

# TAKING ACTION ON NORTHERN CONTAMINANTS

**Inuit fight toxic pollution in the Arctic on the global stage.**

photo: courtesy of INAC



Arctic environment: High levels of toxic chemicals are finding their way into the northern food chain.

When Sheila Watt-Cloutier talks to international policy makers about the impact of toxic chemicals on the Inuit, she speaks from the heart. As a child growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Kuujjuaq, a small Inuit village in northern Quebec, Watt-Cloutier led a traditional life, travelling by dogsled and canoe and eating “country foods” such as caribou, ptarmigan, fish, goose, seal and whale.

“The environment is still our supermarket,” she says. “The land provides us with nutritious food, and the communal aspects of harvesting and eating help sustain our culture in the face of rapid change.”

However, with the disturbing discovery in the past two decades that high levels of toxic chemicals coming

from far outside of the Arctic are making their way into the northern food chain, Inuit who rely on traditional foods for sustenance are at risk. Researchers have found that three quarters of Inuit women far exceed guidelines for polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs) levels in their blood and have among the highest recorded PCB levels in breast milk in the world.

“Imagine our shock and concern as we discovered that the food that had nourished us for generations and kept us whole physically and spiritually was now poisoning us,” says Watt-Cloutier, Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, an international non-governmental organization representing some 150,000 Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia.

Toxic chemicals such as DDT and PCBs belong to a group known as persistent organic pollutants (POPs). They remain intact for long periods and travel easily through the atmosphere, posing potentially serious risk to humans, wildlife and the environment. Some POPs increase the risk of cancer, damage to nervous systems and birth defects.

The Government of Canada in 1991 set up the Northern Contaminants Program to conduct research, help Inuit make informed choices about their food and advocate for international controls on POPs. Led by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), the program brought together Health Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Environment Canada, as well as the three territorial governments, university researchers and four Aboriginal organizations in a coalition

called Canadian Arctic Indigenous Peoples Against POPs.

Global talks on the issue, sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme, began in 1998 and concluded in 2001 with the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

David Stone, Director of Northern Science and Contaminants Research for INAC, says the convention targets 12 particularly toxic POPs for reduction and eventual elimination. “More importantly, it sets up a system for tackling additional chemicals,” he says. “Ultimately, this points the way forward to a future free of dangerous POPs.”

Watt-Cloutier, as then chair of Inuit Circumpolar Conference Canada, played a prominent role in the talks leading up to the Stockholm Convention. At one point, she presented a soapstone carving of an Inuk mother and child that “came to represent the conscience of the negotiations.”

She says the global agreement, the first to single out Arctic and Indigenous peoples in its preamble, promises real policy impact at the international level. “It will eventually make our Arctic environment and eating our country food safe once again.” ❁

**For more information, visit the Inuit Circumpolar Conference at [www.inuitcircumpolar.com](http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com), the Northern Contaminants Program at [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ncp](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ncp) and the Web site of the Stockholm Convention at [www.pops.int](http://www.pops.int).**