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 everywhere 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.

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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 “sustainable development”! That, one must admit, is a much more difficult concept to deal with. 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.

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Principle 12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.
ilogue 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.