

Soviet Natives fight for autonomy

by Mike Rostad
for the Tundra Times

KODIAK — Twenty-six indigenous peoples in the Soviet Union including groups of Aleuts and Eskimos have united in their struggle to gain autonomy as encroaching industry threatens their subsistence lifestyles and cultures.

Recent Kodiak visitor, Jens Dahl, was at the Congress in Moscow in which an association of the indigenous groups was formed. Dahl, an associate professor in the Institute of Eskimology at the University of Copenhagen (Denmark), is currently on leave. He is the executive director of the secretariat of the International Workgroup for Indigenous Affairs, an independent international organization which supports indigenous peoples in their struggle against oppression.

Dahl wrote the introduction for a publication documenting the historic meeting at the Kremlin. Dahl said that the congress was given a certain significance with the presence of Mikhail Gorbachev.

This was the first time the 26 groups united in one voice, expressing their consternation over the situation in the Soviet North, said Dahl.

Prior to the formation of the Association of Small Peoples of the Soviet North, regional associations were formed, Dahl said.

"The formation of this association signifies that indigenous people of the Soviet Union for the first time in history have obtained the opportunity

to speak on their own behalf in a national setting. . . Due to *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the whole world is now reminded of the consequences of Russian colonialism and the disregard and neglect of indigenous peoples' rights," Dahl wrote in a recent article.

Dahl said that the people in the Soviet North "look forward to cooperating with people from other parts of the Arctic."

The indigenous Saami from Norway and Inuit from the circumpolar region also attended the congress.

The association is defined as a political organization uniting the small peoples of the economy to improve the social and cultural living standards and to defend their rights, working within the framework of the constitution and laws of the USSR.

The opening speech at the congress, given by Chuner Taksani, "identified economics and the ecological situation, as a real catastrophe in the Soviet Union," reported Dahl.

More than 90 people representing the 26 groups gave accounts of:

- State construction, oil, gas and mining companies moving into the tundra and tundra, showing no respect for the vulnerable Arctic and sub-Arctic ecology.
- Forests rapidly cut down to supply timber for joint ventures between the USSR and private companies from Southeast Asia.
- Gigantic hydro-electric companies damming the rivers.
- Industries polluting reindeer

pastures.

• Social issues that plague the indigenous peoples such as poor housing and disease.

Indigenous culture, art and history are also being threatened, according to the documentation. Folklore collectors take works of art and sacred objects, people are discouraged from speaking their mother tongue, children are taken from their homes and acclimated in state schools.

Objectives of the association include defining the legal status of the indigenous peoples to make sure they are represented at all governmental levels, restoring abandoned villages and migration camps, allowing people to produce products according to their traditional methods, transferring hunting and fishing areas and reindeer pastures to individual families and family tribes for permanent use, creating cultural centers that preserve the indigenous culture and history centers that would be a place for photo

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exhibitions, national festivals, games and preservation of old songs.

Dahl was accompanied to Kodiak Island by his wife, Ria, an anthropologist who has worked in Africa and Greenland. The Dahls visited Old Harbor where they were guests of Sven and Mary Haakanson. The Danish couple hosted the Haakansons during their visit to Denmark and assisted Haakanson in finding his Danish ancestors.