

Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting Statement May 20, 2021

Van gwinzii shalak nait (Good morning my relatives). Shoozhrii Edward Alexander oozhii ts'a' Gwichyaa Zhee gwats'an ihlii. (My name is Edward Alexander and I am from Fort Yukon I live now in Fairbanks.) Shiyehghan nait goovoozhrii Clarence ts'a' Ginny Alexander oozhii. Sha'at voozhrii Alisa oozhii.

I began by speaking a bit of Dinjii Zhuh K'yaa, how we refer to the Gwich'in language which is a homonym that also means "our way of life", to recognize the UN decade of indigenous languages, and its important inclusion in this Declaration. Our languages carry knowledge from the beginning to where we are now, and how we work together going forward. In our Gwich'in language, at the very beginning of time there was a person named Ch'iteehaakwaii, which means "he paddled amid things". At the time the Arctic was a hostile place, not like the beautiful north we know today, there were giant animals that all fought amongst each other, many of whom preferred to eat all of us human beings. There were Giant bears that would decimate villages, giant beavers that would dam the Yukon, Eagles that would eat people, and Ch'iteehaakwaii traveled amid these, and he defeated the problems one by one, some by direct action and others by dialogue, and treaty with these animals, it is said that at that time we all spoke one language, the same language as the plants and the animals. In this way Ch'iteehaakwaii was able to negotiate the ecosystem of the north today that sustains our people in peace, and inspires the world. And so as we welcome this decade of indigenous languages, let us also celebrate stories like Ch'iteehaakwaii and the example that he set for creating a peaceful, and vibrant world for our peoples. Today we do not all speak the same language, like in Ch'iteehaakwaii's time, but we must speak the common language of the north, providing voice to the concerns of our people, particularly the most vulnerable, and for all of the creatures that inhabit our lands, waters, and sky. Their concerns should be our concern too.

We welcome progress on that front in the adoption of this declaration at the 25th Anniversary of the Arctic Council, and in the coming together of a strategic plan with a shared vision for the Arctic, that provides us with the framework to move together like Ch'iteehaakwaii amid our collective challenges. We recognize the threats we face like the climate crisis, this continuing pandemic, we see the impacts

on our food security with the water warming, mass salmon die-offs, we see the changes around us, and we all share the common concern of Wildfire in the north. Like Ch'iteehaakwaii, we can never get rid of all of our challenges, but we must do our best to ensure that we safeguard our people, and our ways of life by working together, by speaking to each other with solutions to those challenges we hold in common. This cooperation is the language of the north, the way of the north.

This year, we commend our Gwich'in communities across Alaska, the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories, and other communities across the Arctic, that have come together with a spirit of cooperation through this pandemic, and all of the challenges that we have faced. We celebrate the continued commitment to sustainable energy systems in the ARENA project and elsewhere, which we are proud to co-lead, and we are thankful the community of Old Crow is now running completely on solar power in the summer months. We welcome the 4th Economy of the North report, and its inclusion of a section on caribou economy, and its understanding of a suite of values encompassing language, material, food security, harvesting culture, the arts and more.

The Porcupine Caribou Herd is central to Gwich'in, we appreciate the renewed commitment from the US and Canada to "safeguard" the calving grounds. We welcome Local to Global, and its focus on empowering communities and youth in mental health and wellness. We are committed to the continued work on Wildland fire in both CAFF and EPPR to further cooperation and knowledge exchange.

Hai' ee Shalak naii. Thank you, my relatives. Hai' ee to Iceland, for your outstanding leadership, hospitality and vision during the past two years, your team has been outstanding. We commend Iceland for adapting during the global coronavirus pandemic, and coordinating these significant deliverables and achievements to successfully mark the 25th anniversary of the Arctic Council as we work together towards a sustainable Arctic. We welcome the incoming Russian chairmanship and look forward to continuing this good, and necessary work with all of you.

Thank you.