council.

It is worth noting that the Arctic Indigenous Peoples were able to demonstrate the efficacy of working together in a way that the Arctic states were not. While the Indigenous Peoples got the message that what is happening in the Arctic is important and that the region is an indicator for global environmental health, efforts by the Arctic states to insert such language into the WSSD Action Plan and final political statement did not succeed because the delegations of the individual Arctic countries failed to see its importance, or to recognize that they had common cause. This occurred for the simple reason that the Arctic lost out to many competing interests and, when the Arctic states
had to make decisions about what language to support, the chose not to include language that they had previously agreed up at the Arctic Council.

The Arctic Council is the first international forum where Indigenous Peoples and nation states sit at the same table and discuss issues in relative parity. It is a model that has been incorporated by the UN Permanent Forum, though the rules of that body are different. Some of the Permanent Participants have also been active in the Convention on Biological Diversity and other international treaties.

Role at the Arctic Council

Peter Jull, who has worked with Indigenous Peoples for more than three decades, has written:

“… hunter-gatherers are *de facto* ambassadors and practitioners, moving easily and speaking fluently where national governments fear to tread. Arctic political, social, economic, and environmental imperatives are those which Indigenous Peoples have long been proclaiming, and now ones which national governments – including the most powerful on earth – accept and help enforce.”

Indigenous Peoples have invested a lot of time, energy and scarce resources into making the dream of Arctic co-operation a reality. They continue to work through the Arctic Council despite increasing signs that there are limitations to what the council can accomplish. There is a relativity in the relationship that is troubling. While it sounds good on paper, its execution still leaves something to be desired.

An American official intimate with the council recently commented that the body “doesn’t exist.” She meant that as a product of a political agreement. Its working groups’ activities are mandated through political declarations. There is no treaty. No legal force. Without a central secretariat or annual budget, the Arctic Council could only ever do as much – or as little – as the consensus of eight states would permit. All it takes to block progress is to say no. After being on the outside, Indigenous Peoples have worked diligently over the last decade to ensure that the Arctic Council, and its predecessor the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, were more than talk shops.

Indigenous peoples organizations put more faith in the council than that, but this faith is being sorely tested by two concurrent issues: the development of climate change policy recommendations and the ongoing discussion about funding and resources.

My personal opinion is that if the Arctic Council did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. Given the global nature of the problems affecting the region and its peoples, national solutions that do not consider the situation across borders are doomed to failure. Just as there are cumulative environmental, social and economic effects emanating from climate change, contaminants and other problems, there are combined political effects to consider as well.

While it is possible to criticize the Arctic Council on a number of fronts – too slow, too unfocussed, too little action, too much playing to the lowest common denominator in order to maintain consensus, it has a great strength that should not be overlooked. The
Arctic states have more in common than many other nations. Indigenous Peoples while from different cultures and with different histories, share common links to the environment that has nourished them for millennia. To paraphrase Pope John XXIII, we must seek that which unites rather than divides us.

The Arctic has become more or less Mikhail Gorbachev’s “zone of peace”. This cannot be underemphasized. The collaboration of Arctic states and Indigenous Peoples – of former colonizers and the formerly colonized – tells us there is another way – that differences can be overcome (or overlooked), that new ways of thinking are possible, that change for the benefit of people can be achieved.

At the moment much of the council’s potential remains unrealized, but it is there. Indigenous Peoples can help the council realize its potential.