

WWF Last Ice Area  
Traditional Knowledge Report Summary  
ICC Canada

“Inuit” means “people” and is plural. “Inuk” is the singular and “Inuktitut” is the name of their language. Archeological and other forms of evidence suggests that Inuit have occupied and used the LIA (and beyond) for millennia and that Inuit history began about 4,500 years before European discovery in the late 1500’s (ITK 2008, 5000 Year History). The Inuit share family ties across the circumpolar region in Greenland, Alaska, Chukotka (Russia) and Canada. They depend greatly on marine mammals, fish, caribou and seabirds for food, clothing and other materials. Inuit rely on Traditional knowledge to guide and inform all aspects of their lives and decisions. This knowledge gained over centuries helps us understand the Arctic, its animals, what our actions mean and the changes that are being observed. As a marine hunting culture, the impacts of environmental change on Inuit who depend on the wildlife for nutrition, community and cultural expression require greater attention. Many facets of Arctic life from economic development, health, geology to wildlife population are being examined, and should continue to be, in order to best prepare for the changes that arise from social and environmental change.

The Last Ice Area project (LIA) is a project that is exploring the environment, biology, geophysical and human dimensions of an area projected to be where summer sea ice will persist the longest. As the sea ice is known to be an important, even critical habitat for a variety of species, the resilience of these species is likely linked to ice conditions and their fate tied to the changes the Arctic is currently experiencing.

The vast Arctic Archipelago within which the LIA region lies is ecologically rich and diverse. The LIA region within Canada is part of the Nunavut Land Claims Settlement Area and subject to the terms and conditions set out in the NLCA (Nunavut Land Claims Agreement) since 1999. The NLCA includes Inuit title to approximately 350,000 square kilometres of land (an area the size of Spain), of which about 35,000 square kilometres include mineral rights, Inuit rights to harvest on land and waters of the settlement area, and where Inuit own surface title to the land, the right to negotiate with industry for economic and social benefits with non-renewable resource development. Greenland assumed responsibility for self-government of judicial affairs, policing, and natural resources in 2009.

Inuit culture and identity continues to be integrally connected to the land and sea and depend for their subsistence on the seasonal migrations and shifts of wildlife availability in the Arctic, while adopting to and incorporating modern ways. Inuit in both Canada and Greenland have

relied on marine life, in particular seals, fish, whales and birds for cultural and physical sustenance for millennia. Subsistence hunting remains crucial to cultural, economical and physical well being. As such, Inuit culture and identity and livelihoods are based on free movement on the land, water and sea ice. Inuit also temporarily move out from communities in the spring and summer to harvest resources that are sometimes shared, bartered, commercially sold or traded, but mainly contributes to achieving food security through family consumption. Their understanding of weather, sea and ice conditions, migration routes, behaviour and ecology of the wildlife within the LIA region was bestowed upon younger generations through the collection of extensive and detailed knowledge of the many systems -- environmental and biological--that ensured Inuit survival.

Despite the changing Arctic community and research environments toward more participatory partnerships, numerous challenges remain in relation to polar bears, research, traditional knowledge and capacity building outside of and within the bounds of the LIA. Recommendations from this literature search and preliminary report would support locally based enhanced long-term monitoring programs based on systematic traditional knowledge studies to provide supplementary information on trends in distribution and local density of wildlife in the LIA area of interest, the use of these species by communities and the impact of change on the human and ecological community.

Ringed and other seals, fish, whales and seabirds are important food sources for Inuit communities, especially those with limited economic development opportunities. Toothed whales such as beluga and narwhal are particularly sought in Canada and Greenland, while in Greenland other species such as minke are also harvested. Orcas have been increasingly observed in Arctic waters in recent years. Baleen whales such as the bowhead are prized and quotas set according to scientific population estimates. In Greenland, other species such as fin and humpback are also harvested. Several other important species include walrus, caribou, and polar bear.

Recent studies on the Inuit knowledge of polar bears areas surrounding the LIA have reported higher abundances of polar bears compared to 10-15 years ago (Dowsley 2005, Born et al. 2008, 2011). In addition, Inuit have observed an increase in problem bears, and increase in human bear interactions (Kotierk, 2010). There has also been an increase in number of cubs (family sightings) (Dowsley and Wenzel, 2009). Observations on the population status of polar bears differ between communities and between community population numbers and those made by various scientific teams. However, Inuit knowledge suggests that the bear populations in Davis Strait and Baffin Bay have increased over the last 20 years.

The purpose of this report is to gather and synthesize existing published and grey literature on traditional knowledge of selected topics from both Nunavut and Greenland related to the LIA and to identify knowledge gaps, and to contribute a knowledge base to future stakeholder discussions and decisions within the LIA. The information presented in this report will be used in conjunction with a report on scientific knowledge of the LIA to establish a baseline of information to assess the current state of relevant knowledge, identify gaps and assist in communicating the significance of the project. This document focuses a lens on the long history of use of the LIA by Inuit from the Inuit perspective as much as possible, but this is a living document, to be revised as comments and reviews are received and more information becomes accessible and/or available.