

Opinion by Sayers Tuzroyluk, Sr.
President, Voice of the Arctic Inupiat

Arctic Iñupiat will speak for themselves

In recent years, the eyes of the world have been focused on the Arctic. With global warming becoming a major political issue and environmental groups spending millions to purchase a voice in the debate, Alaska's Arctic Slope has become ground zero for climate change and ecosystem policy discussions. Unfortunately, the Iñupiat who call the region home – and therefor stand to be most affected – are often left out of the discussion.

This month, a group of more than 350 scientists sent a letter to President Obama urging him to “protect vital habitats in the Arctic Ocean” stating that “no new oil and gas leasing or exploration should be allowed in the Chukchi or Beaufort Seas.” Instead of offering any scientific information to support their request, they simply state that they're doing it for us. That the areas should be placed off-limits to honor subsistence hunting, fishing, access for indigenous peoples, and to protect the long-term health of the waters.

The letter concludes by asking the President to “consult with indigenous communities and tribes, who have extensive traditional knowledge relevant to decision-making.” Ironically, these scientists themselves failed to consult with us – the Iñupiat of the region – the very people they claim to be fighting for. They also failed to share the results of their studies, which they conducted in our communities. Instead, they used our voice in their plea to the President as if speaking for us about how our region should be managed.

The Iñupiat have historically invited scientists into our region to conduct research in the Arctic and welcomed them into our homes while doing so. Some of them have worked in the region for years and are considered friends. So it is truly discouraging to learn that these same scientists chose to speak on our behalf without our knowledge or permission.

Statements like those from the science community, or anyone for that matter, regarding policy decisions in our backyard should include engagement and consultation with local people to ensure key issues are addressed which correctly reflect the priorities and views of North Slope Iñupiat.

As protectors of our land and waters, we understand more than anyone the need for balance. Our Iñupiat culture and traditional lifestyles cannot be sustained without careful management of our natural resources, so it's important that we take a measured approach to any development – onshore and offshore. At the same time, we cannot be expected to survive without a stable, fully-functional economy, and the region is heavily-reliant on revenues from oil and gas development.

Today, we live in a cash economy, where we need jobs and economic opportunities to subsist and survive. The key is to strike a balance between preservation and development.

It is unfair to put the needs of the environment and animals above our own survival. The sustainability of our region's people should never be secondary to the preservation of its land, sea and wildlife. Perhaps nowhere else in America would such a discussion even take place.

Our experience as local Natives cannot be overstated. We offer a unique perspective to the Arctic, based on thousands of years of traditional knowledge, which supports our regional priorities and offers solutions to maintaining a healthy ecosystem while providing for the economic longevity of our communities.

When it comes to the land and sea in the Arctic, no one has more experience caring for them and the resources they provide than Iñupiat. We cherish our traditional subsistence practices above all else, and also understand the need for modern, responsible development of the oil and gas resources our region is blessed with.

As President of Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, I am hopeful that Alaskans and the White House understand our perspective on Arctic policy in advance of any decisions that will impact our lands, ocean, culture or economy.

I am not writing in support of OCS development and the organization remains neutral regarding offshore activity in the region. Instead, we are focused on ensuring that outside voices do not speak for the Iñupiat people of the North Slope or appropriate our people, culture or region to support any outside agenda. I am concerned that 350 scientists chose to do so, and even more saddened that 27 of our fellow Alaskans joined them by signing the letter to President Obama.

Sayers Tuzroyluk, Sr.
President, Voice of the Arctic Inupiat
Sayers.Tuzroyluk@inupiatvoice.org
907.368.2479 direct
907.368.6621 main

Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat (VOAI) is a 501(c)4 nonprofit organization established to provide direct input from the Inupiat people in matters of Arctic policy. VOA's membership includes 20 of the 28 entities from across the North Slope including tribal councils, municipal governments and Alaska Native corporations.