



## **Introduction**

From February 15 to 17, 2005, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) hosted a workshop on contaminants in Nunavut. Over 40 people gathered in Iqaluit to take part in this 3-day workshop intended to build Inuit capacity on contaminants-related issues. Participants included Inuit Elders, Hunters and Trappers Organization (HTO) members, Wildlife Officers, Community Health Representatives and Health Promotion Officers, staff from Inuit organizations (Regional Inuit Associations, NTI, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Inuit Circumpolar Conference), Northern Contaminants Program (NPC) and Niquit Avatittinni Committee (NAC) representatives, as well as technical experts. The workshop was chaired by Thomasie Alikatuktuk, President of the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, and facilitated by Joanase Akumalik, Director of Government and Public Relations at NTI.

When asked, in a 2003 survey on human and environmental health, to answer “*Where do you think you can get the most helpful information about wildlife and contaminants?*”, most Inuit in the 17 participating Nunavut communities responded with Wildlife Officers, HTO members, Elders and Community Health Representatives. Accordingly, these were the people invited to take part in a workshop that NTI organized to provide information to, and to hear the concerns of, community resource-people. Since every person around the table was considered a specialist in his or her own area of expertise, the workshop relied exclusively on open thematic discussions to bring forth participants’ knowledge and perspectives on contaminants. NTI, as a member of the Niquit Avatittinni Committee, received workshop funding from the Government of Canada’s Northern Contaminants Program.

## **Key Issues**

The following are the main issues that surfaced during the workshop’s thematic discussions:

### **Contaminants and Human Health**

- Country foods are preferred and more beneficial than store-bought foods
- Personal preference, practicality and availability, rather than contaminants, are the main considerations governing food choices
- Research needs to look at the overall effect of country foods on the health of Inuit, not just at the potential impacts of the contaminants contained in country foods

### **Contaminants and Environmental Health**

- The health of Inuit, of wildlife and of the environment are interconnected
- Contaminants levels in Nunavut are generally too low to affect the health of wildlife
- Need to take practical steps to clean up Nunavut’s environment and reduce the local contaminants output

### **Looking Ahead**

- Contaminants need to be addressed in a broader healthy diet and lifestyle context
- Local resource-people are key in informing community members
- It is important for communities to be involved in all stages of contaminants research in Nunavut, including its design
- The common, ultimate goal is informed decision-making by community members

# **Workshop Summary**

## **Contaminants and Human Health**

### **What are contaminants?**

- Toxic products that we can't see, taste or smell
- Substances that are common or even essential, but that can sometimes become toxic at higher concentrations or levels
- Mainly pesticides, nuclear radiation, as well as some gases and metals
- Contaminants, and the issue of what is or isn't contaminated, is something very sensitive and difficult to define for interpreting/translating into Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun
  - The most significant contaminants in Nunavut are: Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), mercury, cadmium and lead.

### **Food choices (either country foods or store-bought foods)**

- Country foods are mainly eaten because of their availability and 'warming' properties, not because they are or aren't contaminated
- Parents sometimes buy food that their kids like without giving it much further thought, especially if the kids are saying that they're hungry or that there's nothing to eat when they are only offered country foods
- Although many Elders only buy flour and tea, some even doubting that they could survive on store-bought foods, younger generations mostly consider both country and store-bought foods as basic components of their diet
- Preparation time and costs are also important aspects of food choices
  - Contaminants are generally not an issue; it is mainly a question of personal preference, practicality and availability.

### **Influence of government and research on personal food choices**

- When you are mindful of what you eat, there is a reluctance to hear people trying to influence your personal food choices
- Governments aren't controlling people's food choices, but because different Departments have different jurisdictions, governments can nonetheless impact people's behaviour through laws and regulations
- Government also has a responsibility to inform communities and to help people have healthy diets and habits
  - Government doesn't have all the answers, but it needs to share what it knows
- Researchers have an ethical responsibility to return the conclusions of their research
- Very unlikely that Inuit will stop eating country foods because of research results
  - Elders and hunters, governments and researchers need to educate each other, not impose their views on each other.

### **Costs-benefits and risks-benefits related to food choices**

- We never used to blame anything on food, but now things are different
- Country foods are considered healthy, not harmful, and in general, the health risks of contaminants in country foods are more theoretical than practical or proven
  - When discussing contaminants, special care needs to be taken to avoid unduly scaring people away from eating country foods
- Store-bought foods may or may not be healthy, because stores basically sell their products to make money; in parallel, concerns were raised about potential health risks related to the expired 'non-perishable' goods often found on store shelves
- In many communities country foods also have very important economic benefits, since some people just can't afford to eat much of anything else
- Because of availability or preferences, not every single Inuk can or wants to eat any and all kinds of country foods
- The type of fats found in country foods are healthier than the 'manufactured' ones contained in many store-bought foods
- There are generally less bacteria in country foods than in store-bought meats and that is why, unlike store-bought meats, it is possible to eat country foods raw
- Country foods are very important both culturally and health-wise; there is a definite need to educate today's youth (on the benefits of eating country foods, and in harvesting and clothing preparation training) to encourage them to eat more of it
- Scientific methods have improved and now detect smaller amounts of contaminants, but low concentrations of contaminants are not necessarily a cause for concern
  - Overall, country foods are preferred and more beneficial; need to be mindful to choose healthy store-bought foods.

### **Contaminants and the health of Inuit in Nunavut**

- Contaminants can be absorbed through the skin, by eating and drinking foods or beverages containing contaminants or by inhaling contaminated air
- It is very difficult to determine the impacts of contaminants on Inuit because the majority of health research is done on Southern, non-aboriginal populations; healthy weights and risks factors need to be 'corrected' so they can be more relevant to Inuit
- Research needs to look at how different diets may be affecting different metabolisms and at how different metabolisms process different diets
- Are studies being conducted on contaminants and Nunavut Inuit? Examples:
  - GN Health is working on a study looking at levels of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and mercury in maternal cord blood
  - The Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment is doing a study on the level of mercury in hair and toenails
- There is a wide-ranging concern that people still using the traditional camping sites on which DEW Line sites have been build are exposed to high levels of contaminants, and may be getting cancer as a result
  - Since contaminants studies are mainly conducted in Inuit regions, researchers need to improve their understanding of how country foods affect Inuit health and physiology before they draw conclusions on the impacts of contaminants on the health of Inuit.

## **Contaminants and Environmental Health**

### **Relationship between the health of Nunavut's environment and Inuit**

- Southerners rely on economic opportunities, whereas Inuit rely on the land; Inuit have traditionally survived off the land, not off money
- Economic and financial drives are threatening traditional ways; there is a need to preserve and pass on the knowledge of Elders in order to preserve our environment
- Wildlife is an important source of food and part of the Inuit way of life
- Terrestrial, marine and freshwater ecosystems are all interrelated
- Need to let governments know that Inuit place tremendous importance on country foods and the health of the environment
- The contamination of wildlife is a concern in itself, not just because of the potential repercussions on country foods; the focus of contaminants research should therefore not focus exclusively on human health
- Elders need to educate youth on how to hunt and prepare/age country foods so that today's generations can increase their appreciation of wildlife and the environment
  - In government and university settings, there is the perception that the health of the environment is largely unrelated to the well-being of humans; to Inuit, they are interconnected.

### **Contaminants and the health of Nunavut's environment and wildlife**

- Given the levels of contaminants found so far in Nunavut's wildlife, it is very unlikely that unhealthy animals are sick because of contaminants
- Abnormalities tell Inuit hunters and seamstresses that something's not right with an animal, although contaminants are not necessarily the source of the problem
- Skinny animals used to be the sick ones; now internal organs are sometimes affected in animals that, on the outside, appear healthy
- Not all illnesses in wildlife are caused by contaminants, although they can be a contributing factor
- The quality of skins and furs is generally declining
- Very few animals or growing plants in the immediate vicinity of DEW Line sites
- Many Inuit have been taught to kill obviously sick animals, but there is no clear consensus regarding how (if at all) to handle sick animals, or where to send samples so that answers can be obtained
- Abandoned fuel drums are scattered across the land; after a while they start leaking and animals sometimes nibble at the rust chips falling from them
  - Even though contaminants are essentially invisible and difficult to detect in the environment or wildlife, cultural knowledge might to some extent shield Inuit against contaminants; by not harvesting skinny animals and killing obviously unhealthy ones, Inuit might indirectly be protecting themselves against excessive contaminants intake.

### **Local action on contaminants**

- Need to consider the contaminants that we put into our environment ourselves, not just the contaminants reaching Nunavut through air and ocean currents
- Need to teach schoolchildren now about contaminants and recycling so that actions to help reduce contaminants can become a routine for them
- Can be effective by communicating and raising the awareness of Northern leaders
- Need to clean up our land (old fuel drums and metal wastes especially) and properly dispose of local contaminants (batteries, burning at community dumps, reuse and recycling) so that Nunavut's wildlife is not needlessly exposed to contaminants
  - Regional Inuit Associations don't always know where all the fuel drums and other sources of contaminants are; to be able to fully address the issue, they need the help of Inuit in the communities to locate and document them
- The concerns voiced by Nunavut Inuit must be taken up by scientists, governments and Inuit leaders to convince people around the world to change their behaviour, so that contaminant levels can eventually decrease in Nunavut's environment
  - Stockholm Convention is an example of how Inuit concerns can be heard internationally and contribute to the worldwide reduction of contaminants
- Used to leave many things behind at camps, but now what we leave can harm wildlife because our gear isn't biodegradable anymore; Elders have to educate youth because the traditional camps should always be there for future generations to enjoy
- Need to get people to start thinking about protecting their environment so we don't keep on using more and more cars more than we need to
- Must ensure that appropriate environmental assessment measures are put in place to guide the operations of current and future industrial projects in Nunavut
  - The concerns we raise internationally in order to decrease the amount of transboundary contaminants reaching Nunavut will be more credible if we take practical steps to clean up our land and diminish our own contaminants output.

## **Looking Ahead**

### **Inuit perspectives on contaminants not entirely taken into account by research**

- On the land, Inuit are always attentive to the health of the environment and wildlife; HTOs need to be considered as sources of expertise and insight for researchers
- Because Inuit culture is connected to wildlife and seasonal cycles, country food consumption varies both throughout the year and across the territory
  - Contaminants research should not be conducted on the basis that all Inuit eat an average quantity of a given country food every single day of the year
- Thinking negatively about animals can imprint upon them unhealthy consequences
- Given researchers' ability to detect trace quantities of contaminants almost anywhere, and the lack of knowledge about their effects, is the result of continually searching for contaminants ultimately more harmful than beneficial to Inuit?
  - The emphasis should be placed on the need for a healthy diet and lifestyle; taking the focus away from country foods makes the contaminants issue easier to acknowledge.

### **Lessons learned from recent research**

- Contaminants are not as crucial an issue to Nunavut community members as they are to contaminants researchers
- Contaminants messaging needs to be receptive to community concerns and be part of a broader health and environmental context instead of being in stand-alone form
  - When talking about contaminants, it is important to look at the big picture
- Need to focus more on healthy choices programs and educate people
- The absence of behavioural change is not necessarily a sign that the contaminants message has not been received; it can also be an informed decision to carry on with personal food choices
- Need for communities to take ownership of community-level programs
- Need for further study into the effect of climate change on the fate of contaminants in the Arctic and their pathways
- Answers from the South are not always the best; need to apply local knowledge in assessing research results and formulating contaminants messaging
  - The communications goal should be to enable community members to have enough knowledge and understanding of contaminants to feel comfortable about their food choices.

### **Returning research results to Nunavut communities**

- The results from studies conducted in Nunavut and from samples sent South by Nunavut hunters are rarely heard of in communities
  - Individuals who submit samples for contaminants research should receive information outlining the results of any analysis conducted on those samples
- Research needs to be documented in a form that will inform communities
  - Inuit in communities don't see/read papers in English scientific journals
- Inuit are taught to respect Elders, so how can young Inuit working in the health field 'tell' their Elders what to eat or do because of contaminants?
- Communications needs to be an ongoing process in order to raise the awareness and knowledge of contaminants in communities
- Because of their concern for the health of future generations, Inuit sometimes take research results or predictions as certainties without really understanding, or critically assessing, them; need to clarify, and translate, research results
- Researchers often come to Nunavut for only a short time, conduct interviews, and are never heard from again
  - Without proper follow-up, there is a perception that researchers are using and abusing Elders and Inuit knowledge for their own gain
- If researchers spent time in communities to 'get their bearings', establish links and get to know the community and environment before beginning their study, it might then be easier for them to conduct relevant research and to return their results
- It would be more useful if researchers mentioned communities where their research was conducted instead of simply Nunavut because of the differences between communities and wildlife distribution throughout the territory
  - Local resource-people are key to informed communities and want to work more closely with those dealing with contaminants information.

## **Towards relevant contaminants research**

- Research tends to be centered on communities easier to reach or cheaper to work in
    - More focus should be placed on smaller communities and more consultation with HTOs are needed for scientists to know where to conduct their research
  - Research needs to be more acceptable to, and usable by, community members in order for it to be respectful of community concerns and needs
    - Funding and research proposals need to be presented and advertised in a way that encourages community-led research initiatives
  - Elders are wise and knowledgeable, but they don't always go out much anymore; researchers also need to consult/interview adults who are actively going out on the land because they are more keenly aware of current conditions
  - It is sometimes difficult for researchers to make links with local partners and to identify community concerns and research priorities; likewise, community members who want to design/conduct a scientific study often have difficulty identifying appropriate researchers to support their initiative
    - Could the Nunavut Research Institute act as a 'match-maker' between researchers and communities with compatible interests?
  - Need to integrate contaminants research with socio-economic policy development as it relates to environmental protection, economic development and population health
  - Unilingual Inuit find it almost impossible to use most wildlife sampling kits
    - All material and information needs to be translated in Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun, and thought must be given to dialectal differences
  - Research should look at crustaceans and micro-organisms because they are at the base of the marine food chain
  - A lot of research is based on questions researchers are asking themselves; need more forums like this to help researchers find answers that are important to Inuit
  - Need to promote scientific studies to Inuit students
  - Scientists need to start listening to, believing in, and respecting Inuit knowledge
    - Inuit Elders and full-time hunters might not have titles or degrees, but they are experts on their environment and wildlife
  - Research samples need to come from wildlife that would be consumed
    - Contaminants results from 'random' or uninformed sampling might not be reflective of the contaminants intake of local human populations
  - Concrete signs of contaminants (like leaking fuel drums out on the land) are more of a worry to Inuit than invisible contaminants; could Government tour communities and conduct environmental assessments of the surrounding lands with local hunters?
  - Researchers use the services of airline/helicopter companies, who in turn leave fuel caches in areas of high wildlife concentration; responsibility for cleanup and disposal of fuel caches gets passed around and the fuel often ends up staying there
    - Researchers should be more sensitive to what they, and the companies they contract, leave behind and adds to the contamination of the land and wildlife
  - The issue of tranquilizer use on polar bear is very sensitive
    - Different perceptions on the impact of the tranquilization and handling need to be considered for polar bear research to be acceptable to all
- Community involvement is the key to relevant research.

### **Towards informed decision-making**

- If researchers were more open, more visible and came more often to communities to consult with Inuit before finalizing their study designs, it would be easier for community members to consider the information and knowledge of researchers
- Need to improve communications, forms and the licensing process to consider local concerns more meaningfully and to improve understanding of contaminants issues
  - Project proposals that have already been endorsed and/or licensed by research permitting agencies should not be sent to communities for “rubber stamping”; communities should have the first opportunity to approve or reject research proposals
- Need for more research and communication so worries can subside
  - The more people are informed, the less they are angered by contaminants research and scared of its potential implications for country foods
- How often should there be research on the species that are eaten if people are meant to base their informed food choices on the results of contaminants research?
- Communications is a very important issue
  - Contaminants information needs to be more accessible and understandable
- Why are there no health advisories on unhealthy store-bought foods when there will be some issued if certain levels of contaminants are found in country foods?
  - Effective communications on contaminants remains a necessity because there are still misconceptions and misunderstandings that potentially hinder informed decision-making.

### **The role of Inuit organizations (HTOs, RIAs, NTI, ITK, ICC)**

- Political and community leaders need to work together protecting our environment for our grandchildren
  - Need for policies to protect Nunavut’s environment and wildlife
- Leaders of Inuit organizations should be the voice of communities
- Present generations always need to preserve the environment for the future ones
  - Need to uphold the NLCA in order to protect and preserve Nunavut
- Inuit organizations must share information, and pass on concerns, to one another
  - Need for better networking, coordination and communication
  - It is important to keep on voicing local concerns/issues so they can be addressed at the international level
- Keep this collaborative momentum going, because the only way to address contaminants issues is to inform, educate and learn from each other
  - Inuit organizations need to hear community concerns and voice them at the regional, national and international levels in order to protect the rights of future generations as well as Nunavut’s environment and wildlife.

Lastly, NTI wishes to thank all workshop participants for sharing their knowledge and perspectives on contaminants and respectfully welcoming the input of others.



## **Contaminants in Nunavut: Inuit Capacity-Building Workshop**

**February 15-17, 2005 (Building 981, Iqaluit)**

### **Tuesday, February 15    Contaminants and Human Health**

#### **Morning (09:00-12:00)**

- What are, and aren't, contaminants?
- Can contaminants be present in store-bought foods and/or country foods?
- Can contaminants affect the health of Inuit in Nunavut?

#### **Afternoon (13:30-16:30)**

- Do Inuit consider contaminants when making food choices?
- What are the health risks/benefits associated with eating country foods?
- Does government and/or research have a say in personal food choices?

### **Wednesday, February 16    Contaminants and Environmental Health**

#### **Morning (09:00-12:00)**

- Are the health of Nunavut's environment and the health of Nunavut Inuit related?
- Do Inuit in communities see contaminants as an environmental health concern?
- How do contaminants 'get into' Nunavut's environment and wildlife?

#### **Afternoon (13:30-16:30)**

- How can we tell if there are contaminants in Nunavut's environment and wildlife?
- Are contaminants affecting the health of Nunavut's environment and/or wildlife?
- How can Inuit reduce the amount of contaminants in Nunavut's environment?

### **Thursday, February 17    Looking Ahead**

#### **Morning (09:00-12:00)**

- What can we learn from Inuit on how to address the contaminants issue?
- What have we learned from the 2004 Niqit Avatittinni Tour in 20 communities?
- What can we learn from the results of the 2003 Environmental Health Survey?
- What is the best way to return research results to Inuit in Nunavut communities?

#### **Afternoon (13:30-16:30)**

- How can NCP and contaminants research assist Inuit in making informed decisions?
- How can Inuit assist scientists in conducting relevant contaminants research?
- What role do Inuit expect Inuit organizations (HTOs, RIAs, NTI, ITK, ICC) to play regarding contaminants?

## **Contaminants workshop participant list (February 15, 2005)**

### **Elders**

Joseph Niptanatiak (Kugluktuk)

Regilie Piungituq (Clyde River)

### **Hunters and Trappers Organizations**

Peter Taktogon (Kugluktuk)

Joadamee Amagoalik (Resolute Bay)

Jack Angoo (Whale Cove)

Solomon Qanatsiaq (Hall Beach)

Peter Suwaksiork (Arviat)

Jerome Tattuinee (Rankin Inlet)

### **Regional Inuit Associations**

Stanley Anablak, KitIA (Kugluktuk)

David Ningeongan, KivIA (Rankin Inlet)

Jaypeetee Arnakak, QIA (Iqaluit)

Steve Hartman, KivIA (Rankin Inlet)

### **Wildlife Officers**

Tabitha Mullen (Resolute Bay)

Don Thatcher (Taloyoak)

David Netser (Arctic Bay)

### **Community Health Representatives**

Wendy Avalak (Kugluktuk)

Kathy Michael (Iqaluit)

### **Health Promotion Officers**

Cindy Roache, Kitikmeot

Donna Kilabuk, Baffin (Pangnirtung)

### **Technical Experts**

Chris Furgal, Nasivvik Centre for Inuit Health and Changing Environments (Quebec)

Grace Egeland, Centre for Indigenous People's Nutrition and Environment (Montreal)

Stephanie Meakin, Inuit Circumpolar Conference (Ottawa)

Isaac Sobol, Nunavut Chief Medical Officer (Iqaluit)

Shawn Donaldson, Carleton University (Ottawa)

Carrie Grable, Consultant (Ottawa)

### **Northern Contaminants Program (NCP)**

Simon Smith, Education and Communications (Ottawa)

Jason Stow, Wildlife (Winnipeg)

### **Niqiit Avatittinni Committee (Nunavut contaminants committee under the NCP)**

Eric Loring, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (Ottawa)

Pitsiula Kilabuk, GN Health (Pangnirtung)

Amy Caughey, GN Health (Iqaluit)

Fred O'Brian, GN Health (Rankin Inlet)

Janet Brewster, GN health (Iqaluit)

Jamal Shirley, Nunavut Research Institute (Iqaluit)

Jenny Ipirq, NTI (Iqaluit)

Philippe Lavallée, NTI (Iqaluit)

### **Other Participants**

Thomasie Alikatuktuk, QIA (Iqaluit) – Workshop Chair

Joanasie Akumalik, NTI (Ottawa) – Workshop Facilitator

Joe Ohokanoak, NTI (Cambridge Bay)

George Hakongak, NTI (Cambridge Bay)

Tommy Akulukjuk, ITK (Ottawa)

Carol Gregson, GN Health (Iqaluit)

Looee Okalik, ITK (Ottawa)

Aaju Peter, Akitsirak Law Program (Iqaluit)

Andrea Glenn, Nunavut Arctic College - Environment Technology Program (Iqaluit)

Steven Curley, Nunavut Arctic College - Environment Technology Program (Iqaluit)

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Tommy Akulukjuk, ITK (Ottawa)

Carol Gregson, GN Health (Iqaluit)

Leanna Ellsworth, Nunavut Arctic College - Environment Technology Program (Iqaluit)

Peter Kattegatsiak, Nunavut Arctic College - Environment Technology Program (Iqaluit)

Melanie Howell, Nunavut Arctic College - Environment Technology Program (Iqaluit)

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Lizzie Pootoolik (Coral Harbour)

Regilie Piungituq (Clyde River)  
Casmir Kriterdluk (Chesterfield Inlet)

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Jenny Ipirq, NTI (Iqaluit) Philippe Lavallée, NTI (Iqaluit)

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Carol Gregson, GN Health (Iqaluit)  
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Lucien Ukalianuk, GN Justice (Iqaluit) Myna Ishulutak, GN Justice (Iqaluit)  
Aaju Peter, Akitsirak Law Program (Iqaluit) Saila Nooshoota, GN Justice (Iqaluit)  
Micah Arreak, GN Justice (Iqaluit)