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KIRT EJESIAK AND MAUREEN FLYNN-BURHOE

The Boston Globe

Animal rights vs. Inuit rights

By Kirt Ejesiak and Maureen Flynn-Burhoe | May 8, 2005

IN THE 1980s, postcards were distributed to 12 million United States and United Kingdom households depicting the infamous Canadian Atlantic fisher swinging a bat at a baby seal and eliciting an overwhelming emotional response. Major legislative bodies relented to public pressure with a staggering impact on wildlife management. The collapse of the sealskin market marked a victory for protesters who had waged the most effective, international mass media campaign ever undertaken.

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The moral victory for animal rights activists not only hurt Newfoundlanders, it adversely affected thousands of Canadian Inuit living in tiny, remote, Arctic hamlets. Antifur protesters lump all seal-hunting methods together. It is tragic but not surprising that there has been virtually no media coverage of the devastating economic, social, and cultural impact of the collapse of the seal skin market on Inuit. If outsiders had known more about Inuit life, perhaps they would not have so easily dismissed all seal-hunting as unethical and cruel.

Canadian Inuit, who number about 46,000, are part of a circumpolar Inuit community numbering about 150,000 in Greenland,

Alaska, and Russia. For Canadian Inuit, the seal is not just a source of cash through fur sales, but the keystone of their culture. Although Inuit harvest and hunt many species that inhabit the desert tundra and ice platforms, the seal is their mainstay. The Inuktitut vocabulary designates specific objects made from seal bone, sinew, fat and fur used as tools, games, thread, cords, fuel, clothing, boats, and tents. There are also words referring to seasons, topography, place names, legends, and kinship relationships based on the seal. One region of Canada's north is inhabited by the Netsilingmiut, or "people of the seal."

Inuit no longer use seal oil lamps or kudlik for heating, as did their grandparents. But seal meat, which is extremely high in protein, minerals, and vitamins and very low in fat, is still the most valued meat in many parts of the Arctic. Seal skin mittens and boots continue to provide the greatest protection against the harsh Arctic climate.

Like most people, Inuit respond to structural changes by adapting and innovating. They were already dependent on costly hunting supplies by the 1980s. When fur prices plummeted after the sealskin boycott, their credit and cash flow from furs dried up while the cost of supplies rose. Many families could no longer afford hunting equipment. Their fragile economy was imperiled and

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their vulnerability increased. Their social order was ruptured as they were deprived of the complex social aspect of sharing seal meat.

Their historical, legal, social, and economic situation already placed them at alarmingly higher risks of poverty and violence than other Canadians even when they live outside the North, as 10,000 Inuit have chosen to do. Life expectancy among the Inuit is 10 years lower than other Canadians. Rates of infant mortality, unemployment, illnesses such as diabetes, violence against women, and overcrowded housing are chillingly high.

One of the most brutal aspects of the lack of cultural continuity is the epidemic of youth suicide striking small communities in clusters where one death rapidly engenders another. But the Inuit, having endured myths and misinformation about their culture for decades, have carried on.

The ability to adapt to change has proven crucial in helping Inuit survive. Artists like Lucie Idlout, Zach Kunuk, and Kenojuak are renowned internationally. Youth and children, who witnessed their parents' seeming acquiescence when confronted with forced relocations, residential schools, tuberculosis, and sealskin boycotts, were motivated to become land claims negotiators, political leaders, and activists.

Inuk lawyer Paul Okalik's arguments for recognition of the seal as mainstay of the Inuit fell on deaf ears in 1985. Today, he speaks as the premier of Nunavut, Canada's newest territory, a vast region of the central and eastern Arctic covering over a million square miles. Nunavut, which means "our land," is the result of decades of deliberations, one of four Canadian Arctic regions involved in self-government negotiations.

So, if Inuit are continually proving their ability to adapt to the tribulations Southerners bring them, robed in misunderstandings and injustice, why should we care? Why do we need to pay attention to the local stories from a frozen land?

This is not just a story about seals. The success of the animal rights campaign illustrates how strong emotions and opinions based on an assumption of universally shared esthetics and ethics affected public policy, threatened human rights, and created environmental refugees.

The Inuit are resourceful people who deserve more respectful attention from outsiders.

Kirt Ejesiak is a Fulbright Scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Maureen Flynn-Burhoe is a PhD candidate and independent researcher living in Quebec.

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