

Decolonizing Wildlife Management and  
Conservation Knowledge for Inuit food  
Sovereignty in Nunatsiavut



## Introduction

The Inuit are Northern Indigenous Peoples from Greenland, Alaska or the Canadian Arctic. In Canada their homeland consists of most Northern areas (Figure 1), the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunatsiavut and Nunavik (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), no date).

Food to the Inuit is a focal point of their culture and subsistence harvesting is necessary to meet food needs given their remote location (ITK, 2021). Country foods are obtained from this harvesting, which are foods obtained from gathering, fishing and hunting in local areas. Prior to colonization the Inuit were independent, relying on traditional ecological and land stewardship knowledge passed down through generations for a subsistence economy relying on country foods.

However, colonialism moved the Inuit from their communitarian lifestyles towards capitalism which brought market-distribution of goods that commoditized food. Given their remote location, capitalism had an outsized negative effect on Inuit peoples. Costs of living skyrocketed, making waged work hard to find and fresh, nutritious food difficult to afford, pushing poverty rates significantly above national averages (Nunavut Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, no date) and resulting in low-nutrition, shelf-stable foods being a mainstay in Inuit diets (Herrmann *et al.*, 2021). Sixty-Three percent of Inuit in Canada are food insecure (Statistics Canada, 2024), meaning that they are uncertain of their ability to or unable “to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways” (Health Canada, 2020).

Today, forms of colonialism persist in Inuit lives including the coloniality of knowledge, meaning Eurocentric knowledge is viewed as a singular way of knowing (Quijano, 2007). This has exacerbated food insecurity by dominating Inuit perspectives when setting policies regarding Inuit food systems. Key food system policies for the Inuit are wildlife and conservation management, particularly for caribou given the significant role the caribou play as a staple country food and in deep cultural identity ties (Snook *et al.*, 2020; ITK, 2021).

The Pluriverse diverges from the coloniality of knowledge by emphasizing that there is more than one way of knowing in the interaction between humans and nature (Blaser and de la Cadena, 2018). Pluriverse solutions dismantle dominant Eurocentric ontologies such as the superiority of scientific knowledge to build connections between other ways of knowing and living to form heterogenous solutions and knowledge towards a sustainable future (Blaser and de la Cadena, 2018).

Accordingly, this paper will demonstrate how coloniality of and in knowledge<sup>1</sup> pertaining to wildlife management and conservation (WMC) has impacted food security for the Inuit residing in Nunatsiavut, Canada. I will demonstrate this through an analysis of WMC pertaining to the Mealy Mountain Caribou (MMC) herd of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) and the George River Caribou (GRC) herd, present in the northern parts of the provinces of NL and Quebec which are the Nunatsiavut and Nunavik areas of Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland (Figure 1) (Snook *et al.*, 2020). I will demonstrate how Indigenous-led conservation of caribou populations in other parts of Canada have embraced traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) for successful WMC.

I will then examine food sovereignty which places “the needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies” (La Via Campesina, 2025, quoted in Rosset &

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<sup>1</sup> Coloniality in knowledge refers to hierarchical categories built into Modern knowledge (capital M) (Arora, 2020; Haraway, 1991).

Martínez-Torres, 2012, p. 17). I will discuss how this concept deconstructs colonial knowledge dominance as a pluriverse solution to food security and why it is vital to Inuit food security prior to the conclusion.

### Western Wildlife Conservation

Most caribou populations in Canada are administered via the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (NAM) (Snook *et al.*, 2020). The seven principles of NAM are built from colonial based knowledge systems, emphasizing Western science as the “proper tool for discharging wildlife policy” (Kisonak *et al.*, 2024, p. 6). This demonstrates coloniality of knowledge which devalues TEK and treats Modern scientific knowledge as the only rational road to progress (Arora, 2020; Quijano, 2007). To further illustrate hierarchical categories built into the coloniality in knowledge of the NAM, NAM principles insinuate animals are property through principle three, which states “allocation of wildlife is by law” (Kisonak *et al.*, 2024, p. 6), as opposed to part of the land with which humans have a symbiotic relationship.

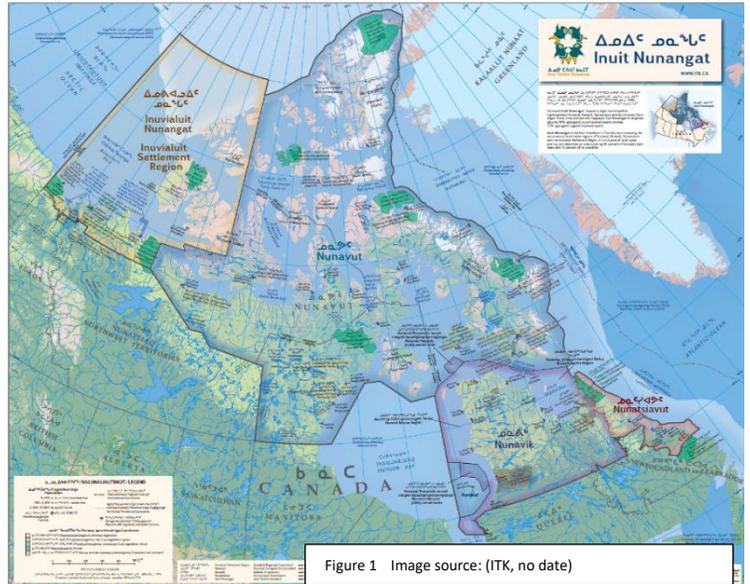


Figure 1 Image source: (ITK, no date)

In alignment with NAM and the coloniality of knowledge, although harvesting rights are built into agreements with federal and provincial governments, in the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement, western governments retain the rights to govern wildlife management by establishing the amount of allowable harvest (Government of Canada, 2005, c. 12.4.3, p. 165). This colonial focus neglects Indigenous needs for subsistence hunting. For example, 81% of caribou species for which Canada has available data are declining and since 2003, Canada has listed declining caribou species as “threatened” in accordance with the Species at Risk Act (Snook *et al.*, 2020). This includes the GRC and MMC herds, previous staples in the diets of the people of Nunatsiavut. The listing resulted in a hunting moratorium enacted by the government of NL in 2004 for the MMC and 2013 for GRC that continues today (Samson, 2018; Government of NL, 2025, c. 12.4.3 p. 165).

The Inuit people involved in Snook *et al.*'s (2020) study on the relationship between the Rigolet Inuit in Nunatsiavut and the caribou emphasized there was no consultation prior to the MMC ban and discuss the lack of meaningful consultation for the subsequent 2013 GRC hunting ban. The participants expressed significant frustration with their inability to self-determination regarding WMC policies in this region.

For example, a scenario unfolded where the MMC were stranded on an island and the community requested a restricted hunt from the government, which was not granted. The caribou ultimately died of starvation, leading to further frustration and disenchantment with the governments lack of inclusion of Inuit voices in WMC efforts (Snook *et al.*, 2020).

Wildlife management and conservation has significantly affected food insecurity due to the sudden, top-down impact of losing such a valuable food resource combined with difficulty obtaining healthy dietary replacements due to remoteness of communities and lack of planning for this impact from the government (Theriault, 2011; Snook *et al.*, 2020). Snook *et al.*'s (2020) study exemplifies this impact, outlining the reliance on caribou for survival and how the ban has led to criminalization for harvesting a species vital to their survival and growing tension and frustration with inconsistencies in the ban enforcement.

Caribou hunting is also deeply connected to Inuit cultural identities. In Snook *et al.*'s (2020) study, Inuit peoples describe how the hunting ban has decimated the passing down TEK of caribou relating to effective wildlife management such as habitats, herd sizes, ecology, biology and connections of hunting related to Inuit culture and well-being. Knowledge which could aid in conservation practices.

Evidence shows that environmental disruptions from climate change are contributing to the health of caribou population (Theriault, 2011) and affecting food security through weather interruptions on the shipment of perishable goods, resulting in less nutritious, shelf-stable foods being a larger part of Inuit diets. No policy is in place to disrupt non-Inuit lives in the same manner that the hunting bans have altered Inuit lives due to the coloniality entrenched in knowledge systems which affects policy and governance of the lands as demonstrated above.

### **Decolonized knowledge: Indigenous led conservation**

Contrasting the examples above, Indigenous-led conservation informed by TEK was paramount to the recovery of the Klinse-Za Mountain Caribou (KZC) in British Columbia (Lamb *et al.*, 2022). Two First Nations groups came together to lead recovery efforts given the declining population without initial government involvement (Lamb *et al.*, 2022). The collaborative effort between nations included guardians that lived among the caribou for observation (Lamb *et al.*, 2022). They employed techniques based on root causes of population decline including reducing wolf populations and penning mothers to protect young from predators (Lamb *et al.*, 2022). This resulted in excellent short-term rebounding of the population as the Nations persisted for longer-term solutions with steady pressure on the government for a protected habitat area.

The KZC inhabits a relatively small area compared to the GRC (that often mix with the more sedentary MMC herd) which migrates between Nunatsiavut to Nunavik. This results in further colonial complications between provincial legal landscapes and Modern development issues encroaching on habitat areas for Inuit of Nunatsiavut (CBC News, 2014). Additionally, in 2019, British Columbia (BC) became the first province to enact the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into legislation (Legislative Assembly of BC, 2019). With provincial provisions that enable mechanisms for shared statutory authority between Indigenous governing bodies and the provincial government, this has aided in giving Indigenous populations authority over and implementation of pluriverse solutions to WMC. No other province, including NL has enacted UNDRIP, continuing to approach caribou management with a top-down colonial viewpoint as demonstrated above (First Light, 2025).

Although the First Nations groups above were not Inuit, this example demonstrates the success of non-Eurocentric knowledge when it comes to WMC, an essential first step in food sovereignty for the Inuit of Nunatsiavut.

## **Pluriverse Solution: Inuit Food Sovereignty**

The vast rates of food insecurity in the north have demonstrated a reconfiguration in policy thinking is necessary. Coté (2016) discusses how global food systems have marginalized Indigenous communities in similar ways to the experiences of the Inuit described above (devaluing small-holder farmers through waged work in the same way Inuit were moved from hunting into waged work resulting in the loss of cultural knowledge). Through these examples the author describes that global food insecurity is a result of government authority of food policies. Rosset and Martínez-Torres (2012) and Coté (2016) describe food sovereignty as one strategy that dismantles the colonial knowledge production entrenched in policies viewing food as a commodity.

Food is place and culture specific, as emphasized by the Inuit's connection to the food they eat as part of their culture. For the Inuit, the knowledge of the caribou and the mutual success of both Inuit and caribou is an essential part of their being. Living in harmony with the caribou and having sovereignty over wildlife decisions supports passing down TEK, food security, health (by having nutritious food as opposed to shelf-stable "junk" foods) and is part of their spiritual and cultural well-being. Food sovereignty recognizes this unique connection and the importance of food systems in social-economic justice from ecologically appropriate food, giving rights to manage those lands and the wildlife and foods within them to those producing the food as opposed to commodification from Eurocentric views of food (European Coordination Via Campesina, 2018).

Food sovereignty for the Inuit recognizes the underlying causes of food insecurity which are the incompatibility of the current Modern system with the complexities of remote northern lifestyles, particularly the increasing wildlife dying off due to western-induced climate and accompanying biodiversity changes and decreasing affordability and reliability of shipments for imported food.

Food sovereignty must begin though pluriverse solutions to wildlife policies pertaining to caribou. This would allow conservation of traditional knowledge of the herds and the land which can also help to manage the effects of decreasing wildlife and biodiversity on Inuit food supply.

Some Inuit communities have built successful country foods programs that employ local hunters who practice land stewardship and preserve local culture and tradition (Thompson *et al.*, 2012; Williams, 2022). These communities see hunting as an essential service (Williams, 2022). Within these programs, food sovereignty works to both preserve culture, a healthy diet and food security. In fact, in a 2012 study by Thompson *et al.* on food in the Canadian North, food sovereignty from local country food programs was paramount in increasing food security.

However, in Nunatsiavut the long-standing hunting bans on caribou complicates their ability to achieve this. Valuing TEK with Inuit authority over WMC is necessary to restore caribou population and move towards food sovereignty.

## **Conclusion**

Through our discussion, it has been demonstrated that the coloniality of and in knowledge within WMC policies concerning the GRC and MMC herds significantly impacted food security for the Inuit residing in Nunatsiavut. Through the integration of TEK in the wildlife management of the KZC, I have shown that decolonizing knowledge pertaining to WMC management led to effective solutions for restoring a caribou population. In this regard, returning rights to manage the lands and the wildlife and foods within

them to the Inuit is the first step that should be taken to restore the GRC and MMC herds and alleviate food insecurity through food sovereignty.

Having the authority to manage wildlife for the Inuit will deconstruct colonial knowledge dominance by de-commodifying food, allowing the Inuit to continue to pass down TEK, eat a healthier and more culturally appropriate diet, reduce reliance on shipments of shelf-stable less healthy food and maintain the cultural ties to the caribou. Given the importance of the caribou to their culture, maintaining the herd is of vital importance to the Inuit and food sovereignty will allow them to make critical decisions on behalf of the community regarding what is best for both the food security of the Inuit people and the caribou each season.

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