



## **After the Fact | [Ocean, People, Planet: Part II—The State of Our Ocean With Sheila \(Siila\) Watt-Cloutier](#)**

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

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**Sheila Watt-Cloutier, environmental, cultural, and human rights advocate:** *We become the sentinels for signaling what's happening to our planet at the top of the world. But we also become the guardians for the rest of the planet.*

**Dan LeDuc, host, The Pew Charitable Trusts:** That's Siila Watt-Cloutier talking about her home, the Arctic, where she is an environmental, cultural, and human rights advocate. And she has lots of work to do.

Over the past half-century, the Arctic has been [warming three times faster](#) than the rest of the planet.

**Dan LeDuc:** Welcome to “After the Fact.” For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc, and we continue our season: “Ocean, People, Planet.”

That multiple of three, as reported by the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, is our data point for this episode. This accelerated rate of warming is bringing big changes to the Arctic, causing snow and ice to melt more quickly and making the region’s weather more unpredictable.

As we’ll hear today, what happens in the Arctic will soon be felt in other parts of the world. Glaciers and permafrost melt and the ocean changes—wildlife moves from its natural territory, and traditional ways of life for the Indigenous people of the region are threatened. But as we’ll hear from Siila Watt-Cloutier, there are things we can do about it.

**Dan LeDuc:** Sheila Watt-Cloutier, thank you so much for joining us today. You're talking to us from Canada.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** I am, yes.

**Dan LeDuc:** You were born into the Inuit community. I've heard you describe it as where the tree line meets the tundra. What was it like growing up in your community?

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** We lived in a very small post where my single grandmother and single mother worked domestically for the Hudson's Bay Co. along the Kuujuaq River, what we call Old Fort Chimo. Kuujuaq means big river. We were right on the river. There would be seal hunting, whale hunting, fishing and we traveled also onto the land into



another fishing ground, what we call False River, where we would go and fish for our trout in the wintertime, in the springtime.

*[Sounds of skis on snow and ice, paddling in water]*

We traveled only by dog team the first 10 years of my life. My early memories are about traveling on the icy highways on dog teams and hearing the crunch of the ice under while my brothers led the dogs. Being the baby of the family, I was in this box above this sled in fur being kept warm and watching the sky.

**Dan LeDuc:** You speak so warmly about such a cold place. *[laughs]*

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** Because it's a warm, very hospitable place in the Arctic, which people tend to not understand that. They tend to think, "Oh, it must be cold and foreboding and inhospitable." But the Arctic is very warm in its energy. And it's a powerful energy when you get there and understand and embrace it, and the people are extremely hospitable and welcoming.

**Dan LeDuc:** You were relying on this natural world for almost everything—sustenance—the Inuit people have done that for generations upon generations. Yet your language has no word for nature. I find that really interesting. Can you explain that?

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** You step out of your home, and you're in nature. It wasn't separate from us. We have names for land, *nuna*, and *siku* for ice. And we have our rivers, but we certainly didn't say we were going out to nature, because we were already living in it.

**Dan LeDuc:** Part of this unique relationship to nature is getting sustenance from it—Siila calls it "country food."

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** We have a very, very strong connection to our country food. And it isn't just about the nutritional value of our country food, which really is an important piece. When you're going to be out there on the ice and snow at minus 40, minus 50, which we don't reach anymore very often, but nonetheless, it gives us the warmth from the inside to be eating country food.

If we eat seal meat, for example, it warms you from the inside out. It's like a good gasoline for the engine. But it also gives us a cultural value. The emotional value, connection to identity. Connection to one another, to our hunter, to our ancestry.

**Dan LeDuc:** You have said that the ice is part of your life force from where you are. Could you talk a little bit more about what you mean by that?

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** It certainly is our life force. It isn't just for recreational purposes. It really is about our mobility and transportation. As the ice forms, it becomes our highways



that lead us into our environment that then allows us to harvest and hunt for our organic food.

That ice is such an important piece, but really, it isn't just about the ice itself. It's really about the wisdom that is being lost as the ice goes. And it's about teaching our children the actual life skills: being taught patience, endurance, courage, how to be bold under pressure, how to withstand stressful situations. How to ultimately develop your sound judgment and wisdom.

We learn to be a proficient provider and a natural conservationist, and in our language, that's *silatunig*. The hallmark of Inuit teaching is to be able to teach our children the very holistic way, and that ice is our training ground. We're learning what colonialism has done and how the oppression and suppression has created this loss of sense of identity and grounding.

And what we're finding is that the more kids that were trained on the land and the ice are the ones that are making it in the modern world, because they've integrated, and they've had that built-in capacity to deal with stressors. So, that's how important the ice is to us and why we're fighting to protect that ice, to keep it cold up there, the right to be cold.

**Dan LeDuc:** Made up of eight countries, spanning three continents, and [containing 40 different ethnic groups](#), the Arctic is so vast that it actually helps to moderate the Earth's entire global climate. And, Siila says, what is happening there now is a warning for the rest of the planet.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** The ice and the glaciers of the Arctic are the cooling system. It's the air conditioner, if you will, for the rest of the planet. And, so, as that starts to melt and starts to go, it creates all kinds of other havoc around the world.

*[Sounds of ice crashing into water]*

The oceans are the drivers of climate change to begin with in the world. And it changes the salt content of the oceans. It changes the ocean currents.

What's happening in the Arctic doesn't stay in the Arctic. The erratic events that we see today are a result of that breaking down of that Arctic cooling system for the planet. The hurricanes, the intense hurricanes, the tornadoes, the droughts, the fires, the floods—all of those are connected to what's happening in the Arctic.

Certainly, through the lens of an Inuit woman from the Arctic, I see those connections, and I've seen them for a long, long time, because that's been my life's work, even in elected official positions that I've held at the U.N. level. And that's that connection that everyone should understand, because if you can protect the Arctic, you actually save the planet.



**Dan LeDuc:** The remoteness and vastness of the Arctic doesn't mean it's invulnerable as the Earth warms. The Arctic Ocean is intimately linked with the climate systems around it—and Siila says she sees the impact of the changes in these systems all around her.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** The trees are slumping, what we call drunken trees, as a result of the permafrost that's melting. And now they're collapsing because they just don't have the soil base. We've had homes, in fact, relocated as a result of permafrost melt, because they were buckling. We've got runways that are buckling more frequently and needing to be paved more frequently in the North as a result of permafrost.

We've got coastal erosion, where you just have to look at and Google some of the communities in Alaska, in particular, because it's more stark in the western part, where the coast is more open—and, in particular, Alaska—homes already falling into the sea. We've got insects, birds, fish, some we don't know names of, that are making their way up into the North. The storm surges that come, the rain that comes more frequently even in the winter.

There are hunters that are falling into ice. Traditional wisdom now is being minimized as a result of not being able to read ice conditions, because it forms differently from the bottom because of the warmer waters underneath. And, so, what you see in the top is not what it is under. And, so, there are more accidents as a result of it.

**Dan LeDuc:** We so know and respect the generations of knowledge that the Inuit people and other Indigenous people have of their land. But when the climate is changing on them, that traditional knowledge and understanding gets tested because the signs of nature are different.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** Our elders, they have often said—and I would hear this in Nunavut—they'd say, "I'm teaching you this now, how to read the conditions of the weather, the ice, where the animals are. I'm teaching you all of this." And then they have a disclaimer. They say, "However, because of climate change, things will be different now. You have to be more cautious. You have to be more focused when you go out in the land and the ice."

Indeed, that's what I mean by traditional knowledge and wisdom is being minimized and often destroyed because of climatic changes that are happening. It's not just about the ice that we're losing. It's the wisdom that goes with it. The cost of living in the Arctic is extremely high. It can be two to three times higher than, let's say, in the southern parts of Canada. People don't come to understand these pieces where food insecurity really exists in the Arctic. The caribou, for example, are very hard to find now, especially in my region—where when I was a child, they were very plentiful and easier to track and easier to get, and to harvest, to hunt.



I know there are cycles. There's no doubt there are cycles. These issues that are happening now and the changes that are happening are above and beyond the natural cycles that have happened for millennia.

Indigenous wisdom is the answer to the problems that the world faces. And we are the very medicine the world seeks to address these issues of sustainability and these unsustainable activities and businesses that have reigned for so long. It isn't about one species of an animal. It isn't about one country that is to blame.

I have often said in terms of a global connection or an international connection, we become the sentinels, really, for signaling what's happening to our planet at the top of the world. We indeed still rely on the well-being of our atmosphere and climate for our livelihood, our culture, our food.

And that's why I think if we can continue to explore the idea of let's say, conservation economies, where our hunters would be official guardians by being conservation agents in the Arctic—would be an incredible way, I think, to move forward, rather than how the world is looking at the Arctic to become the energy feeder of the Earth through oil and gas. It's really important for people to understand these issues of conservation and try to explore that avenue of how we can remain those sentinels and guardians in the far North for the rest of the world.

**Dan LeDuc:** Siila says it's time for a new perspective, a new way of viewing conservation with a sense of fairness.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** It's all about fairness. Doing things in fairness with respect for our environment, for each other. We're a people that when we harvest and we hunt our food, we waste nothing of the animal. We use every part of it, really. And we eat most of it. The fur, we use it for clothing.

It's about the basic values and principles that we all should be abiding by and respect the environment that we live in, and to be giving back to it in every way that we can as it gives to us. And that's what the principles and values of most Indigenous peoples of the world are.

Especially now, since the pandemic and the virtual events have been happening, the pandemic as well as the recovery of the children residential school here in Canada, the heart seems to have been opened up in our country and beyond. And I think it's time now to really start to address these issues from that very heart space. And change the way in which we do things, the way in which we treat Indigenous people, the way in which we treat one another, and the way in which we innovate and reimagine a new way forward with intention.

**Dan LeDuc:** We're in a period of time where the conservation world is embracing the wisdom of Indigenous peoples in so many regions around the world, because



Indigenous people are so close to what we call nature, what they call the world around them. And I just wonder if you see a difference in approach to how we can conserve this natural world better for all of us if we think about it a little differently. And maybe the terms we're just talking about here, to not think about it separately, matter.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** Well, I think oftentimes, it's very difficult for those living in the urban setting to actually have that kind of connection. Some of the teachings that I've been doing for the last couple of decades now is to say, "Well, you don't have to necessarily become a hunter or a fisher or gatherer, but you can go out in nature in your surroundings." You have forests, you have lakes. You can go out and connect to nature. And find out about how to grow your own food—that's nature, too. I mean, even though it's gardening, maybe on your farmland or even in your home in the backyard, and going out and doing activities like canoeing or hiking. It's connecting to the cycles of nature.

Things that nature builds you up in that way is a good way to reconnect with nature and learn more about the cycles and the changes that are happening in the surroundings that you're in. Because the world is completely affected now by climatic changes and it's an important piece there to be able to reconnect with it and understand it better.

**Dan LeDuc:** Sheila Watt-Cloutier, thank you for helping us maybe imagine things anew. It's been a pleasure talking to you today.

**Sheila Watt-Cloutier:** It's been wonderful. Thank you for having me.

**Dan LeDuc:** Thank you for listening. Keep an eye out for more of these episodes coming your way soon, and in the meantime, please visit [pewtrusts.org/oceanpeopleplanet](https://pewtrusts.org/oceanpeopleplanet) to learn more.

I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts.