

Santiago Tijerina

*University of Maine*

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Honors College

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Bill Taylor Essay Contest 2020-2021 For College Students

*Climate Justice—The Center of Geopolitical Debates in the Arctic*

Climate justice is a term used to frame global warming as an ethical dilemma. This is done by relating the negative effects of global warming to concepts of justice, such as human rights. Climate justice is the predominant social issue circulating the debates of the Arctic's geopolitics, and the effect of global warming on indigenous peoples of the Arctic has raised many concerns among human rights activists. Global warming is beginning to deteriorate the Arctic's ecosystems, consequently, unprecedented challenges for indigenous peoples of the Arctic are taking shape. If the lack of sustainable development persists and the pursuit of exploitative oil development begins to occur in the Arctic, then indigenous communities will suffer from unjust and severe consequences. Climate justice is ultimately a movement led by activists who strive to have these inequities addressed head-on, in an attempt to implement long-term mitigation policy and regulation. Sara Olsvig strongly articulated a position for climate justice at the Camden Conference. Olsvig argued that new forms of colonization, such as economic exploitation, must be avoided. We have gone through too much colonization, and it is unacceptable to go through another type of colonization. One interesting question that Olsvig brought to the conversation was whether or not the international community is willing and able to make sure that indigenous communities of the Arctic have a seat at the table, and that their voices are taken into consideration.<sup>1</sup> Gunn-Britt Retter added to the conversation at the Camden Conference, most notably, by revealing how government leaders involved in the Arctic have not been prioritizing the lives of indigenous peoples of the Arctic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Olsvig (2021, February 20-21), *Greenland—the Challenges of Developing Self-Governance and Safe Communities* [Sixth Presentation], 2021 Camden Conference The Geopolitics of the Arctic: A Region in Peril, Camden, ME, USA, [www.camdenconference.org](http://www.camdenconference.org)

<sup>2</sup> Gunn-Britt Retter (2021, February 20-21), *The People of Eight Seasons: A Resilient Culture or a Future at Risk?* [Seventh Presentation], 2021 Camden Conference The Geopolitics of the Arctic: A Region in Peril, Camden, ME, USA, [www.camdenconference.org](http://www.camdenconference.org)

Climate justice begins with recognizing the key groups who are directly affected by global warming. The Arctic is “home to around four million people. Roughly 10 percent of people in the Arctic are indigenous.”<sup>3</sup> Numerous communities of indigenous peoples inhabit the “Arctic Five” nations (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States). These communities have been directly threatened by global warming, therefore, climate justice activists have become increasingly interested in intervening to protect their human rights.<sup>4</sup> Sheila Watt-Cloutier, a world-renowned author who was once nominated for a Nobel Prize, is dedicated to raising awareness over the impact of global warming on her people, the Inuit.<sup>5</sup> Watt-Cloutier is one of the numerous activists driven by an ethical agenda to raise awareness over human rights. As an intellectual, Watt-Cloutier views education as a starting point for drafting solutions. As an aside, the commencing stages of industrial megaprojects amounts to the violation of human rights experienced by indigenous peoples of the Arctic. “The indigenous peoples of the Arctic are wary of the changes they have witnessed over the past decade. The strange environment wrought by changing Arctic ice isn’t the only concern for the indigenous communities. The prospect of heightened activity in the region also threatens to encroach their isolated way of life.”<sup>6</sup> Gail Whiteman is involved with sustainable development and is an expert on global socio-economic risk on climate change. She contributed an economic lens to the Camden Conference by stating that Arctic shipping, over time, will cause an increase in black carbon and other pollutants. That increase could result in \$10 trillion of climate impacts globally. Whiteman advocated for economic climate justice by stating that highly developed nations will not pay the

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<sup>3</sup> Yolanda Kakabadse, *Frontier Mentality Has No Place in the Arctic*, Harvard International Review, Vol. 36, No. 3, Published 2015, pp. 55-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649294>

<sup>4</sup> “Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic,” *GRID Arendal*, Published 2021, [www.arcgis.com](http://www.arcgis.com)

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Gregoire, “Grise Fiord: Cold warriors,” *Canadian Geographic*, Published 2008, [www.canadiangeographic.ca](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca)

<sup>6</sup> Richard A. Kerr, *A Warmer Arctic Means Change for All*, Science, Vol. 297, No. 5586, Published 2002, pp. 1490-1492, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3832479>

price, instead, those that are already being affected by climate change will pick up the price tag.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, industrial megaprojects pose another pressing issue which indigenous peoples of the Arctic must face alongside global warming. Solutions must be drafted quickly and the attention of human rights activists must be shifted to the Arctic region.

However, before drafting solutions one must reflect on what global warming has done to the Arctic and what that means for indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Over time, scientific research has proven that the Arctic's ecosystems have become increasingly sensitive to temperature increases. "The most drastic result of continued warming is the ongoing shrinking of summer sea ice in the Arctic Ocean, in terms of extent, thickness, and volume. The Arctic Ocean is projected to become nearly ice-free in summer within this century, likely within the next 30 to 40 years."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, global warming has created a negative chain reaction within the Arctic's ecosystems. The melting of sea ice and coastal erosion has displaced animals from their natural habitats and caused major changes to the marine food chain.<sup>9</sup> Traditional food, which is consumed by the majority of households in indigenous communities, relies on the preservation of natural habitats for animals and consistency within the food chain. "The loss of permafrost, animals, and fish could have a devastating effect on the native peoples of the region, whose cultures continue to be linked intimately with them. The Inuit hunting culture is directly threatened by changes not only in the physical geography of the environment but in the composition of the animal population."<sup>10</sup> Evidently, global warming can have adverse impacts on

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<sup>7</sup> Gail Whiteman (2021, February 20-21), *What Happens in the Arctic Doesn't Stay There* [Fourth Presentation], 2021 Camden Conference The Geopolitics of the Arctic: A Region in Peril, Camden, ME, USA [www.camdenconference.org](http://www.camdenconference.org)

<sup>8</sup> Yolanda Kakabadse, *Frontier Mentality Has No Place in the Arctic*, Harvard International Review, Vol. 36, No. 3, Published 2015, pp. 55-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649294>

<sup>9</sup> Lawson Brigham, *The Changing Arctic: New Realities and Players at the Top of the World*, National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), No. 18, Published 2014, pp. 5-13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24905270>

<sup>10</sup> Charles K. Ebinger and Evie Zambetakis, *The Geopolitics of Arctic Melt*, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 85, No. 6, Published 2009, pp. 1215-1232, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40389013>

underprivileged populations. Indigenous populations like the Athabaskan face many obstacles, some of which have the potential to threaten future generations. The preservation of health and property of the Athabaskan is at stake, considering the long-term impacts of global warming. Their cultural identity is also being threatened since it is based on their spiritual connection to their ecosystem. Biodiversity and entire species are also at stake.<sup>11</sup> “If access to traditional resources diminishes, Arctic peoples are likely to increasingly look to new industries for support. The key is to ensure that these new industries do not further erode the means of their substance.”<sup>12</sup> Traditional food shortages are a worst-case scenario, although likely to occur if regulation on emissions fails to be implemented in industries. Emissions directly increase atmospheric carbon dioxide, which in turn causes acidity levels to rapidly rise. Increasing acidity levels deteriorate conditions for animals and fish, in addition to melting sea ice in the Arctic Ocean. Regulation on emissions is critical for drafting solutions to lessen the impact of global warming on the Arctic’s ecosystems.

Momentum is building for climate justice solutions. Mary Simon, president of Canada’s Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, was involved in lobbying governments to help the Inuit of Canada prepare for the future through sustainable development projects.<sup>13</sup> As previously mentioned, Watt-Cloutier helped identify a violation of human rights through the struggle of indigenous peoples of the Arctic. As a leading activist, Watt-Cloutier made monumental changes to protect human rights through the 2001 Stockholm Convention banning Persistent Organic Pollutants. These pollutants were turning up in the flesh of marine mammals that are a critical part of the

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<sup>11</sup> Agnieszka Szpak, *Arctic Athabaskan Council’s petition to the Inter-American Commission on human rights and climate change—business as usual or a breakthrough?*, Climate Change, No. 162, Published 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02826-y>

<sup>12</sup> Yolanda Kakabadse, *Frontier Mentality Has No Place in the Arctic*, Harvard International Review, Vol. 36, No. 3, Published 2015, pp. 55-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649294>

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Gregoire, “Grise Fiord: Cold warriors,” *Canadian Geographic*, Published 2008, [www.canadiangeographic.ca](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca)

Inuit diet.<sup>14</sup> If the indigenous communities like the Inuit move away from their own self-sustaining local food systems to industrially-produced food systems, there will be consequences for their dietary health and cultural identity. The Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) works to support the dietary health and cultural identity of indigenous communities by contributing evidence-based research to formulate a policy that will ensure the preservation of self-sustaining local food systems.<sup>15</sup> Evidently, global warming is a pressing matter and those in danger are in desperate need of solutions. Protecting biodiversity in Arctic ecosystems while also following a pathway of economic growth based on investment in sustainable development that benefits communities instead of industrial megaprojects which view the Arctic as a wasteland frontier to be exploited. "States should agree on strong measures at an international level to mitigate climate change through emission control. All development plans in the Arctic must integrate ecological, social and economic policies and practices; that is, ecosystem-based management (EBM)."<sup>16</sup> The Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC) is an intergovernmental treaty organization, which represents the interests and fosters a greater understanding of the Athabaskan. In 2013, the AAC filed a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to raise awareness that global warming in the Arctic region was being caused by emissions of black carbon by Canada. The IACHR stems from the Organization of American States (OAS), a unified organization with member nations who are driven by the common goal to maintain peace and justice. In collaboration with the IACHR, the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "The Inuit and their Indigenous Foods," *YouTube*, uploaded by Indigenous Peoples' nutrition, 11 October 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReCQrz0-7n0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReCQrz0-7n0)

<sup>16</sup> Yolanda Kakabadse, *Frontier Mentality Has No Place in the Arctic*, Harvard International Review, Vol. 36, No. 3, Published 2015, pp. 55-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649294>

AAC has addressed human rights as an issue surrounding the present and future dynamics of the Arctic.<sup>17</sup>

There are several potential future outcomes for how social issues such as climate justice will be perceived. Since the Arctic holds about 22 percent of the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon resources, the region will likely turn into a new geopolitical epicenter.<sup>18</sup> Simply put, the reason why stakeholders in the global economy can access the Arctic is because of climate change and the reason climate change exists is that emissions have been burned.<sup>19</sup> The potential for oil development in the future is one of the most controversial topics of discussion concerning the Arctic's ecosystems.<sup>20</sup> "In 2008, the US Geological Survey said, 'the total mean undiscovered conventional oil and gas resources of the Arctic are estimated to be approximately 90 billion barrels of oil. Representing 30 percent of global undiscovered natural gas (approximately equivalent to Russia's entire current proven reserves).'"<sup>21</sup> The pursuit of oil development and the incapability to control industrial megaprojects in the Arctic could pose several disadvantages for indigenous communities. However, "an Arctic region that is more accessible to lucrative activities such as the exploitation of hydrocarbons, fish and minerals will necessarily attract increased governmental attention, and this could benefit the citizens of the region."<sup>22</sup> These communities have yet to exploit their economic potential. In the future, we can only imagine that

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<sup>17</sup> Agnieszka Szpak, *Arctic Athabaskan Council's petition to the Inter-American Commission on human rights and climate change—business as usual or a breakthrough?*, *Climate Change*, No. 162, Published 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02826-y>

<sup>18</sup> "Geopolitics of the Arctic," *YouTube*, uploaded by CaspianReport, 9 November 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV67yJHoPvw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV67yJHoPvw)

<sup>19</sup> "The Battle for the Arctic | Fault Lines," *YouTube*, uploaded by Al Jazeera, 14 November 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMAZJ6EgC4c&feature=emb\\_logo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMAZJ6EgC4c&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>20</sup> Yolanda Kakabadse, *Frontier Mentality Has No Place in the Arctic*, *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Published 2015, pp. 55-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649294>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Charles K. Ebinger and Evie Zambetakos, *The Geopolitics of Arctic Melt*, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 85, No. 6, Published 2009, pp. 1215-1232, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40389013>

some communities will choose to adopt a capitalist mindset similar to that of the Sami of northern Norway, who already have legal rights to certain local resources and will receive compensation from companies that exploit them.<sup>23</sup> Another advantageous possibility for indigenous communities could be involved in new accessible trade routes created by the melted ice.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, “The Inuit Circumpolar Council launched its Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty on 28 April 2009, stating: ‘It is our right to freely determine our political status, freely pursue our economic, social, cultural and linguistic development, and freely dispose of our natural wealth and resources.’”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps in the future, more indigenous communities like the Sami will become stakeholders in the global economy and benefit from oil development and trade routes occurring in their home territory.

Assuming that human rights activists succeed in their efforts of climate justice, one can only anticipate an increase in the involvement of ethical decision-makers, the implementation of both policy and regulation, and raising awareness through education. In other words, climate justice will persist if these criteria are not met. The Arctic “is a place where humankind has a unique opportunity to get development right. Getting it right means instead of viewing the region as a resource frontier to be plundered, we view it as a place where sustainability can be more than an afterthought, a place where knowledge-based decisions can safeguard Arctic ecosystems for the benefit of Arctic peoples and humanity as a whole.”<sup>26</sup> Global warming must be lessened to a significant degree to ensure the preservation of the Arctic ecosystems and the avoidance of a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “Geopolitics of the Arctic,” *YouTube*, uploaded by CaspianReport, 9 November 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV67yJHoPvw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV67yJHoPvw)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Yolanda Kakabadse, *Frontier Mentality Has No Place in the Arctic*, Harvard International Review, Vol. 36, No. 3, Published 2015, pp. 55-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649294>

*Tragedy of Commons*.<sup>27</sup> Besides, if intervention in the Arctic is done without understanding the impacts it could have on a local and global scale, then the future ecosystem of the Arctic is at risk of being further threatened and exploited. Raising awareness over how global warming affects the Arctic ecosystems is the first step in initiating change and preservation for the greater good of future generations. Ethical policy and regulation must follow to ensure this positive outcome. For the future of the Arctic to have a positive outcome, the numerous governments and organizations that operate on an international scale should not limit their strict agendas to oil development. Instead, alternate solutions must be explored to protect renewable resources and sustainably develop them. In conclusion, Watt-Cloutier insists that the time to draft solutions such as policy and regulation in an attempt to mitigate global warming and prevent industrial megaprojects has nearly expired. Is it too late to save the Arctic?

All speakers concluded that the clock was ticking and there was a desperate need for governments and organizations to pursue ethical agendas by taking action on climate justice. Governance must be based on science and not personal interest. Commitment to knowledge-based decision-making and a government regime that expects high compliance and collaboration is necessary to avoid a *Tragedy of the Commons*. All speakers spoke-out against the extraction of natural resources and expressed favoritism for the climate justice policies of the current Biden-Harris Administration. The world moves on while we discuss these issues, however, as citizens we have the responsibility to vote for government leaders with ethical agendas and ensure that these leaders are progressive.

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<sup>27</sup> Ulf Sverdrup (2021, February 20-21), *A Frozen Region Goes Dynamic* [Third Presentation], 2021 Camden Conference The Geopolitics of the Arctic: A Region in Peril, Camden, ME, USA, [www.camdenconference.org](http://www.camdenconference.org)

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