

**See Also:** Global warming is killing us too, say Inuit, by Paul Brown, *The Guardian*, 11 Dec 2003

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## **Inuit seek to recast global warming as human rights issue**

**by Andrew C. Revkin**

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The Inuit, about 155,000 seal-hunting peoples scattered around the Arctic, plan to seek a ruling from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that the United States, by contributing substantially to global warming, is threatening their existence.

The Inuit plan is part of a broader shift in the debate over human-caused climate change evident among participants in the 10th round of international talks taking place in Buenos Aires aimed at averting dangerous human interference with the climate system. Inuit leaders said they planned to announce the effort at the climate meeting today.

Representatives of poor countries and communities -- from the Arctic fringes to the atolls of the tropics to the flanks of the Himalayas -- say they are imperiled by rising temperatures and seas through no fault of their own. They are casting the issue as no longer simply an environmental problem but as an assault on their basic human rights.

The commission, an investigative arm of the Organization of American States, has no enforcement powers. But a declaration that the United States has violated the Inuit's rights could create the foundation for an eventual lawsuit, either against the United States in an international court or against American companies in federal court, said a number of legal experts, including some aligned with industry.

Such a petition could have decent prospects now that industrial countries, including the United States, have concluded in recent reports and studies that warming linked to heat-trapping smokestack and tailpipe emissions is contributing to big environmental changes in the Arctic, a number of experts said.

Last month, an assessment of Arctic climate change by 300 scientists for the eight countries with Arctic territory, including the United States, concluded that "human influences" are now the dominant factor.

Inuit representatives attending the conference said in telephone interviews that after studying the matter for several years with the help of environmental lawyers they would this spring begin the lengthy process of filing a petition by collecting videotaped statements from elders and hunters about the impacts they were experiencing from the shrinking northern icescape.

The lawyers, at EarthJustice, a non-profit San Francisco law firm, and the Center for International Environmental Law, in Washington, said the Inter-American Commission, which has a record of treating environmental degradation as a human rights matter, provides the best chance of success. The Inuit have standing in the Organization of American States through Canada.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier, the chairwoman of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the quasi-governmental group recognized by the United Nations as representing the Inuit, said the biggest fear was not that warming would kill individuals but that it would be the final blow to a sturdy but suffering culture.

"We've had to struggle as a people to keep afloat, to keep our indigenous wisdom and traditions. We're an adaptable people, but adaptability has its limits. Something is bound to give, and it's starting to give in the Arctic, and we're giving that early warning signal to the rest of the world."

If the Inuit effort succeeds, it could lead to an eventual stream of litigation, somewhat akin to lawsuits against tobacco companies, legal experts said.

The two-week convention is the latest session on two climate treaties: the 1992 framework convention on climate change and the Kyoto Protocol, an addendum that takes effect in February and for the first time requires most industrialized countries to curb such emissions.

The United States has signed both pacts and is bound by the 1992 treaty, which requires no emissions cuts. But the Bush administration opposes the mandatory Kyoto treaty, saying it could harm the economy and unfairly excuses big developing countries from obligations. That situation makes the United States particularly vulnerable to such suits, environmental lawyers said.

By embracing the first treaty and signing the second, it has acknowledged that climate change is a problem to be avoided; but by subsequently rejecting the Kyoto pact, the lawyers said, it has not shown a commitment to stemming its emissions, which constitute a fourth of the global total.

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