

# Inuit and the Northwest Passage: A Relationship Built on Balance

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Inuit Nunangat is a distinct geographic, political and cultural region that is co-managed by Inuit and the Crown through democratic governance structures established by comprehensive Inuit land claims agreements. It encompasses the land, water and ice of the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Quebec) and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador).

The region includes Canada's entire Arctic coastline. With 50 of the 51 communities in Inuit Nunangat located on coastal lands (only one community in Inuit Nunangat, Baker Lake, is located inland), Inuit are a marine people whose survival, food, travel and knowledge all stem from a close and interrelated relationship with the environment. Waterways, such as the Northwest Passage, have served as 'highways' to hunting grounds and to extended networks of friends and relatives throughout Inuit Nunangat. Today, the role of these waterways is under threat by rapidly changing climate conditions, which results in the declining extent of sea ice and increased external access to internal waterways.

The Northwest Passage is a coveted route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Ships using the Northwest Passage can complete the journey between Asia and Europe in 30 days, versus 40 days using the Suez Canal. The difference of 10 days has enormous financial implications for ship operators based in the South. Historically, ice made this route impassable, however, an ice-free passage is quickly becoming a reality. The significance of an alternative route was never more keenly felt than in March 2021 when a single ship stuck in the Suez Canal disrupted global trade for nearly a week at a cost of \$9.6 billion in lost revenue per day.<sup>1</sup>

With 90 per cent of worldwide goods shipped by sea, the impact a permanent shipping route through the Northwest Passage will have on Inuit communities is enormous. In only four years, between 2015 and 2019, vessel traffic in Inuit Nunangat increased by 37 per cent.<sup>2</sup> All ships traveling through the Northwest Passage enter Inuit Nunangat. As the people who live on the front lines of this drastic change, it is crucial that Inuit are equipped to deal with the inevitable outcomes.

Our 51 communities, the largest of which has a population of just over 7,000, are spread across an area that encompasses a third of Canada's total landmass. The Northwest Passage might be easier to traverse in the coming years,



Sea ice image provided by author.

but it is still located in one of the most isolated areas on the planet. Inuit are uniquely positioned to act as first responders in the event of an accident or disaster, but without significant investment, we are simply not equipped to respond effectively.

Although the International Maritime Organization (IMO) approved a ban on the use and shipping of heavy fuel oil in the Arctic after 1 July 2024, some environmental groups are critical and say it could take until 2029 for the ban to come into effect.<sup>3</sup> An oil spill in Inuit Nunangat would be an unprecedented disaster. Not only would it devastate our ecosystem and way of life, recovery would be next to impossible. Cleanup would be slow and transportation of equipment and personnel to the site would need to be done at the mercy of the weather, ice conditions, the season and myriad other factors. Communities are too often relied upon, in terms of resources and finances, to respond to spills. This is an unsustainable burden.

Investment in our communities is critical for disaster response, and also prepares us to take advantage of the economic opportunities increased shipping would bring to Inuit Nunangat. Cruise ships bring visitors to communities that would not normally see tourists, which was the case in 2016 when the ship *Crystal Serenity* made its voyage through the Northwest Passage. That season, the ship's community visits brought \$110,000 in tourism

revenue to Cambridge Bay and \$35,000 to Pond Inlet in pre-pandemic times.<sup>4</sup> In order to benefit from these opportunities, our communities need the infrastructure to support them. An influx of thousands of visitors can easily overwhelm a small community.

### ***The Current Landscape***

As Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) noted in a 2018 video “Nilliajut 2, Inuit Perspectives on the Northwest Passage and Shipping and Marine Issues,”<sup>5</sup> our comprehensive land claims agreements ensure our place as co-managers of Inuit Nunangat waterways alongside government. In November 2021, our decision-making rights were further recognized when the IMO announced that the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) would become the first Indigenous organization to receive International Maritime Organization Provisional Consultative Status.

In 2018, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) and the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) introduced standalone Arctic regions for the first time to provide Arctic-specific programming. DFO headquarters for the Arctic have always previously been located in the South, now, there is an office in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. The boundaries for these regions were announced in March 2021 and include the four regions of Inuit Nunangat. In July 2021, ITK created a National Inuit Marine Committee, which will represent Inuit on the newly formed DFO and CCG Arctic Region Table. The full implementation of the DFO-CCG Arctic Region is a top priority for Inuit and recently featured at the December 2021 meeting of the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee (ICPC).

Full implementation of the DFO-CCG Arctic Region would include staffing the federal department to reflect the population and geography of Inuit Nunangat. Additionally, all operations, from research to programs, would be run by the Arctic Region department rather than being allocated among other provincial or territorial offices. Using the DFO-CCG Arctic Region Table, policies and procedures would be developed in collaboration with Inuit Land Claims Organizations.

### ***Priorities for Responsible Marine Traffic Conditions in Inuit Nunangat***

Inuit continue to develop strategies and recommendations that strengthen our self-determination and recognize our right to support for our waterways. The first priority is to increase capacity within Inuit communities and organizations by providing adequate information to aid in decision-making, improving access to the internet across Inuit Nunangat, supporting and empowering Inuit involvement in knowledge creation and increasing long-term investment to support organizational capacity.

The second priority is to develop effective partnerships

between Inuit Nunangat and the federal government by ensuring Inuit regions affected by policy decisions are involved in the decision-making process. Engagement with Inuit organizations should be improved to maximize efficiency and minimize consultation fatigue, and communities should be better informed about research vessel activity. All information and communication should be

provided in both Inuktitut and English. The third priority is to enhance emergency response capacity through increased resources for search and rescue and oil spill response, supporting marine infrastructure development and providing emergency response training to community members.

The fourth priority is to increase domain awareness and environmental protection. That includes making it mandatory for all vessels to have Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), developing mandatory greywater (i.e., ship waste water from sinks and showers for example) disposal regulations that address Inuit concerns, and requiring cruise ships to request permission before landing in any area. This priority also includes requiring vessels to have marine mammal observers onboard to monitor vessel operations and wildlife interactions, requiring vessels to have professional pilots onboard to manoeuvre ships in dangerous areas and conducting sufficient charting to ensure safe navigation through Inuit Nunangat waters.

It is our inherent right and responsibility to ensure we are living in balance with the natural world. Now that responsibility extends to all those who wish to engage us in the development of our homelands. Strong relationships have never been more crucial as the world continues to look to the Arctic for opportunity. Together, we can achieve responsible development that encourages the respectful sharing of cultures and supports thriving communities with a solid footing in both tradition and modernity. 🇨🇦

#### **Notes**

1. Justin Harper, “Suez Blockage is Holding Up \$9.6bn of Goods a Day,” BBC News, 26 March 2021.
2. “Gap Analysis: Shipping and Coastal Management in Inuit Nunangat,” A report prepared for Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Ottawa, 2021, p. 3.
3. Bob Weber, “Ban on Heavy Fuel Oil Full of Holes, Environmental Groups Say,” CBC News, 22 February 2020.
4. “Nunavut Aims to Build on Cruise Ship Market,” *Nunatsiaq News*, 7 November 2016.
5. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, “Nilliajut 2, Inuit Perspectives on the Northwest Passage and Shipping and Marine Issues,” 2 February 2018.

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*Photo of the author.*

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