

Review: “*The Caribou Taste Different Now*”: Inuit Elders Observe Climate Change

Jeffrey van den Scott, Memorial University of Newfoundland

José Gérin-Lajoie, Alain Cuerrier, and Laura Siegwart Collier, eds. “*The Caribou Taste Different Now*”: *Inuit Elders Observe Climate Change*. Foreword by Mary Simon. Iqaluit, NU: Nunavut Arctic College Media, 2016. 314 pages. ISBN 978-1-897568-39-2

Over the past three decades, Nunavut Arctic College Media has grown a catalogue of monographs examining traditional and contemporary Inuit life, including series such as Life Stories of Northern Leaders, Inuit Perspectives on the 20th Century, and Memory and History in Nunavut. “*The Caribou Taste Different Now*”: *Inuit Elders Observe Climate Change* is the latest installment in the series Interviewing Inuit Elders, and the first new publication in this series in 15 years. Its editors, along with a team of researchers from the University of British Columbia, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, the Jardin botanique de Montréal, and Memorial University of Newfoundland, tackle the topic of climate change as seen through the eyes of Elders in eight Inuit communities across Nunavut (Kugluktuk, Baker Lake, Pond Inlet, Pangnirtung), Nunavik (Umiujaq, Kangiqsualujuaq, Kangiqsujaq), and Nunatsiavut (Nain).

Following 15 pages of front matter, including acknowledgements, a short introduction, and an overview of the methods involved in collecting data, the book is divided into two parts. Part I (pp. 15-23) is a “Cross-Community Summary of Environmental Change”, identifying the primary themes emerging from the interviews. The majority of this volume’s pages, however, are dedicated to Part II (pp. 25-300), which features quotations by the study’s 145 participants, organized by community. An appendix (pp. 306-312) includes summary charts of findings from the interview data.

The editors use the front matter to suggest that this work will allow the voice of Inuit Elders and their local knowledge to contribute to larger scientific discourses of climate change. They further address their work to Northerners, writing, “We hope this tool will increase awareness among readers, especially Northerners, about the environmental changes that are taking place around the communities, but also throughout the land” (p. 6). They express a hope that Northern administrators will use the knowledge presented in support of “regional adaptation strategies” and “to address current and future environmental challenges” (p.9).

In service of the goal of speaking to Northerners, the entire book is published bilingually, in English and Inuktitut. Most of the interviews were conducted in the various dialects of the participants. The interview transcripts

van den Scott, Jeffrey, “Review of ‘*The Caribou Taste Different Now*’: *Inuit Elders Observe Climate Change*.” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 38 (2018).

were then translated into English, then into a common Baffin Island dialect of Inuktitut, which is what appears in the book. Each page has two columns, with Inuktitut appearing on the left side and English on the right. The inclusion of Inuktitut will be most useful for Inuit in Nunavut, where the syllabics used in the book are commonly used. The editors plan to release future editions in other dialects (p.3) which, when achieved, will help toward to the goal of reaching a broader Northern readership.

Where some oral histories of Inuit life are guided by a narrative thread, such as *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), the editors of "*The Caribou Taste Different Now*" have elected to let the Elders' voices stand uninterrupted – though they are selections from longer interviews: some only a few words and others up to a paragraph in length. In the six pages of text that comprise Part I, the editors provide introductory comments on the interviews. In general, communities are seeing significant changes "across all aspects of their natural environment" (p. 17), and most participants also see an increase in the presence of certain shrubs. Changes to berry abundance and quality and mammal activity vary among the communities represented. This section reads as a summary list, and provides little analysis of the results of the survey; the authors opt instead to let the words of the Elders in the volume's next part speak for themselves. They offer an overall comment that the differences observed in communities across the North "emphasize the importance of consulting with numerous communities within each region" (p. 22) in order to gain accurate views of a changing Northern climate.

The primary focus of the book is on the Elder interviews of Part II. These are organized by community, roughly from West to East beginning with the four Nunavut communities, followed by the three Nunavik communities of Northern Quebec, and finishing with Nain in Nunatsiavut, the Inuit self-governed territory of Labrador. The editors introduce each sub-section with a two- to three-page community profile including its location, population, and an overview of the trends seen in the observations by local Elders, including points of consensus and where differences emerge. This is followed by the names of the Elders interviewed along with a small headshot photograph of each. The interviews are not presented as wholes, but rather, selected passages are included and arranged according to six themes that recur in each sub-section: Berries, Other Plants, Animals, Seasons, Climate/Weather, and Impacts on Traditional Ways of Life.

It is these Elders' voices that are the heart of the book. In reading the quotations from Baker Lake, I am easily transported to my experiences in Nunavut's Kivalliq Region. I hear the voices in my mind's ear - full of inflection and passion for the land. The choice to present these voices in short, thematic excerpts, however, may reduce their impact. At the end of each excerpt, I want to read more, to hear more from this Elder. I am, however, introduced to another just as quickly. In the absence of a narrative pulling the quotations together, for

readers to create a full story of climate change from the Elders' voices requires significant work.

Although the lack of narrative might suggest that the editors are objective and avoiding influencing readers, the selection of which quotations to include is subjective and mysterious to the reader. The methods page states only that quotes were "grouped by theme" (p.12), with no other commentary on selection criteria. Coming to this book from my own background in humanities and social sciences, the editors' approach from biological and environmental sciences feels like the simple presentation of data. Qualitative research, including interviews, offers the great possibility to engage with people and their lived experience. Despite the rich data in the quotations, it feels detached from the context of life in the North – the very subject the editors are addressing through climate change.

In addition to the text, this book is full of full-colour photographs, many taken by the editors, and many from stock images (p. 313). The photographs generally support the text, such as a muskox appearing opposite a section of quotes about animals. These photographs can enhance the reading, providing visual clues to the Elders' stories. They are not, however, telling the story of climate change so much as presenting fragmentary views of the themes discussed in the book. A full-page photo of mosquitoes flying (p. 95), or a closeup of crowberries (*Empetrum nigrum*) (p.155) help to set the scene of the North but in isolation cannot illustrate the story of change.

The Summary of Findings charts found in the appendix add little to the understanding of the text. Each chart presents one of the book's themes (e.g., Berries), and lists each community's perception of the change to that aspect of the environment. Given the book's focus on climate change, and the selection of Elders' quotes reflecting this, a surprisingly high number of blocks are marked "no change," with no explanation of why this is the case. It is certainly true that the effects of climate change can be puzzling – and indeed may not always be manifest in consistent ways. If, however, such high percentages of Elders mentioned "no change", then these charts may not be a necessary appendix to a book aiming to focus on Elders' voices. For a reader coming from an environmental science background, these charts may prove more valuable, but as a reader looking for oral history relating to climate change, the charts seem superfluous.

As a whole, this book presents a distinct contribution to the work of preserving the voices of Inuit Elders, documenting these voices in our particular ecological moment, and allowing the voices to be heard outside of the North. The volume, however, offers little analysis and so, as an academic work, will serve a particular niche. The editors express a hope of serving communities, schools, and institutions in "documenting climate change from an Inuit perspective" (p. 302). "*The Caribou Taste Different Now*" does this, presenting a rich array of voices sharing past and contemporary experiences of Inuit life. At the same time, the

limited analysis leaves opportunities for readers to interpret the text in ways that, if not partnered with the experience of life in the North, may or may not align with the editors' goal of deepening southern understandings of the Arctic. In the end, however, southern voices concerning climate change and the Arctic environment are ample: this book provides an opportunity for Inuit voices to be heard and presented for a broad readership.