

Gwich'in Council International

Ministerial Statement

Presented by Edward Alexander

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Rovaniemi, Finland

Van gwinzii shalak nait (Good morning my relatives). Shoozhrii Edward Alexander oozhii ts'a' Gwichyaa Zhee gwats'an ihlii Gaa tanan gwich'ii. (My name is Edward Alexander and while I am from Fort Yukon I live now in Fairbanks.)

As I sit here today, Rovaniemi, the home of Arctic cooperation, a mere 5,200 kilometers from my hometown of Fort Yukon, Alaska, I feel both the honor and the weight of being charged with the responsibility by my people to share with you, my distinguished colleagues, the views of our Gwich'in people on some of the most pressing issues facing humanity today.

These are: the state of our relations, climate change, and the cultural and linguistic survival of Indigenous peoples, who since time immemorial have had their histories and lives intertwined with the animals, the lands, the waters for both our physical and spiritual nourishment.

When I began my remarks, I started with the term Shalak nait, which is the traditional way a Khekwaai, a leader, always begins his or her remarks as a Gwich'in person. It means "my relations" or "my relatives." We say it first to remind ourselves that our relationships come first; that this is why we are here to conduct business, because, quintessentially we must care for each other and our world like our family. Sometimes, on days like today, we might need to be reminded of the paramount role relationship building plays in the north, in the Arctic Council, and in Arctic families, and that little bit of wisdom has survived tens of thousands of years in the north, because we respect every one of you today here and listening around the globe.

Shalak nait.

I want my children and grandchildren, and yours too, and onwards forever, to grow up to be able to say: *Shalak nait, Nehkàa ji' vadhaih eengjit nahâlzrii*, "Tomorrow, I will hunt for caribou."

I fear that future generations will not be able to say, *Nehkàa ji' vadhaih eengjit nahâllzrii* – "I will hunt for caribou tomorrow" for two reasons:

Because our language has been brutally repressed in the wake of decades of policy that punished our people for speaking Gwich'in, which we call "Dinjii Zhuh K'yaa" – "the humble people's language" – and which also means "the humble people's way of life."

Or, alternatively, because there will be no caribou on the mountain, because the government of today, chose to value temporary profit over our relatives and relationships that have sustained us since time immemorial.

The United Nations has deemed 2019 to be the year of Indigenous Languages. The individual and collective effort of dedicated young people who seek to become the elders of the future, able to pass down our language, cannot be overlooked, but it can only be restored with the respect of all, with Shalak naii.

The right is recognized in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in Article 14:1:

'Indigenous peoples have a right to education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.'

Shalak naii, we owe it to our children to root them in a sense of self that is guided by their culture, give them the tools to repair the lines of cultural transmission that we so aggressively destroyed in the past by government policy.

Not only do we need the language transmission, so that future generations can say, *Nehkàa ji' vadzhaih eengjit nahâllzrii*, we need for there to be caribou: tomorrow, and into the future.

The future of the Porcupine Caribou herd, this unique herd which has the longest land mammal migration in the world, is threatened.

This awe-inspiring migration has been put into peril by the insistence of the Government of the United States of America to open the area to oil and gas development, despite the urging of both the Gwich'in and many of the governments here at this table.

The Gwich'in directly and unequivocally call on our friends in the United States to immediately cease all efforts to issue oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and to ensure the preservation and the integrity of the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd and the Gwich'in people's way of life.

This is why GCI was pleased to see an emphasis on "Strengthen(ing) circumpolar cooperation on environmental impact assessment", as a recommendation in the Finnish-chairmanship led project on *Good Practices for Environmental Assessment and Meaningful Engagement in the Arctic*.

GCI was proud to co-lead this project, which exemplifies the ability of the work at the Arctic Council to be impactful not only on a Circumpolar or International scale, but to speak directly to the priorities of the Indigenous governments of the North.

Gwich'in benefited not only from the product itself, but from the discussions sparked in our communities by the project and the access to research and expertise that it facilitated. For example, the project enabled GCI to commission a report on emerging practices of Indigenous – rather than state-led – impact reviews.

The nations of the Arctic Council benefited from the integral knowledge of the Permanent Participants and that which we bring to the discussion with thousands of years of knowledge and management of the land, the animals and the waters.

While Gwich'in stand opposed to development in ANWR, we are actively investing in developing renewable energy infrastructure in our communities.

The *Arctic Sustainable Energy Futures Toolkit*, an SDWG initiative and the first project proposed and lead by GCI in the Arctic Council, is a print and web-based guide for communities to follow when developing and exercising community energy planning

processes. This step-by-step toolkit will transfer knowledge using best practices, resource guides, case studies, videos, worksheets, and template pathways to help communities create and implement their energy visions.

This month Gwich'in delegates will meet and officially declare a "Climate Change Emergency" in our territories. Our animals are suffering, hunters are falling through thin ice, there's the Yukon River king salmon collapse threatening our food security, our permafrost is rapidly deteriorating, and we have unprecedented wildfires in our territories.

GCI continues to believe that the Arctic Council is an effective body for seeking cooperation to take steps towards addressing this emergency. Much more needs to be done by us all.

Climate change is why Gwich'in Council International has proposed that the eight Arctic states, with the active participation of the six Permanent Participants, negotiate an agreement on cooperation in the mitigation of and response to wildfires, and better work to understand the changing nature of fire ecology in the Arctic.

Hai' choo Shalak nait. Thank you, my relatives, and never ever forget the importance of our relationships, our families, all of our relations that make us leaders, that inspires the people's trust in our governments. It is, in our perspective, the only path to a more just, peaceful and vibrant world for us all and for all of our relations on the land, in the water, and in the air.

Gwich'in around the world thank the Finnish Chairmanship for their excellent leadership over the last two years and for the Chairman's Statement. We also say thank you to the Finnish people for their warm hospitality and true kindness, as well as thank you to the Member States, the Permanent Participants, the Observers, to all of the excellent work coming out of our Working Groups, and we look forward to working with the incoming Icelandic Chairmanship so that we can continue to say and we will always be able to say, Shalak nait *Nehkàa ji' vadhaih eengjit nahâllzrii.*

Mahsi' choo, hai'.