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The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change

Sheila Watt-Cloutier
Bill McKibben, Contributor
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Sheila Watt-Cloutier grew up in the Arctic. As a native Inuk, she witnessed numerous environmental dangers, not the least of which was climate change. In a candid, heartfelt memoir that concentrates on her lifelong activism, Watt-Cloutier shares stories about her upbringing and her development into an adult whose passion is the protection of the indigenous Inuit.

Prior to her landmark work on climate change, Watt-Cloutier became president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), an organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the Inuit culture and way of life. This led to her involvement in a campaign to rid the Arctic of a group of contaminants known as persistent organic pollutants, or POPs. The author writes authoritatively about this challenge, but it is her passion that really shines through the text; POPs are toxins that directly affected the Inuit food supply, so “the threat to our country food struck me at a deeply visceral, emotional level,” she notes. Her efforts, recounted in an engaging narrative, directly led to a major if imperfect multicountry agreement that helped to contain most but not all of the POPs.

An even graver challenge than POPs facing the Arctic, however, was climate change. Watt-Cloutier describes in somewhat disturbing detail how her homeland was affected: “Everyone in the Arctic communities could see that the ice melted sooner and returned later … but perhaps most shocking of all was that the very ground beneath our feet was no longer solid.” These dramatic visual images bring the harsh impact of climate change to life.

The Right to Be Cold takes its title from a journalist, who said to Watt-Cloutier during an interview, “You are fighting for the right to be cold.” This also became the slogan for an historic struggle that captured international attention. In documenting her fight, Sheila Watt-Cloutier is giving all of humanity a much-needed wake-up call.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (May/June 2018)

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