



Perception of Contaminants, Participation in Hunting and Fishing Activities, and Potential Impacts of Climate Change

The activities of hunting, fishing and collection of resources from the land and sea are of central importance to the health of Inuit in Nunavik. For approximately twenty years now, confidence in these resources and Inuit access to them have been threatened by reports of environmental contaminants in wildlife, social and economic trends influencing the time available to hunt and fish, and more recently, reports of climate change and variability and influences on the availability and accessibility of wildlife resources. This summary focuses on the information on these issues contained in the Nunavik Inuit Health Survey 2004.

Country foods, and the activities (hunting and fishing) to collect, distribute and prepare them for consumption, are still important aspects of everyday life in Nunavik communities today. They are important for their social and cultural value, formal and informal economic worth, and what they represent in terms of their contributions to physical, social and mental well-being. Their importance is further emphasized by the challenges that exist in the region with regards to access to safe, healthy and affordable market food alternatives in many communities. As well, nearly one third of the population (28%) reports still using some traditional food items for their medicinal properties. At the time of the survey, most (62%) people reported that they had heard about contaminants in the environment. Familiarity with mercury, PCBs and lead was reported by 57%, 47%, and 38% of participants respectively and appears to be lowest among young females. Since hearing about chemical contaminants in country foods, one quarter (25%) of the population reports having changed some aspect of their diet, however, only a very small number said they had stopped eating any country food items.

Despite the social, cultural, economic and political changes that Nunavik has undergone over the past decades, hunting, fishing and gathering of wild resources and the subsequent sharing of those items with others in the community continue to be important activities bringing together individuals, families and generations. The results of the survey reveal that nearly half (45%) of the Nunavik population goes hunting frequently throughout the year and one third (33%) goes fishing regularly once a week or more in at least two seasons. About half (48%) of the population participates in berry collecting at least once a month during berry picking season. More than half of all Nunavimmiut (57%) reported sharing their catch "often" with other members of their community. Less than one-quarter (23%) of hunters said they have rejected or thrown away something they have caught in the 12 months previous to the survey for safety reasons. Rejection of species caught was more closely associated with the presence of visible anomalies such as parasites rather than concerns related to chemical contaminants in wildlife.

Climate change occurring in Nunavik and other northern regions is reported to have potential implications on various aspects of health and well-being. Currently, little is known with regards to the potential influence of climate change on aspects of health, such as country food security, in the North. Half of the participants (51%) in the survey reported that some animals have become harder to find and hunt during the same season over the past four years.

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The most common rationale for difficulties in locating caribou in the year prior to the survey as compared to the same season in the past was associated with changes in animal distribution rather than influences on weather conditions or other environmental variables. Inuit in Nunavik have also expressed concern previously in community workshop that the sun is 'getting hotter' and more people are experiencing sun burns today than ever before. Based on results from the survey, it is estimated that 4% of population experienced a sunburn in the year before the survey; with 33% experienced blistering and 92% experienced redness / peeling. As increases in UVB exposure are projected for northern populations in the near future which influence these rates and warrant enhanced public education on the topic, it would be prudent to continue to monitor this status in future years.

The results presented here highlight the continued importance of land and sea based activities for Nunavimmiut today. However, these resources are potentially being threatened by forms of environmental change including the presence of chemical and metal contaminants and shifts in climatic conditions. The knowledge and awareness of these issues among Inuit in Nunavik should continue to be monitored, to ensure that residents receive and have access to information that will support their informed decision making on important health related behaviours such as diet and the consumption of traditional or country foods.

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