Challenging Faux Fur Narratives in the Fashion Industry: Epistemological Conflicts and the Resilience of Inuit Knowledge Systems in the Arctic

Joyce Cortez

The fur trade has historically played a significant role in the economic well-being, cultural identity, and subsistence practices of Arctic Indigenous communities, particularly the Inuit. However, growing animal welfare concerns, anti-fur activism, and changing consumer preferences have reshaped global attitudes toward fur and influenced regulatory frameworks affecting Arctic livelihoods. This paper employs a qualitative research approach, drawing on scholarly literature, grey literature, documentary sources, media discourse, and policy analysis, including an examination of the European Union's (EU) seal-products regime. Using Cultural Adaptation Theory and Inuit Knowledge Systems (IKS) as complementary analytical frameworks, the study examines how anti-fur narratives and regulatory measures may privilege understandings of sustainability while giving insufficient attention to Indigenous perspectives, adaptive practices, and systems of environmental stewardship. The findings suggest that contemporary anti-fur discourse frequently frames sustainability through consumer choice, animal welfare, and market-based ethics, whereas IKS emphasize reciprocity, subsistence, resilience, cultural continuity, and interconnected relationships among people, animals, and the environment. The analysis further suggests that the promotion of faux fur as a sustainable alternative may overlook the environmental impacts associated with synthetic materials and the cultural and economic significance of Inuit harvesting practices. By highlighting the epistemological tensions between dominant sustainability narratives and Inuit perspectives, this paper argues that sustainability cannot be understood through a single universal framework. Instead, more inclusive approaches to policymaking and environmental governance are needed to ensure that Indigenous voices, rights, and knowledge systems are meaningfully incorporated into discussions surrounding sustainability, ethical consumption, and Arctic development, consistent with the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the geographic and livelihood realities of Arctic communities.

Introduction

The widespread promotion of faux fur as the benchmark for "ethical" and "sustainable" fashion highlights an epistemological conflict between dominant Western sustainability narratives and Inuit Knowledge Systems (IKS). While synthetic alternatives are frequently presented as environmentally responsible by animal activists and the fashion industry (Council of Fashion Designers of America,

Joyce Cortez is a researcher based in Canada whose work focuses on Arctic and Indigenous governance, sustainability, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and public policy. Her work appears in *UN Chronicle* and *UN Today*. She also contributes as a fashion week reporter for *Fashion Week Online*.

2025; Humane World for Animals, 2023; Jacobs, 2018), such narratives may overlook the ecological consequences associated with petrochemical-based materials (Patel, 2026), as well as the cultural, ecological, and subsistence relationships embedded within Inuit harvesting practices (Furgal et al., 2002). Anti-fur campaigns often centre on animal welfare concerns (Humane World for Animals, n.d.; International Fund for Animal Welfare, n.d.; Linzey, 2006), yet these perspectives may give insufficient attention to the role that harvested animals play in subsistence, stewardship, cultural continuity, and resilience within the circumpolar North (Buschman & Sudlovenick, 2022; Ford et al., 2020; Furgal et al., 2002; Inuit Art Quarterly, 2023). Furthermore, the European Union's regulation on trade in seal products, adopted in 2009 and implemented in 2010, alongside broader industry-wide anti-fur initiatives (European Commission, n.d.; Council of Fashion Designers of America, 2025), has raised concerns regarding Inuit cultural heritage and economic autonomy, particularly in relation to market access, demand for sealskin products, and economic opportunities associated with traditional harvesting practices (Couchie & Mosby, 2017; Flanagin, 2022; Hennig, 2015; Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, 2013; European Commission, n.d.).

Some anti-fur campaigns reflect a "choosing consumer" logic that places emphasis on individual purchasing decisions as a means of addressing animal welfare and sustainability concerns (Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Koskinen & Jauho, 2024). This approach may prioritize market-based solutions while giving insufficient attention to the structural realities of subsistence economies and the cultural and non-monetary dimensions of sustainability (Cortez, 2026; Furgal et al., 2002; Pearce et al., 2015). Inuit Knowledge Systems, meanwhile, represent a dynamic form of environmental knowledge that contributes to climate resilience, environmental stewardship, and adaptive capacity while informing broader discussions surrounding governance and sustainability (Berkes, 2012; Cortez, 2025; Pearce et al., 2015).

Moreover, the growing promotion of faux fur raises questions regarding the criteria through which sustainability is evaluated. Many faux-fur products are manufactured using petrochemical-based polymers, including polyester and acrylic, which can release microplastic fibres during use and washing (Leslie et al., 2022). Microplastic pollution is a broader environmental concern, with plastic particles having been detected in human blood (Leslie et al., 2022; Patel, 2026). In contrast, traditionally harvested fur contains keratin-based fibres, which are naturally occurring biological material with biodegradable properties (Agnieray et al., 2021; Banasaz & Ferraro, 2024). Traditionally harvested fur has also supported Arctic livelihoods through systems of local harvesting, use, and reuse (Cortez, 2025; Furgal et al., 2002). However, the environmental impacts of fur and faux fur also depend on factors such as production, processing, chemical treatments, transportation, and disposal (Ziouzios et al., 2026).

To better understand the epistemological conflict between dominant sustainability narratives and Inuit Knowledge Systems, this paper employs Cultural Adaptation Theory (Fogarty & Kandler, 2020; Smit & Wandel, 2006; Steward, 1973) alongside IKS as complementary analytical frameworks. Cultural Adaptation Theory helps explain how Arctic societies have historically adapted to environmental conditions through subsistence practices, while IKS provides a lens through which broader questions of stewardship, cultural continuity, environmental governance, and sustainability can be examined.

This study employs a qualitative approach drawing on scholarly literature, policy analysis, media discourse, documentary sources, and previously conducted interview material. The analysis

examines how anti-fur narratives, sustainability discourses, and regulatory frameworks shape understandings of Inuit livelihoods and Knowledge Systems. Documentary sources include *Angry Inuk* (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016), which presents Inuit perspectives on anti-sealing activism and the consequences of international anti-fur campaigns for Arctic communities. The study also draws on statements from Inuit organizations to examine concerns regarding harvesting practices, market access, and policy decisions affecting Inuit livelihoods. In addition, a previously published interview (Cortez, 2022) with Mark Angelo, founder of World Rivers Day and a featured expert in the documentary *RiverBlue*, is used to contextualize broader environmental debates concerning sustainability, fast fashion, and the impacts of synthetic materials within the fashion industry. The interview with Angelo, which focused on the documentary and its examination of pollution associated with the fashion industry, is used for this broader environmental context rather than as evidence of Inuit perspectives.

This paper aims to answer the following research questions: How do anti-fur narratives and regulatory frameworks reflect particular understandings of sustainability, and to what extent do they recognize Inuit Knowledge Systems? In what ways do Inuit perspectives challenge prevailing assumptions regarding sustainability and ethical consumption within the global fashion industry?

Previous research has examined the EU seal products regulation in relation to Indigenous rights, animal welfare, international trade, and Arctic governance (Cambou, 2013; Hennig, 2015; Hossain, 2015). Building on these discussions, this paper examines how the regulation and its implications for Inuit communities relate to Inuit Knowledge Systems and competing understandings of sustainability. Statements from Inuit organizations are particularly important for understanding concerns about market access, consultation, and the recognition of Inuit harvesting practices (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2015).

Frameworks: Cultural Adaptation Theory and Inuit Knowledge Systems

Julian Steward, an anthropologist and cultural ecologist, developed a cultural ecological approach to understanding how societies adapt to their natural environments through subsistence activities and interactions with ecological conditions (Steward, 1973). Central to this approach is the relationship between environmental conditions, technology, and cultural practices. In the Arctic, technologies associated with hunting, harvesting, and processing animal resources have historically supported Inuit adaptation and survival, while contributing to the transmission of knowledge and skills across generations (Furgal et al., 2002; Pearce et al., 2015). The framework of cultural adaptation incorporates complex processes that occur at multiple levels, involving the transfer of knowledge and skills from one individual to another and across generations, with variability in their transmission over time (Reyes-García et al., 2016). Understanding these historical processes is important in examining how cultural practices continue to evolve in response to environmental and social change (Fogarty & Kandler, 2020).

Traditional Inuit fur clothing provides a practical example of cultural adaptation to extreme Arctic environments, reflecting generations of knowledge concerning material selection, garment construction, and protection against cold temperatures (Cortez, 2025; Cotel et al., 2004). The Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada documents the use of caribou and sealskin clothing among Inuit, including the insulating properties of caribou hair and the specialized knowledge required to produce garments suited to different environmental conditions (Canadian Geographic, 2018). Experimental research by Barker et al. (2025) further demonstrates the thermal performance of

Indigenous-made clothing, reporting that the seal fur mittens tested provided greater insulation (2.18 clo) than the Parks Canada leather mittens tested (1.28 clo). These findings illustrate how traditional clothing practices embody both practical environmental adaptation and intergenerational knowledge, reinforcing the relevance of Cultural Adaptation Theory to understanding Inuit relationships with Arctic environments (Cortez, 2025; Barker et al., 2025; Steward, 1973). The findings concern the specific garments tested and should not be interpreted as evidence that all fur clothing performs better than synthetic or other alternatives.

As defined by Berkes (1993), Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) encompasses knowledge, practices, and beliefs concerning relationships between living beings and their environments. While TEK has played an important role in advancing recognition of Indigenous environmental knowledge, this paper adopts Inuit Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a broader analytical and epistemological framework. The Nunavut Impact Review Board distinguishes between Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, commonly translated as Inuit Traditional Knowledge, and Inuit Qaujimaningit, which includes Inuit Traditional Knowledge as well as Inuit epistemology without reference to temporality (Nunavut Impact Review Board, n.d.). Consequently, IKS are understood here as extending beyond ecological observations to encompass cultural values, stewardship practices, subsistence activities, social relationships, and epistemologies developed through generations of interaction with Arctic environments (Nunavut Impact Review Board, n.d.; Ford et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2015). In this sense, IKS provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding how environmental knowledge, cultural continuity, adaptation, and sustainability are interconnected within Inuit communities.

Combining Cultural Adaptation Theory (Steward, 1973) and IKS helps illuminate how Inuit communities develop and adapt knowledge and practices in response to environmental and social change (Ford et al., 2020; Redvers et al., 2023; Wheeler et al., 2020). These perspectives are particularly relevant to Arctic communities, where harvesting practices are closely connected to environmental knowledge, cultural identity, and intergenerational learning (Furgal et al., 2002; Pearce et al., 2015). Importantly, cultural adaptation and environmental sustainability are related but distinct concepts: a practice may support community adaptation without necessarily producing the same ecological outcomes across different places and circumstances.

Furthermore, the profound ties that Inuit have with their land offer unique perspectives on environmental change while emphasizing its effects on interpersonal connections, life experiences, spirituality, family, and oral tradition (Ford et al., 2020; Wenzel, 1999; Stevenson, 1993). For example, IKS encompass detailed understandings of weather patterns, sea ice conditions, animal behaviour, and harvesting practices developed through generations of interaction with Arctic environments (Weatherhead et al., 2010; Furgal et al., 2002), illustrating place-based relationships with Arctic environments (Zhang and Li, 2024). Similarly, understanding cultural adaptation is also essential for understanding how knowledge and practices change in response to environmental and social pressures (Fogarty and Kandler, 2020) and climate change (Adger et al., 2005; Pearce et al., 2015), including the challenges and opportunities Inuit communities encounter in adapting to changing conditions. In addition, exploring cultural and traditional histories can provide valuable insights for modern adaptation strategies (Ford et al., 2020; Srinivas, 2023) and contribute to the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and practices (United Nations, 2019) while informing contemporary environmental decision-making.

The significance of IKS in environmental change assessments and decision-making is gaining recognition as policymakers increasingly acknowledge the value of Indigenous knowledge in understanding and responding to environmental change (Pearce et al., 2015; Wheeler et al., 2020; Wenzel, 1999). This recognition raises questions about how Indigenous knowledge is incorporated into environmental assessments, regulatory decisions, and policies affecting Arctic livelihoods (Nunavut Impact Review Board, n.d.; Wheeler et al., 2020). When analyzing the connection between Cultural Adaptation Theory and the challenges presented by anti-fur narratives within the fashion industry, traditional fur harvesting must be understood as more than a means of material survival. It is also connected to cultural identity, knowledge transmission, community relationships, and environmental stewardship (Furgal et al., 2002; Ford et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2015).

While Cultural Adaptation Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how Inuit fur practices emerged through long-term adaptation to Arctic environments, contemporary debates surrounding fur involve more than questions of material survival and environmental adaptation (Furgal et al., 2002; Steward, 1973). They also raise questions about whose knowledge and values inform the definition of sustainability and the development of environmental policies (Moore et al., 2015; Hossain, 2015). Some anti-fur campaigns and faux-fur advocacy emphasize animal welfare, ethical consumption, and market-based sustainability (Gabriel and Lang, 2015; Koskinen and Jauho, 2024), whereas research on IKS highlights reciprocity, stewardship, subsistence, cultural continuity, and long-standing relationships with Arctic environments (Ford et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2015; Inuit Art Quarterly, 2023). These perspectives are not necessarily incompatible, but tensions may arise when particular sustainability objectives are applied without sufficient consideration of Indigenous knowledge, harvesting practices, and cultural relationships with the environment (Cambou, 2013; Hennig, 2015; Hossain, 2015).

This paper does not assume that IKS are inherently more sustainable than all Western approaches or that Indigenous harvesting practices are beyond critical examination. Rather, it adopts the normative position that Inuit communities should have meaningful authority in decisions affecting their livelihoods, cultural practices, and relationships with Arctic environments. This position is grounded in Indigenous self-determination and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge within environmental governance (United Nations, 2007; Ford et al., 2020). The epistemological conflict examined here therefore concerns the unequal recognition of knowledge and decision-making authority, rather than the inherent superiority of one knowledge system over another. These debates extend beyond fur itself and raise questions of governance, representation, and authority: who determines which forms of human–animal relationships are considered ethical or sustainable, and whose knowledge systems are prioritized when policies affecting Arctic livelihoods are developed largely outside the environments in which Inuit communities live and adapt (Cortez, 2025; Cortez, 2026).

Table 1 presents selected emphases within the contrasting sustainability perspectives examined in this paper. These categories are intended to highlight differences in emphasis rather than suggest that Western consumer-oriented frameworks or IKS are internally uniform or mutually exclusive. The comparison acknowledges that environmental outcomes depend on specific practices and circumstances rather than on the identity of a knowledge system alone.

Table 1. Competing Understandings of Sustainability: Western Consumer-Oriented Frameworks and Inuit Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Feature	**Western Consumer-Oriented Paradigm**	**Inuit Knowledge Systems (IKS)**
Primary Value	Market-based/Individual choice	Reciprocity/Stewardship
Sustainability Metric	Often emphasizes carbon footprint and animal welfare	Resilience/Biodiversity/Cultural Continuity
Materiality	May favour synthetic alternatives, including petrochemical-based faux fur	Traditionally harvested, keratin-based fur
End-of-Life	May contribute to persistent plastic pollution and microplastic release into ecosystems	Biodegradable properties; embedded in local systems of harvesting, use, and reuse
Human-Nature Relation	Often framed through consumer choices and animal welfare considerations	Interconnectedness
Governance Mode	Globalized regulation/Market-based standards	Localized/Adaptive self-governance

Source: Author, adapted from Cortez (2025), Ford et al. (2020), Pearce et al. (2015), Gabriel & Lang (2015), Koskinen & Jauho (2024), and Nunavut Impact Review Board (n.d.).

As Table 1 demonstrates, contrasting understandings of sustainability extend beyond material choices to broader questions of environmental responsibility, governance, and human-environment relationships (Cortez, 2025; Ford et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2015; Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Koskinen & Jauho, 2024; Nunavut Impact Review Board, n.d.). This epistemological conflict has implications for policymaking, particularly when environmental regulations developed outside the Arctic affect Inuit harvesting practices and livelihoods (Hennig, 2015; Hossain, 2015). The EU seal products regulation illustrates how animal welfare objectives and recognition of Inuit subsistence practices are addressed within the same regulatory framework (Cambou, 2013; Hennig, 2015). Although the regulation includes an exception for qualifying products derived from Inuit harvesting, Inuit organizations have raised concerns regarding consultation, market access, and practical effectiveness of the exception (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2015). These tensions highlight how epistemological conflicts extend into Arctic governance, raising questions about whose knowledge, cultural practices, and socioeconomic realities are recognized when environmental policies affecting Inuit communities are developed and implemented.

Anti-Fur Narratives and "Ethical" Consumption

Contemporary anti-fur movements have significantly shaped public perceptions of animal-derived products within the global fashion industry. Since the late twentieth century, animal welfare organizations and advocacy groups have increasingly challenged the use of fur by framing it as ethically problematic and incompatible with modern understandings of responsible consumption

(Linzey, 2006; Humane World for Animals, n.d.; International Fund for Animal Welfare, n.d.). These narratives have also influenced institutional decisions regarding the production, promotion, and sale of animal-derived products (Council of Fashion Designers of America, 2025).

The contemporary anti-fur movement emerged during the 1970s and expanded significantly through the efforts of animal rights organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) (Siitonen, 2025). Anti-fur campaigns frequently relied upon emotionally charged imagery, celebrity endorsements, and public demonstrations to challenge the legitimacy of fur use and reshape public attitudes toward animal-derived fashion products (Holland and Scott, 2020; Kruesel, 2017). PETA's highly visible *"I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur"* campaign became one of the most recognizable anti-fur initiatives globally, utilizing celebrity participation and provocative advertising to associate fur consumption with animal cruelty and unethical fashion practices (Holland & Scott, 2020).

The influence of anti-fur activism has extended beyond individual consumption practices and increasingly shaped industry standards, fashion institutions, and media organizations (Council of Fashion Designers of America, 2025). Over the past decade, numerous luxury fashion houses, including Gucci, Prada, Chanel, Armani, Versace, and Michael Kors, have adopted fur-free policies, while major fashion weeks in London, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Berlin, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Melbourne, and New York have introduced restrictions or prohibitions on animal fur (Blake, 2021; Petter, 2019).

Within this context, faux fur has increasingly been promoted as an ethical and sustainable alternative to animal-derived materials (Humane World for Animals, 2023; Jacobs, 2018). Advances in textile manufacturing have enabled the production of increasingly realistic synthetic alternatives, commonly marketed as faux fur, often at substantially lower costs than animal-derived fur products (Shin and Jin, 2021; Hazelton, 2020). The growing prominence of faux fur reflects broader transformations within contemporary sustainability discourse, where consumers are encouraged to align purchasing decisions with moral, environmental, and political values (Gabriel & Lang, 2015). Similarly, Koskinen and Jauho (2024) argue that contemporary sustainability initiatives frequently emphasize consumer responsibility while positioning purchasing decisions as primary mechanisms for environmental change. However, the promotion of faux fur as an ethical alternative also raises environmental questions concerning the fashion industry's reliance on petrochemical-based textiles, microplastic pollution, and the lifecycle impacts of synthetic materials (Cortez, 2025; Leslie et al., 2022; Patel, 2026). These concerns complicate claims that replacing animal-derived fur with synthetic alternatives necessarily produces more sustainable outcomes.

The growing influence of these narratives extends beyond activism and consumer behaviour. As noted by *Vogue*, efforts to eliminate fur from fashion increasingly involve industry-wide commitments, legislative initiatives, and media policies, reflecting the normalization of anti-fur values within global fashion governance (Tonti, 2025). At the same time, debates within the fashion industry have become increasingly complex as concerns regarding the environmental impacts of synthetic alternatives have entered mainstream discussions. While anti-fur campaigns have successfully challenged the use of animal fur, fashion commentators have also begun questioning whether faux fur necessarily represents a more sustainable alternative (Aires & Lie, 2025). Discussions surrounding vintage fur, for example, have highlighted tensions between animal welfare concerns, waste reduction, reuse, and lifecycle sustainability, illustrating that there is no

universal consensus regarding what constitutes the most ethical or environmentally responsible choice (Anbouba, 2026). In 2021, Inuk artisan Vanessa Brousseau argued that Etsy's wildlife product policies resulted in the removal of her sealskin jewellery despite the materials being legally and ethically harvested by Inuit communities (Rogers, 2021). Similar concerns emerged following Etsy's later decision to prohibit the sale of natural animal fur products on its platform, citing animal welfare concerns and evolving consumer expectations regarding ethical consumption (Kwon, 2026; Letts, 2026). Inuit artists, northern governments, and community leaders argued that such policies failed to adequately recognize the cultural, economic, and subsistence significance of sealskin products within Inuit communities Kwon, 2026; Pearce et al., 2015; Letts, 2026).

While anti-fur narratives have contributed to important discussions regarding animal welfare and responsible consumption, they may also obscure the diversity of human–animal relationships, subsistence practices, and systems of environmental stewardship that exist across different cultural and environmental contexts (Furgal et al., 2002; Pearce et al., 2015; Buschman & Sudlovenick, 2023; Inuit Art Quarterly, 2023). Research conducted by Furgal et al. (2002) demonstrates that harvested animals often provide multiple resources, including food, clothing, tools, fuel, and materials used in everyday life, reflecting long-standing practices of stewardship and resource use rather than single-purpose extraction. Inuit perspectives similarly emphasize the interconnected relationships among environmental stewardship, subsistence activities, cultural continuity, and community resilience, challenging sustainability frameworks that prioritize market-based consumption choices over place-based knowledge systems (Buschman & Sudlovenick, 2023; Cortez, 2022; Cortez, 2025; Slack et al., 2025). Consequently, anti-fur narratives are not simply campaigns against particular products; they represent broader normative claims regarding what constitutes ethical consumption, environmental responsibility, and sustainability itself.

Inuit harvesting practices emerged through long-term processes of environmental adaptation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, stewardship, and subsistence (Furgal et al., 2002; Pearce et al., 2015; Ramirez Prieto et al., 2026), whereas anti-fur narratives frequently evaluate fur through universalized assumptions regarding animal welfare and ethical consumption (Barnett, 2010; Canadian Geographic, n.d.; Couchie & Mosby, 2017; Council of Fashion Designers of America, 2025; Dawson & Martens, 2026; Linzey, 2006; PETA, 2015).

However, anti-fur advocacy, fur-free fashion policies, and restrictions on seal products are distinct developments and should not be treated as interchangeable. The European Union's seal products regulation provides a specific policy case in which animal welfare objectives, Indigenous harvesting rights, and international trade became contested issues (Hennig, 2015; European Commission, n.d.; Hossain, 2015). These tensions remain evident in contemporary debates, with animal-welfare organizations continuing to advocate for maintaining restrictions on seal-product trade (Eurogroup for Animals, 2026).

The European Union's (EU) Seal Ban Regulation and the Governance of Arctic Livelihoods

Prior to European contact, Inuit communities relied heavily on marine resources for survival and participated in extensive Indigenous trade networks throughout North America (Pedersen, 2016; Podruchny & Nation-Knapper, 2016; Joseph, 2017). Following contact, these trading systems became increasingly integrated into European economic networks, transforming Indigenous

economies and relationships with trade (Gullason, 2004). The EU seal-products controversy also influenced diplomatic discussions concerning its participation in Arctic governance. Canada's objections to the EU's treatment of seal products became an important tension surrounding its application for Arctic Council observer status, although the disagreement cannot be attributed solely to the seal regime (Bonesteel, 2006; Hossain, 2015). At the Arctic Council's 2013 Kiruna Ministerial Meeting in Sweden , the EU's application was received affirmatively, but a final decision was deferred while outstanding concerns were addressed (Arctic Council, 2013).

In 1983, the European Economic Community restricted commercial imports of products derived from whitecoat harp seal pups and blueback hooded seal pups under Council Directive 83/129/EEC (European Union, 1983). The directive did not prohibit all seal products and included an exception for products resulting from traditional Inuit hunting. Regulation (EC) No. 1007/2009 subsequently introduced a broader prohibition on placing seal products on the EU market, subject to specified exceptions, including one for qualifying products from traditional hunts conducted by Inuit and other Indigenous communities (European Union, 2009). Hennig and Caddell (2017) identify a fundamental limitation of the EU regulatory approach: formal recognition of Indigenous harvesting does not necessarily preserve the commercial conditions required to sustain it. Their analysis highlights differences in how the Indigenous exception operated for Greenlandic and Canadian Inuit producers. Canada and Norway subsequently challenged the EU seal-products regime through separate World Trade Organization disputes, DS400 and DS401.

In May 2014, the WTO Appellate Body recognized animal welfare as a legitimate public morals objective but upheld findings that aspects of the regulation's exceptions were applied inconsistently with international trade obligations. The dispute concerned differences in the treatment of qualifying Greenlandic seal products and comparable Canadian and Norwegian products. The WTO Dispute Settlement Body adopted the reports in June 2014 (World Trade Organization, 2014). Inuit organizations also pursued legal and political challenges. During the 2014 WTO appeal hearings, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami President Terry Audla and Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada President Duane Smith reiterated concerns that the Indigenous exception could not compensate for the wider decline in consumer demand. Inuit organizations were not parties to the WTO disputes, but they separately challenged the regulation before the EU courts and mobilized public opposition to its economic and cultural consequences (European Union, 2013; Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, 2013).

Following the WTO disputes, Regulation (EU) 2015/1775 revised the Indigenous exception and removed the separate exception for hunts conducted for marine resource management purposes (European Union, 2015). Inuit Circumpolar Council representatives, including Okalik Eegeesiak and Duane Smith, continued to emphasize that legal recognition of Inuit products did not reverse the effects of market stigmatization (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2015). In response, initiatives such as the Northwest Territories Seal Certification Programme were later developed to support products harvested and manufactured by Inuit, Inuvialuit, and other Indigenous communities (European Commission, 2023). Fisheries and Oceans Canada (n.d.) confirm that Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are recognized authorities for certifying qualifying Indigenous seal products for commercial importation into the EU. Nevertheless, certification provides a legal route to market access rather than a guarantee of consumer demand or viable commercial returns.

The socioeconomic consequences of European seal-product restrictions must be understood in relation to the longer history of anti-sealing campaigns and changing international markets. The Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry in Canada (1986) examined the economic, social, and cultural significance of sealing during the period surrounding the 1983 European restrictions. Wenzel (2019) provides historical evidence from Clyde River, Nunavut, where reported sealskin sales revenue declined from approximately CAD $85,000 in 1981 to CAD $7,000 in 1984. This represents a nominal reduction of approximately 91.8%. During the same period, average prices reportedly declined from CAD $20.50 to less than CAD $3 per skin. However, the observed decline cannot be attributed exclusively to the 1983 European restrictions, and it predates the broader EU regulation introduced in 2009. Figure 1 illustrates this historical comparison.

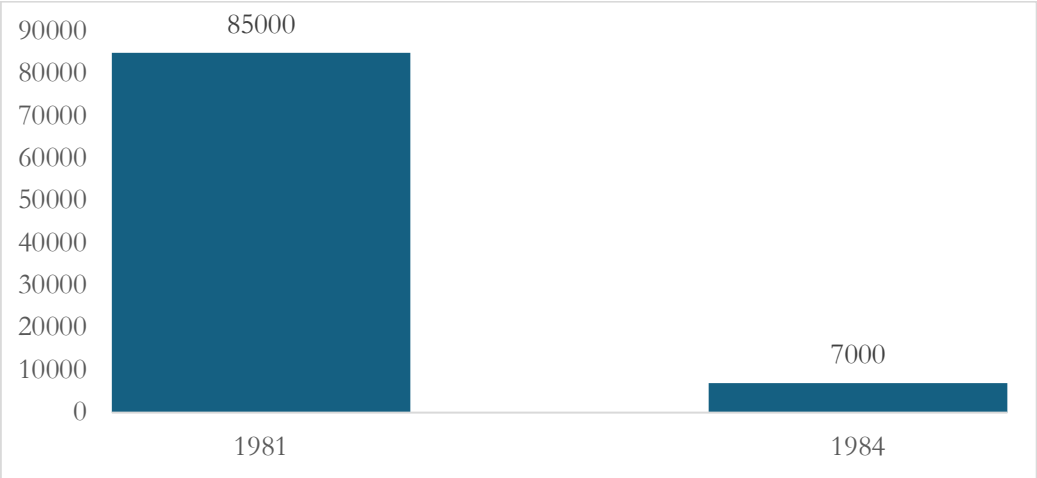

Figure 1. Historical sealskin sales revenue in Clyde River, Nunavut, 1981 and 1984. Source: Author, adapted from Wenzel (2019). Reported sealskin sales revenue declined from approximately CAD $85,000 in 1981 to CAD $7,000 in 1984, representing a nominal decrease of 91.8%. The figures are not adjusted for inflation and do not establish that European restrictions alone caused the decline.

Figure 1 illustrates a sharp decline in reported sealskin sales revenue in Clyde River, Nunavut, from approximately CAD $85,000 in 1981 to CAD $7,000 in 1984, representing a nominal decrease of 91.8% (Wenzel, 2019). This reduction highlights the economic importance of sealing within Inuit mixed subsistence economies, where income from sealskin sales helped support harvesting activities and household needs (Wenzel, 2019; Furgal et al., 2002). Although the revenue decline coincided with European seal-product restrictions and wider anti-sealing campaigns, it cannot be attributed solely to European regulation (Wenzel, 2019; Hennig, 2015). Beyond its commercial value, seal harvesting also contributes to food security, cultural continuity, and the transmission of Inuit knowledge and practices (Buschman & Sudlovenick, 2022; Cortez, 2025; Cortez, 2026; Ford et al., 2020).

Quantitative evidence from Nunavut provides a more specific account of market changes. CBC News (2013) reported that annual sealskin auction volumes declined from approximately 8,000 before the 2009 regulation to 3,000 afterward, while international prices fell from approximately CAD $60 to $30 per pelt. During this period, the Government of Nunavut maintained payments to hunters ranging from CAD $25 to $60 per pelt, and approximately 2,000 tanned sealskins were sold locally during the preceding year. The decline from approximately 8,000 to 3,000 pelts

represents a 62.5% reduction in auction volume, while the reported international price decreased by approximately 50%. However, these measures describe different aspects of the market and cannot be treated as equivalent indicators of household income or as proof that the EU regulation independently caused the changes.

The Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (2024) and Manning, Busson, and Duncan (2024) likewise identified market restrictions as an important concern for northern and coastal sealing economies. Kassam (2017) documents how Inuit designers Victoria Kakuktinniq and Nicole Camphaug used contemporary sealskin fashion to sustain Inuit sewing knowledge and develop new commercial opportunities. Drawing on focus-group discussions with Inuit participants in Iqaluit and Qikiqtarjuaq, Vanderkaden et al. (2024) found that export-oriented market-development approaches had not adequately addressed local gaps in the sealskin value chain. Their findings emphasize that Inuit priorities extend beyond access to European consumers to include local production, distribution, and participation in economic decision-making.

The differences between Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit sealing economies further demonstrate the limitations of formal market exemptions. Although Greenlandic Inuit products could qualify under the Indigenous exception, the Governments of Greenland and Nunavut jointly called for revisions to the EU regulation in 2015. Their statement emphasized the cultural, economic, and subsistence importance of seal hunting and the need to recognize sustainable Indigenous resource use (Arctic Portal, 2015). The controversy also involved other Arctic Council states through international trade proceedings and domestic regulatory arrangements. Norway directly challenged the EU regime through WTO dispute DS401, while Iceland, the United States, and Russia participated in the WTO proceedings (World Trade Organization, 2014). Finland and Sweden, as EU member states, are situated within the European regulatory framework governing seal products. However, the available evidence does not establish equivalent socioeconomic consequences for Indigenous communities in each country.

Table 2. Comparative Evidence Concerning the EU Seal-Products Regime Across Eight Arctic Council Member States

Arctic Council member state	**Evidence concerning the EU seal-products regime**	**Interpretation and limitations**
Canada	Historical decline in Clyde River sealskin revenue; Nunavut auction volumes and prices; Indigenous certification in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories (Wenzel, 2019; CBC News, 2013; Fisheries and Oceans Canada, n.d.).	Direct evidence concerning Inuit livelihoods and market access. The independent economic effect of EU regulation remains difficult to isolate.
Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland)	Indigenous exception and joint Greenland–Nunavut advocacy for regulatory revision (Hennig, 2015; Arctic Portal, 2015).	Formal market access did not eliminate concerns about declining demand and the viability of Inuit sealing economies.
Norway	WTO challenge to the EU regulation through dispute DS401 (World Trade Organization, 2014).	Direct legal and trade-policy involvement, without comparable Inuit livelihood evidence.

United States (Alaska)	Participation in WTO proceedings concerning the EU regulation (World Trade Organization, 2014).	International legal involvement: no quantified EU-ban-related economic losses for Alaska Native communities are established here.
Russia	Participation in WTO proceedings concerning the EU regulation (World Trade Organization, 2014).	International trade-policy relevance; Indigenous livelihood effects are not quantified in the available evidence.
Iceland	Participation in WTO proceedings concerning the EU regulation (World Trade Organization, 2014).	Demonstrates diplomatic and trade-policy involvement, not documented household-income losses.
Finland	EU member state subject to the European seal-products regulatory framework (European Union, 2009).	No specific quantitative evidence of impacts on livelihoods in Arctic Finland is established here.
Sweden	EU member state subject to the European seal-products regulatory framework (European Union, 2009).	No specific quantitative evidence of impacts on livelihoods in Arctic Sweden is established here.

Source: Author, adapted from Wenzel (2019); CBC News (2013); Hennig (2015); Arctic Portal (2015); World Trade Organization (2014); European Union (2009); Fisheries and Oceans Canada (n.d.).

As shown in Table 2, the strongest evidence concerning Inuit livelihoods and the socioeconomic implications of the EU seal-products regime is concentrated in Canada and Greenland; however, the available evidence does not establish uniform socioeconomic impacts across all eight Arctic Council member states. The continued significance of the seal regime is reflected in a recent assessment concerning Regulation (EC) No. 1007/2009. In 2024, the European Commission initiated a fitness check of the EU rules governing trade in seal products, including public consultation and stakeholder submissions (European Commission, 2024). This process provided an opportunity to examine the implementation of the Inuit exception and the socioeconomic consequences of the regulation. Burke et al. (2026), drawing on archival research and interviews with hunters and advocates across the Circumpolar North, argue that the exception remains inadequate because of limited engagement with Indigenous understandings of subsistence, operational barriers, and insufficient institutional support. While the seal regime remains a source of tension, Canada and the EU continue to cooperate on fisheries, trade, environmental protection, and Arctic governance (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, n.d.). Nevertheless, Canadian policymakers argue that the ban continues to impose economic and cultural costs on Indigenous and coastal communities while restricting access to European markets (Manning et al., 2024).

The significance for ethical fashion lies in the tension between animal-welfare narratives and the economic and cultural importance of sealskin production for Inuit communities. Inuit designers and producers illustrate why ethical fashion debates must also consider Indigenous livelihoods, cultural continuity, and participation in market development (Kassam, 2017; Vanderkaden et al., 2024).

Inuit Knowledge Systems, Counter-Narratives, and Epistemological Resistance

Inuit organizations and advocacy groups, including Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), and the Canadian Sealers Association, have argued European seal-product restrictions and associated declines in international demand have constrained economic opportunities for seal harvesters while also affecting broader systems of subsistence, cultural continuity, and community well-being (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2023; Randhawa, 2017; Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, 2013; Canadian Sealers Association, 2024). These concerns are particularly significant in Arctic regions where access to country food remains closely connected to environmental conditions, harvesting practices, and local economies (Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska, 2020).

Inuit responses to the seal ban have extended beyond political advocacy and legal challenges to include efforts to challenge dominant narratives surrounding seal hunting and Inuit livelihoods. A prominent example is the documentary *Angry Inuk*, which critiques anti-sealing campaigns and highlights the disconnect between southern animal welfare narratives and the realities of Inuit communities (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016). Farquhar (2020) similarly argues that Inuit perspectives have often been marginalized within dominant public discourses surrounding seal hunting, despite the livelihood consequences of anti-sealing campaigns and market restrictions. Harvested animals provide food, clothing, and materials used in everyday life, reflecting long-standing relationships between communities, animals, and the Arctic environment (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006; Polar Bears in Canada, n.d.). Rather than framing seal harvesting solely as an animal welfare issue, the documentary presents it as a question of Indigenous rights, representation, and self-determination. It thereby exposes tensions between external ethical-consumption narratives and Inuit Knowledge Systems while asserting Inuit authority in environmental debates (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016; Mullen, 2016). Graugaard (2020) argues that Inuit relationships with seals cannot be reduced to subsistence or resource use, but reflect complex ways of sensing, knowing, and relating to the environment that may not align with Euro-American understandings of sustainability and conservation.

Inuit counter-narratives also challenge the assumption that the inclusion of Indigenous exemptions adequately addresses the impacts of the EU seal regime. Although the EU introduced the Inuit Exception to permit the importation of certified Indigenous-harvested seal products, Inuit organizations and northern governments have argued that the exemption has failed to restore market access or reverse the broader economic and social consequences associated with the seal ban (European Commission, 2020; Nunatsiaq News, 2020). Recent assessments similarly suggest that the practical benefits of the Inuit Exception remain limited, with Indigenous communities continuing to face barriers associated with consumer awareness, market stigma, and the legacy effects of anti-sealing campaigns (Burke, 2025). From the perspective of IKS, these counter-narratives represent more than disagreements over animal welfare or resource management. They constitute forms of epistemological resistance that challenge the authority of external actors to define sustainability, ethical consumption, and appropriate human-animal relationships within Arctic contexts (Moore et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2020).

Rather than viewing Indigenous Knowledge solely as cultural tradition, research, and international policy frameworks increasingly recognize its contributions to climate resilience, environmental

stewardship, adaptive governance, and environmental decision-making (Ford et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2015; Wheeler et al., 2020; United Nations, 2007; Cortez, 2025). IKS provide place-based understandings of environmental change developed through long-term observation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and reciprocal relationships with the environment (Berkes, 1993; Pearce et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2020). Consequently, the debates surrounding fur, seal harvesting, and sustainability are not simply disagreements over products or industries. They also reflect broader questions concerning whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate within environmental governance and whose authority shapes decisions affecting Inuit communities. Recognizing Inuit perspectives is consistent with the self-determination principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007; Moore et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2020).

While some anti-fur campaigns and fashion brands promote faux fur as an ethical alternative to animal-derived materials, Inuit perspectives challenge the assumption that replacing animal-derived materials necessarily represents a more sustainable outcome. Most faux fur products are manufactured using petroleum-based synthetic fibres such as acrylic, modacrylic, and polyester, raising concerns regarding resource extraction, waste, and long-term environmental impacts (Choi & Lee, 2021; Rooney, 2018). In an interview with the author, environmentalist and World Rivers Day founder Mark Angelo, a featured expert in the documentary *RiverBlue*, argued that the environmental consequences of fast fashion are frequently overlooked despite its significant impacts on ecosystems and resource consumption (Cortez, 2022). By contrast, Inuit harvesting practices are closely linked to subsistence, clothing production, and locally available resources, where animals provide food, fur, and other materials essential to community well-being (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2023; Robinson, 2024). Consequently, debates surrounding faux fur and seal products reflect competing understandings of sustainability rather than a simple distinction between ethical and unethical consumption. This comparison does not imply that all harvested fur is environmentally preferable to synthetic alternatives but highlights the importance of considering material impacts alongside Indigenous knowledge and harvesting practices.

Conclusion

Addressing the effects of anti-fur narratives and seal-product restrictions on Arctic communities requires attention to economic, environmental, cultural, and Indigenous rights perspectives. The rise of anti-fur sentiments and changing consumer preferences has contributed to pressures on the livelihoods and traditions of Arctic communities, underscoring the need for Inuit participation and decision-making authority in policies affecting their livelihoods.

This paper examined how anti-fur narratives and regulatory frameworks may privilege consumer-oriented understandings of sustainability rooted in animal welfare and ethical consumption while overlooking IKS that emphasize stewardship, reciprocity, subsistence, adaptation, and cultural continuity. Inuit perspectives challenge prevailing assumptions regarding sustainability within the global fashion industry by advancing alternative understandings grounded in local environmental knowledge, adaptive practices, and interconnected relationships among people, animals, and place. These findings suggest that sustainability cannot be understood through a single universal framework but must account for diverse cultural, environmental, and epistemological perspectives. While the promotion of fur alternatives may provide economic opportunities and animal welfare benefits, faux fur also raises environmental concerns because of its reliance on petroleum-based

materials and contribution to microplastic pollution. Traditionally harvested fur, meanwhile, is embedded in Inuit systems of subsistence, stewardship, and cultural continuity and may offer advantages associated with its natural composition and potential biodegradability. However, the environmental impacts of both natural and synthetic materials depend on their production, use, and disposal.

The findings suggest that debates surrounding seal harvesting are not simply disagreements over animal welfare or fashion, but reflections of competing understandings of sustainability and human-environment relationships. While some anti-sealing campaigns frame seals primarily through animal welfare concerns, Inuit perspectives recognize their broader importance to food security, cultural identity, knowledge transmission, traditional medicine, and local economies. These differences underscore why IKS must be considered in sustainability debates and decisions affecting Arctic livelihoods.

Future research should examine how the impacts of European seal-product restrictions differ across Arctic regions, particularly in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Greenland. Comparative studies should assess whether differences in governance structures, Indigenous self-government arrangements, certification mechanisms, market access, and political representation influence policy outcomes. Such research must distinguish the effects of European restrictions from wider changes in consumer preferences and international fur markets.

From a policy perspective, this study recommends that governments and regulatory institutions use the UNDRIP as a guiding international human rights standard when developing or reviewing policies affecting Inuit communities. Particular attention should be given to Indigenous participation and decision-making authority, the protection of traditional livelihoods, and the geographic and environmental conditions of Arctic communities (United Nations, 2007; Cortez, 2025). Policies governing seal products should consider not only animal welfare and market regulations but also Inuit food security, cultural continuity, economic opportunities, and meaningful access to international markets. As Cortez (2026) emphasizes, policy and trade frameworks shape access to food and the viability of Indigenous food systems. Recognizing IKS and ensuring meaningful Inuit decision-making authority are essential to Indigenous self-determination and culturally responsive sustainability governance.

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