

Joan Scottie's presentation to the World Uranium Hearing¹ held in Salzburg, Austria, September 1992.

Good morning everybody. My name is Joan Scottie, and I'm from Baker Lake in Keewatin Region of the Northwest Territories of Canada.

I'm a member of the Baker Lake Hunters and Trappers Association, but I'm here representing the Baker Lake Concerned Citizens' Committee, which was formed to fight a proposed uranium mine near our community.

The BLCCC is part of a larger organization called the Northern Anti-Uranium Coalition. The initials are pronounced 'NAUC', which is the word in our language for 'No'. So if you ask people in our community if they support uranium mining, they respond 'NAUC'!

Baker Lake has a population of about 1,100. More than a thousand of us are Inuit – people who used to be called 'Eskimo'.

Baker Lake is the geographic centre of Canada. It's also the only inland Inuit community. Most Inuit communities are based on hunting sea mammals like whale, walrus and seal. But my people are called the 'Caribou Inuit' by anthropologists, because the caribou mean everything to people in Baker Lake. The caribou is an animal quite similar to the reindeer.

Our diet consists mainly of caribou, and we also catch a lot of Arctic Char, Lake Trout, Arctic Grayling and Whitefish. Last week we had something really unusual happen. For some reason 5 beluga whales had swam all the way up the river from Hudson's Bay into Baker Lake, and then they swam right up in front of the community. In most places those whales would have become dinner real quick, but in Baker Lake nobody harvested them – we're caribou and fish people.

It's a nice place to visit, especially in the summertime. Many people – myself included – work as guides taking tourists out fishing and out on the land.

In the winter time it gets extremely cold in Baker Lake, usually around 40 degrees below zero celsius. Sometimes it goes down to 60 degrees below zero celsius. And all winter long we have strong winds, which often turn into serious blizzards.

There are very few wage jobs in Baker Lake, and the unemployment is around 80%. It's really hard on people. Most of the men are hunters, hunting caribou to feed their families. People are quite poor, in terms of money, but everyone gets by because we get so much food from the land and because we share what we have with people who can't hunt for themselves.

¹ See: www.nuclear-free.com/english/hearing.htm

The materials for this conference talk about the famous 1979 Baker Lake court case about aboriginal rights, but I want to tell you about our most recent struggle.

A few years ago, the German company Urangesellschaft – or UG – publicly announced that they wanted to build an open-pit uranium mine upwind and upwater from Baker Lake.

The way it works in Canada is that most controversial projects have to go through an environmental assessment process. The environmental assessment panel comes up with a list of questions, which they call 'guidelines'. These guidelines tell the company all the things they have to explain, to describe the proposed project and estimate the impacts it would have. The company takes these guidelines, does a bunch of research and writes its environmental impact statement (EIS). If the panel thinks the EIS addresses all the questions it listed in the guidelines, then it goes ahead with public hearings. If the EIS isn't very thorough, the panel tells the company to go back and do more research.

Yesterday I talked to a reporter from a magazine in Germany. He said he just couldn't understand how a small group of Inuit could stop a big foreign company, especially when we have 80% unemployment and they're offering us jobs.

I told him that the Baker Lake Concerned Citizens Committee gave a voice to the ordinary people – the ones that the government and the powerful people in the community wanted to keep quiet.

I don't think the reporter understood how close to the land we still are. Most people only moved into the settlement of Baker Lake in the 1960s. Before that we lived on the land, in small family groups. We still go out on the land every chance we get. When people from the uranium company come to speak to us in Baker Lake, they don't understand that while our bodies may be in the settlement our hearts and mind are on the land, hunting caribou.

The Baker Lake Concerned Citizens Committee speaks for the average person in Baker Lake. People who have nothing to gain – and everything to lose – if uranium mining goes ahead. If anything happened to the caribou we'd have nothing left but welfare. So our clean environment means everything to us.

If people don't understand that, then they won't understand how determined we are to protect our culture and our environment.

Our strategy was quite simple. We decided to participate in the federal government's review process, and to try and make it work for us. In the case of the environmental assessment process for the proposed Kiggavik mine, the panel tried something new. They asked us what questions should be included in the guidelines.

We worked with people like Dr. Rosalie Bertell, Dr. Gordon Edwards and Dr. Jim Harding to come with very precise wording for all kinds of questions we wanted answers

to. After all, we decided, it's our community and we should be able to ask any question we want.

Many of the questions we raised were included in the final EIS guidelines that the environmental assessment panel gave to the company. This made UG's job much harder. We're very happy that these guidelines set a new standard, and we see our work reflected in the EIS guidelines which were recently issued by an environmental assessment panel in Northern Saskatchewan.

But we also did a lot of things that had nothing to do with the environmental assessment process itself. One really important thing we did was to provide information to the people of the community. We started with a phone-in show on our community radio station. People asked us questions like:

- what is uranium, and why is it dangerous to mine?
- how does it change into other things?
- will the tailings be radioactive, and if so, for how long?
- can modern science eliminate radiation?
- should we be worried that heavy spring run-offs could contaminate our drinking water, or the water that the caribou drink?
- if there's an accident, can they clean it up 100%? And what about if it takes place just when a bad storm is starting?
- if there's so much extra yellowcake that's already been mined, why do they want to mine more uranium?

We developed answers to these questions in plain English, written in a way that ordinary people can understand. We also translated everything into Inuktitut, our Inuit language.

Some of you will have seen this large piece of paper we've been handing out. On one page there's an interview I did with a newspaper called the 'Caribou News'.

On the top of the back page there's an example of the kind of information we distributed all over Baker Lake. It explains to people that laws banning the mining of uranium have been passed in one of the provinces in Canada. The government and the company never mentioned this or explained this to the community. We did, and that's why people trust us. We're from the community, and we explain things – in Inuktitut – that the government and the company want to hide.

On the bottom of the page is a map that shows where the mine would be located in relation to the community and the caribou.

We also made sure we worked with other groups inside our region to form NAUC. The Keewatin Inuit Association, the Keewatin Regional Council, the Keewatin Wildlife Federation, the Keewatin Regional Health Board and a second Concerned Citizens Committee in the community of Rankin Inlet worked very well together. We also worked with other northern groups like Ecology North and the Northwest Territories Federation

of Labour, the national Inuit organization Inuit Tapirisat of Canada also the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

The only group we refused to work with was Greenpeace, because of the damage they did to the renewable resource economy.

One of the most important points we made was that while the environmental assessment is just about this one proposed mine, we knew there is a lot of uranium in our region. It's in the same geological formation as northern Saskatchewan, and we knew from the experience there that once one mine is approved the aboriginal people completely lose control of their future.

Urangesellschaft helped us explain this to people. Shortly after the review started they applied for permission to explore for uranium inside the boundaries of the caribou calving grounds. That's when many of the Inuit people really started getting mad.

In February 1990 we received a major boost when we were leaked a copy of a confidential briefing document sent by the Northwest Territories manager of the federal government's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs to his bosses in Ottawa. On the basis of confidential discussions with government ministers, high officials and private business people he predicted that the mine would be approved and that construction would begin in 1995. Reading his memo it seemed the decision had already been made – behind closed doors and outside of Baker Lake.

Although we already had most of the community on our side, there were still a lot of people – including most of the elected officials – who hadn't made their minds up. This leaked document was the final straw for many of them. On the basis of this document our elected Hamlet Council finally agreed to have a plebiscite about Kiggavik. We worked flat out, just like for an election. I'll never forget that tension of that night, waiting for the results. Finally the person we had scrutineering the ballots came out looking very happy – 90.2% of the people had voted NO to Kiggavik.

A few weeks later the environmental assessment panel released their review of the environmental impact statement for the Kiggavik proposal. In general they trashed it, and in particular they said that the social impact assessment was completely inadequate and that they had collected very little environmental baseline data.

The panel also wanted more information about the possible impact of global climate change, because the company was counting on continuous permafrost – frozen ground – for storing tailings. We quoted government scientists who said they couldn't guarantee that if you built an outhouse on the permafrost that it would be around 50 years from now, so we didn't believe they could guarantee the stability and security of the tailings for thousands of years.

Finally, on July 5, 1990, Urangesellschaft asked the environmental assessment panel for an "indefinite delay" in the review process. They said this was because they needed time

to work on the environmental impact statement, and they never mentioned the vote by the Baker Lake people. And that's where we are today – Kiggavik is delayed but not cancelled.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to come all this way and meet all you knowledgeable people from all around the world. I'm going to go home and tell my community about all people I've met and all the things that I've learned while I was here.

I'm also going to tell them that a lot more people from all around the world know about us, and about our fight to stop uranium mining from ruining our environment. So if you ever hear that some big company is once again trying to force us into having a uranium mine in our region, please give us all the support you can.

Thank you.