Indigenous Peoples between Human Rights and Environmental Protection – An Arctic Perspective

FINNLINGE
Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The basic issues in upholding the indigenous cultures of the Arctic are questions of both economic and cultural rights. However, it is the economic ones that are most pressing.

On December 16, 1966, the United Nations issued two human rights conventions, one on economic, social and cultural rights, and another on civil and political rights. These texts have been endorsed by practically all the nations with which we want to identify ourselves, with the exception of the United States. Part 1, Number 2 of both of these documents reads as follows:

All peoples may for their own ends freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic cooperation based upon the principle of mutual benefit and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.

Needless to say, this text was meant to apply globally, i.e. including the Arctic. Aside from the governments directly involved, though, no signatory state has ever dealt with the question of what this actually means to the people who live in the North.

What peoples can properly be termed Arctic is, of course, a debatable issue. Some define the Arctic by the timberline, others by isotopes and so on, but for the present purpose, the question of Arctic conditions will be dealt with in relation to the 60 degrees northern latitude. If that line is traced around the globe, it runs through St. Petersburg, Oslo, the south tip of Greenland, across Arctic Canada, the southern part of Alaska and across Siberia. Iceland is north of it. It is noteworthy that by and large, agriculture is impossible north of the 60 latitude. North of that line, we are meat-eaters and fishermen. We are predators.

Homo sapiens is a predator, a being that pursues other beings and devours their flesh. This fact becomes veiled in industrial societies where the butchery goes on behind closed doors to which no school children have access. It is
considered low-caste work, because people think that dealing with blood and steaming bowls or intestines is somehow disgusting, degrading, immoral, unethical or scary. So it goes on in closed slaughterhouses. Afterwards, it is delivered to our supermarkets, as we know, nicely packed in the freezers, wrapped in plastic, so it can be taken home and put in the microwave oven – and, lo and behold, we have a nice meal. One is completely separated from the reality, which is that this is a dead animal, and somebody actually killed it.

North of 60 degrees, on the other hand, people are not afraid of killing animals. At the same time, it is significant to note that north of 60 degrees, people are among the least belligerent sub-type of Homo sapiens that exists. In Greenland, we have never had a war.

We live in a time of repeated campaigns on the part of animal rights' groups and misdirected animal welfare organizations. Do not get me wrong: animal welfare is a fine and honourable concern, so long as it is within reason. There are, however, many organizations that deal in false statistics and wrong information. They threaten our aboriginal cultures. Not only do we have the right to live the way nature dictates living conditions in the Arctic, but we also have a right to market our products. Entire nations are now beginning to deny us that right.

The US and the EU are two cases in point. In 1972, the US introduced the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), whereby all imports into the US of any products from marine mammals were prohibited. Whether or not they are on the endangered species list or anything of that sort is – to a number of people – unimportant and not the issue. Some people just no longer want to see products from marine mammals. Now this attitude is spreading to Europe. The animal welfare lobby in the European Parliament is preparing a policy of the same kind for the EU, based not upon reason, but on what some people want and do not want in Europe. This is a contravention of the IUCN, UNEP and WWF World Conservation Strategies 1 and 2, of a number of UN human rights declarations since the two 1966 conventions, and of the Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration's principles 12 and 22. The MMPA, the EEC seal skin directive and the EU wild fur regulation are massively contradictory to all these international agreements.

It is being said that these trends are based on the will of the people. But the term “people” used here refers, in reality, to a small vociferous group of campaign-makers who go crazy when they see a seal skin vest like the one I like to wear. They undermine our culture, because if we cannot market our products then we have no economy, and if we have no economy, people cannot go on living as trappers and hunters. When you present this concept to people who are engaged in the campaigns, you will even hear them say: “Why