



Photo: Talha Awan, Smart Prosperity Institute

Investing in Nunavut's Blue Conservation Economy

Advancing an Inuit-led Vision for Economic Development

Nunavut's oceans are crucial for the prosperity of its coastal communities; healthy marine ecosystems provide jobs, food, and vital connections to Inuit language, culture, and heritage. As Canada moves toward protecting 30% of its land and waters by 2030, investing in new marine protected areas and local conservation economies is a way to catalyze regional economic growth while conserving biodiversity and enhancing resilience to climate change.

Since 2018, more than \$1.35 billion in federal funding has been committed to advance Indigenous-led conservation initiatives, signaling that Inuit communities in Nunavut are facing an unprecedented opportunity to build conservation economies in a way that aligns with *Inuit Qaujimagatugangit*¹ and leverages traditional knowledge and skills to accelerate regional economic growth.

Investing in Conservation Makes Economic Sense

Over the past 25 years, Nunavut's economy has grown at an average of 8.5% a year, and since 2017 it has been the fastest growing economy in Canada. Despite this growth, economic development has been unable to meet the needs of many Inuit communities.

¹ Inuit Qaujimagatugangit is an Indigenous knowledge system and ethical framework consisting of traditional ecological knowledge and values around how to behave ethically when interacting with animals and the environment.

A lack of high-wage jobs, declining access to nutritious food, and inadequate access to housing means that many Inuit continue to face tough choices in providing for their families. The volatility of economic growth primarily led by natural resource extraction presents an additional challenge for many communities where job opportunities and wages are often bound to exploration or extraction activities when some would rather engage in land-based activities like hunting, trapping, and fishing.

Nunavut's blue conservation economy is a different type of economic development model that prioritizes Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit as a driver of economic growth and prosperity. For coastal communities in Nunavut this type of approach can balance natural resource extraction activities with local conservation economies in a way that both activities can flourish. Balancing investments in these activities provides an opportunity to continue advancing community development, while providing more jobs, supporting the environment, and protecting Inuit culture and language for future generations.

The following represents an overview of key lessons learned from three case studies across Nunavut and the Northwest Territories where blue conservation economies are being prioritized as drivers of community development:

Investing in country food economies is a cost-effective way to advance both conservation and community development.

Nunavut's country food economy is valued at more than \$200 million a year — close to five times greater than what the territorial government estimated in 2021.^{2,3} The country food economy in coastal communities around Tallurutiup Imanga National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) currently generates \$33 million a year.

Similar investments in communities like Taloyoak that are seeking greater protection for their traditional lands and waters are already demonstrating a positive impact on the local economy — access to nutritious food is improving and more local jobs are being created that are aligned with Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit. Recent investments in the Niqhaqut processing facility are estimated to grow the local country food economy by 28% in its first year of full production — an additional annual market value of \$1.9 million.

Inuit Guardians are key actors for advancing both conservation and economic growth.

Investments in Inuit Guardians programs are estimated to generate similar returns to those observed elsewhere in northern Canada — more than a twofold return for every dollar of

investment. Guardians programs in Taloyoak and in communities around Tallurutiup Imanga are already estimated to have generated a return on investment of \$27 million. These returns include direct socio-economic benefits, like better access to nutritious food, more job opportunities, and leveraging additional investments, as well as key co-benefits, like providing more role models in local communities, reinforcing the value of existing skills and knowledge, and increasing the local capacity for self-determination.

Tourism and local artisans represent a significant, untapped investment opportunity.

Nunavut has a wealth of natural landscapes and unique biodiversity that have long provided Inuit communities with sources of ecological, socio-cultural, and economic value. Arctic char, whales, seals, walrus, polar bears, caribou, and muskox are estimated to provide a direct value of up to \$37 million a year to local conservation economies across the territory. Investments in infrastructure and additional facilities that can reinforce respectful and community-led tourism — including marine (e.g., cruise ships), wildlife (e.g., wildlife viewing and sport hunting), and cultural (e.g., dog sledding and drum dancing) tourism — could allow certain communities to take advantage of an industry that is already valued at \$96 million (2018).

Similarly, and as an offshoot of local country food harvesting, investing in infrastructure to support the harvesting and sale of furs, hides, pelts, and other by-products like bones and antlers could improve the efficiency of current harvesting practices while also providing more job opportunities for local artisans. Nunavut's annual muskox harvest alone could generate between \$4 to \$7 million a year in materials from the harvested animals.

The case for investing in Nunavut's blue conservation economy is clear, but for different communities to make their own business case to expand investments there needs to be a clear understanding of how Inuit-led conservation can drive economic growth in a way that addresses local priorities. The recent experience with the Tallurutiup Imanga NMCA — the ecological and economic hub of the eastern Arctic — shows us that investing in Inuit-led stewardship and conservation programs can provide real and long-term socio-economic benefits. Already, coastal communities around the NMCA are experiencing better access to nutritious food, more local jobs rooted in Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, and a growing number of youth and Elders using traditional skills and knowledge to provide for their communities.

While there remains a significant need to invest in infrastructure across Nunavut, accelerating investments in conservation economies across the territory can provide several immediate benefits, while ensuring that future growth meets the needs of Inuit communities. There is a clear advantage for investing in Nunavut's blue conservation economy to provide jobs, housing, and food security, while also prioritizing Inuit values, language, and culture.

2 Wartier, D. W., Landry-Cuerrier, M., Humphries, M. M., & Giguère, N. (2021). Valuation of country food in Nunavut based on energy and protein replacement. *Arctic*, 74(3), 355-371.

3 The Government of Nunavut reported \$3.5 million from hunting, trapping, and fishing in 2021 and estimated the total country food economy to be worth \$35 million.