

# Tip of the iceberg

Through community-led, participatory research in the Circumpolar North, **Dr Ashlee Cunsolo Willox** has uncovered how climate change is degrading the land, and with it, impacting Inuit livelihoods, sense of cultural identity and, subsequently, mental health

## What sparked your interest in the impact of climate change on mental health?

My passion emerged from listening to hundreds of testimonies and stories from Inuit about the ways in which climate change impacts them mentally and emotionally – stories full of heart, wisdom, emotion, pain, hope and survival.

## How did you become involved with the Inuit communities of Labrador?

In 2008, Inuit in Nunatsiavut were becoming increasingly concerned about the ways in which the rapid changes they were experiencing in weather, temperature, and snow and ice conditions were impacting the health and wellbeing of the community. The Rigolet Inuit Community Government decided to lead a project to understand the impacts of these changes on health, and discover ways to move forward with adaptation. I was lucky enough to become part of the project team. This led to a case study of the effects of climate change on the mental health of Rigolet Inuit, the first to examine the linkage between climate change and mental health in the Circumpolar North, and one of the first such case studies globally.

In 2012, the other four communities of Nunatsiavut partnered with the Rigolet Inuit Community Government and the Nunatsiavut Department of Health and Social Development to conduct a regional case study of climate-sensitive mental health impacts. I was privileged to be the Principal Investigator on this project, and to work with all five communities.

## To what extent are changes due to climate change impacting the day-to-day lives of Labrador Inuit populations?

Inuit in Labrador have been observing changes in climate, environment, weather and land for almost two decades. They have

identified many health and food security-related consequences that impact mental health: decline in physical health and food security, unsafe and unpredictable travel conditions and declining access to hunting grounds, loss of intergenerational knowledge, cultural skills and land-based knowledge, and disruptions to land access. Inability to go out on the land increases 'empty time', leading to greater potential for substance abuse and suicide ideation. The effects also magnify and exacerbate existing stressors.

## What methodologies do you use?

All of my research is community-led, community-based and participatory. We employ strategies that resonate with Inuit traditions of oral history and storytelling and work to disrupt power imbalances between researchers and research participants via a decolonising lens. In addition, we use in-depth conversational interviews, group discussions, dialogue and participatory digital media.

Most recently, we mobilised filmmaking as a way not only to gather data about the psychological impacts of climate change in Nunatsiavut, but also for the Inuit of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, to share their experiences with other Circumpolar Indigenous populations, and begin dialogue and knowledge sharing through a combination of stunning visual scenery and powerful and emotional narratives.

## What do you consider to be the most challenging aspect of your research?

It is not the research itself, but rather trying to move it into the policy realm and increase awareness of the linkages between a changing environment and mental wellness. Early on, there was a lot of scepticism. Some did not believe that climate change and mental health could even be linked. However, I'm heartened by increasing interest around the globe.

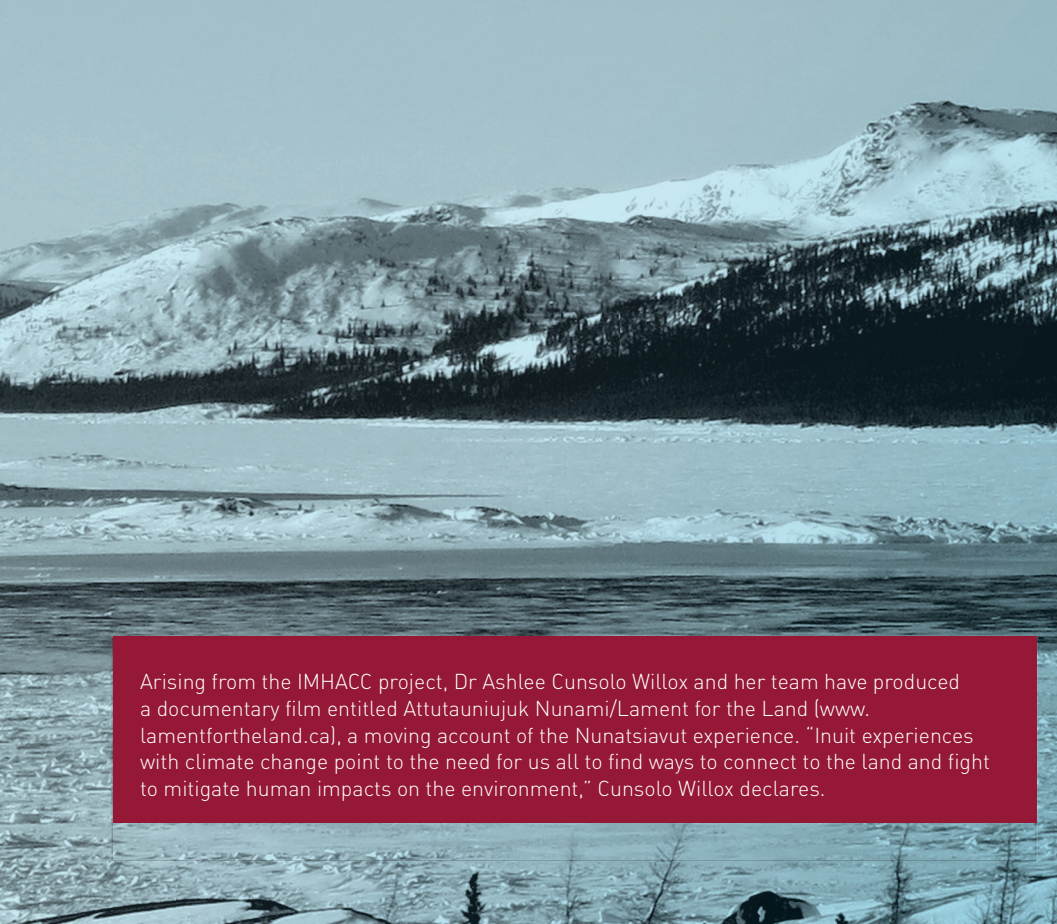
# Lament for the land

Collaborative community-led research between **Cape Breton University** and Inuit communities of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, shows that climate change awareness urgently needs to encompass its effects on mental and emotional wellbeing

**THE RUGGED, PRISTINE** terrain and sea ice of the Nunatsiavut region in Labrador, Canada, have sustained the Inuit communities of Nain, Hopedale, Postville, Makkovik and Rigolet for millennia. These remote coastal communities are the living embodiment, and custodians of, a 6,000 year-old cultural and traditional heritage tightly connected to 'our beautiful land', the meaning of Nunatsiavut in the Inuttitut dialect.

In recent times, however, the people of Nunatsiavut have noticed that their land is changing before their eyes. Temperatures have increased and the weather has become unpredictable. For people whose identity, livelihoods and cultural sustainability are intertwined with the rhythms of the seasons, the results of climate change can be devastating.

When Nunatsiavut residents talk about their connection with the land, they use words like belonging, family, healing, solace, peace and, mostly, freedom. The land is a part of who they are and their way of living, key to their cultural and traditional identity. But winters have become shorter, the sea ice has become unstable and snowfall patterns have changed. Their ability to venture out onto the ice safely is often restricted, while the animals they hunt are moving away. As a result of this, residents report that they feel 'lost', 'helpless' and 'left with nothing'. Above all, Inuit fear that they will not be able to hand on the sense of privilege they feel to live in their beautiful land, nor ancient



Arising from the IMHACC project, Dr Ashlee Cunsolo Willox and her team have produced a documentary film entitled Attutauniujuk Nunami/Lament for the Land ([www.lamentfortheland.ca](http://www.lamentfortheland.ca)), a moving account of the Nunatsiavut experience. "Inuit experiences with climate change point to the need for us all to find ways to connect to the land and fight to mitigate human impacts on the environment," Cunsolo Willox declares.

traditions for coping with it in smart ways, to future generations.

### KEEPING STRONG IN CHANGING TIMES

Based at Cape Breton University, Dr Ashlee Cunsolo Willox is the Canada Research Chair in Determinants of Healthy Communities and is passionate about working with communities to understand the social, environmental and cultural determinants of indigenous health and social and health inequalities. As Principal Investigator of the Inuit Mental Health and Adaptions to Climate Change (IMHACC) project, she is currently working in close collaboration with indigenous colleagues in five Inuit communities in Labrador. This community-based and community-led participatory research looks at the effects of climate-related changes to the environment on Inuit livelihoods, mental health and wellbeing.

For Nunatsiavut communities, the loss of self-sufficiency and inability to travel safely for extended periods are taking their toll. Going out on the land is therapeutic, a means of coping with the legacies of colonial days and enduring hardships; now, however, the window of opportunity for this has reduced from seven months to sometimes as little three. The ice quickly turns to slush, breaking apart, and hurricane-force winds have become more common. Consequently, isolation within the communities has grown. Long periods of unproductive time spent indoors rather than hunting, fishing and gathering firewood create stress and have been linked to a rise in obesity and diabetes. Decline in wellbeing has not only been physical: rates of depression, suicide

and drug and alcohol abuse, which are already higher than in other Canadian communities, have also been impacted.

### AN EMERGING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE

For Cunsolo Willox and her Inuit colleagues, the situation in Nunatsiavut indicates the need for a paradigm shift in recognising the impact of climate change on mental health: "Climate change represents an unprecedented challenge. It should become a priority for the global public mental health community," she asserts. Indeed, their regional study on climate change effects on mental wellness in the Circumpolar North – the first of its kind to be conducted – provided a wealth of data from in-depth interviews with Inuit. Her team found that changes to the land, ice, snow and weather as a result of climate change compounds stress and is therefore likely to become an increasingly serious mental and emotional health challenge among Circumpolar Indigenous populations.

Cunsolo Willox and her Nunatsiavut partners intend to continue to work with Inuit communities to further explore interconnections between sense of place, environmental change and mental health, and to support communities to devise pathways to resilience. Ultimately, her research findings to date point to the need for context-specific climate health planning and adaptation programmes for Inuit communities.

## IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### OBJECTIVES

- To work with the five Inuit communities of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, to discover, analyse and synthesise the climatic and environmental determinants of mental health and wellbeing
- To discover and support protective factors and locally appropriate and culturally relevant indicators of and pathways for supporting mental wellness

### KEY COLLABORATORS

Based in Canada: **Jack Shiwak**; **Charlotte Wolfrey**, Rigolet Inuit Community Government • **Inez Shiwak**; **Marilyn Baikie**, 'My Word': Storytelling & Digital Media Lab • **Herb Jacque**; **Gemma Andersen**, Makkovik Inuit Community Government • **Diane Gear**; **Rebecca Brennen**, Postville Inuit Community Government • **Wayne Piercy**; **Juliana Flowers**, Hopedale Inuit Community Government • **Anthony Andersen**; **Noah Nochasak**, Nain Inuit Community Government • **Michele Wood**, Department of Health & Social Development

### PARTNERS

**Rigolet, Makkovik, Postville, Hopedale and Nain Inuit Community Governments** • **'My Word': Storytelling & Digital Media Lab** • **Nunatsiavut Government** **Department of Health & Social Development**

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**ASHLEE CUNSOLO WILLOX** is a community-engaged researcher, working at the intersection of place, culture, health and environment, with an emphasis on the determinants of Indigenous health. She is a pioneer in climate change and mental health research, and has given over 150 presentations and received wide media coverage. In 2014, she was inducted into the Royal Society of Canada's College of New Scholars, Artists, and Scientists.