

Henriette Rasmussen, Greenland. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 12 on indigenous thinking embedded in the Earth Charter

Sustainable Greenland and Indigenous Ideals



Henriette Rasmussen is Minister of Culture, Education, Science and Church of the Government of Greenland. She has served as a Member of the Parliament of Greenland from 1984-1995 and 2002 to the present. She was Minister of Social Affairs and Labour from 1991-1995. She served on the Nuuk City Council from 1983-1991. She has also been Manager of The Greenland Publishing House, Chief Technical Advisor to the International Labour Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, from 1996 to 2000, and a reporter for Greenland Public Broadcasting Company. She is an Earth Charter Commissioner and has been active in the Inuit Circumpolar Conference for many years. She is a member of the pro-independence political party, *Inuit Ataqatigiit* (Inuit Brotherhood).

*Sustainable use of nature is one thing.
Sustainable development is another.*

Politics in Greenland deal with practical day-to-day issues. What do we do when the ring seal is not there anymore because the sea ice melts? How many tons of shrimp can we catch? But the Earth Charter deals with fundamental attitudes behind such questions. Personally, I find that fascinating, indeed of paramount importance to us all. For it is our attitudes, our frame of mind, that, in the end, will determine the outcome of the concrete issues. But, as it turns out in this country, it takes a while to direct people's attention to fundamentals.

Until now, a sustainable use of the Arctic wildlife has been – and is – the main theme around which discussions revolve in Greenland. The Inuit culture is the most pure hunting culture in existence. Having adapted to the extreme living conditions in the High Arctic of the North American continent for at least four thousand years, Inuit are not even hunter-gatherers. Inuit are hunters, pure and simple.

Needless to say, a culture that depends on one single kind of expertise will have problems adapting to modern living conditions. And problems abound in Greenland, as they do every-

where in the Inuit homeland. But, we are catching on. Appearing on history's grand scene from a one hundred percent hunting background, the first logical choice among modern types of livelihood was fishing, and Greenland is now one of the leading fisheries nations in the North Atlantic. Also, coal and minerals have been mined for several generations. Our tiny people of 55,000 is growing in many respects, and a burgeoning political autonomy is the order of the day.

Optimistic as this may sound, we cannot evade the question of the sustainability of our living resources. The fishing industry is under pressure everywhere, and in that trade nobody can evade tough negotiations and unwelcome quotas. Even more so, our hunters bear the brunt of the dwindling of wildlife. Sure enough, there is no shortage of seals in our waters, and Greenland has the highest quota of large whales in the world, approved by the International Whaling Commission. Even so, the segment of our people that is able to make a reasonable livelihood by wildlife harvest alone is dwindling, and our hunters have to comply with laws, rules, and monitoring as never before. Our people are not accustomed to the idea that efforts be made to keep hunting and fishing on a sustainable level, thereby implying that it is not already so. Tradition says: yes, of course, that kind of activity *is* sustainable! It has sustained us for thousands of years, it will do so in our time as well, and in that of our children and grandchildren! What else?

What else?! That is the big question hurled at us all now. A most relevant question. Basically, there is no doubt; slowly, all of us are going to face a completely different type of situation. We are entering an age of growing uncertainty about our resources and the way we handle them – an unease mostly not displayed by our community planners and decision-makers. But that uncertainty is there. There is a future shock awaiting us. Many don't know it, most will not hear about it, and nobody is certain how to handle it—massive overpopulation of the Earth, to be felt in every corner of the globe; gross abuses in industrial waste-handling; systematic pollution of the water we drink and the air we breathe, pushing the climate balance over the brink for the sake of short-term profits.

The real problem here is that we don't feel we have the time and energy to deal with such issues. Our electorates don't believe that these matters have to do with their day-to-day situation. Yet, somebody must say something. Also in Greenland, we are, by no means, more safe than others in this world. These huge, intractable issues must be addressed, and there is only one way to do that. We have to deal with our situation bottom-up, asking ourselves, "What part do I play here, however small and insignificant. What can I do to push things in the right direction, however humbly?"

For the last few years, the Greenland government has sponsored a campaign aimed at the hunters, working on a new kind of awareness-raising with regard to the sustainability of a number of hunting practices. Traditionally, Inuit hunters are not used to exchange opinions that differ sharply with one another. The very sensible tradition is to reach an agreement in the assessment of the situation, as soon as possible. However, our day and age does require an ability to table widely different opinions. Our time is one of uncertainty – and caution. Wildlife stocks in the Arctic no longer abound. Sustainability in our wildlife harvest is no longer a matter of course. And that is now being understood in our communities.

Sustainable use of nature has become a catchword. But, not so "sustainable development"! That, one must admit, is a much more difficult concept to deal with. One moves to another storey in the building, so to speak, with another view through the window. Here, it is not just a matter of looking after the welfare of this bird or that seal. It has to do with confronting an entire life-style, taking seriously that in 1992, also we Greenlanders took part in the Rio gathering and have – publicly and formally in Oslo 1998 – endorsed the Agenda 21 together with the other countries represented in the Nordic Council of Ministers. This endorsement amounts to saying that we have agreed to take a close look at every detail of our day-to-day lives, identifying every unnecessary practice that is harmful to the environment...for the purpose of doing something about it!

2003 was the year when the Greenland Home Rule Parliament updated its legislation on the safeguard of nature. At that point in time, the overriding concern was the securing of international commitments, such as, among others, the Convention on Biological Diversity, which obliges the ratifying countries to safeguard all and any species of animals and plants within the range of their legislation. In this case, it was the matter of securing living conditions of all plants and animals on nothing less than Earth's biggest island.

Legislation on domestic animals; hunting and fishing; safeguard of the environment when dealing with mineral resources; laws concerning museums and archaeological sites; regulations regarding physical planning and the use of landlots; and, not the least, a general environmental legislation touching on potential problems ranging from drinking water to ocean pollu-

tion—all these areas of our day-to-day lives have now been given a legislative framework, providing new tools with which to secure a better world for our children and grandchildren.

Importantly, the Earth Charter has been translated into the Inuit idiom of Greenland. I anticipate that for the schools, and for the public alike, this translation will be a high-profile tool for the United Nations' Decade for the Education on Sustainable Development in this country. In general terms, for the years ahead, we have decided to tackle Agenda 21 from two angles: from the top and from the bottom.

From all points of view, Greenland's dependence on petroleum for heating is a heavy burden, and a potentially dangerous one as well. It is not surprising that cutting back on precisely that kind of dependence on the outside world be seen as a priority. Now, in the north, in the fishermen's and hunters' town of Sisimiut, the Home Rule government has created an Institute for Arctic Technology specializing, among other things, in state-of-the-art low-energy heating systems and electricity generated by solar panels. In the north, our winter is dark most of the time from autumn to spring. But then, on the other hand, we have the sun around the clock in summertime. The Arctic is not deprived of sunshine! It is just distributed around the year in a different way. With good research into the question of how to store summer's solar energy for use in wintertime, much clean and durable energy can be secured for future development projects.

In the south, in the fishermen's and sheepfarmers' small town of Narsaq, a group of citizens have taken the initiative, together with the local municipality, to create a center, officially called simply "A-21," for the purpose of environmental awareness-raising at the grass-roots. Here, the public will be given an opportunity to collaborate in finding a solution to the almost untractable issue of waste-handling, a problem that is acute everywhere in the Arctic. Also, age-old traditions for the re-use of waste materials are now being revived, together with the growing interest among the general public for solar panel technology and renewable energy systems. Citizens connected to the A-21 project see it as a priority to collaborate with the locally-based Greenland college for healthy foods and good cooking, supporting existing initiatives in Arctic gardening.

In the sheepfarmers' district, people are no strangers to ecological planning. Artificial fertilizers are not allowed, and for number of years already, the farmers have collaborated with professional environmental advisers from the outside world. While on the hillsides and in the valleys, successful, small-scale experiments are conducted in the field of boreal forestry.

My own involvement with the Earth Charter meant a great deal to me. I feel the Earth Charter has been a success. It is a text about the safeguard of our common environment agreed upon by groups as different as Buddhists, Hindi, environmentalists, animal rights' groups, and hunter/gatherers. We are in a dia-

logue worldwide! I feel certain that in the end, sooner or later, the basic tenets of the Earth Charter will be seen and understood by the people. But, let's admit that it will take time. Meanwhile, we must let the Earth Charter work as leaven in the bread. I keep doing what I can to further it in the government and environmental organisations in our country and others dealing with the Arctic region, such as the Nordic Council of Ministers, European Union, Arctic Council, and others.

In Greenland, the general public is very much aware of recent developments with regard to the many serious predicaments of indigenous peoples around the world. The now formally-established Indigenous Peoples' Forum at the United Nations in New York has attracted people's attention. From that perspective, what we see now is an initiative that reflects a growing sentiment that indigenous peoples have an obligation to enter into, and visibly support, the visions we all so sorely need in order to see our world survive. As indigenous people, we will do what we can, and time will ripen for the Earth Charter vision. ●