

Worldwide public opinion hurts Natives

by Jeffrey R. Richardson
for the Tundra Times

Worldwide public opinion about hunting and trapping is hurting Native life, but this trend can be reversed. This was one of the themes emerging from the Sixth Assembly of Indigenous Survival International held in Anchorage last week.

About 120 delegates and visitors gathered on Wednesday, the first day of a three-day session, to discuss strategies for protecting subsistence livelihoods and compatible economic development. More were expected to arrive from across Alaska as well as Canada, Greenland and the Soviet Union.

Hemmo Muntingh, a member of the environmental committee of the European Parliament, opened the assembly with a forceful keynote address blasting free market economic systems which permit intolerable environmental degradation and place destructive pressures on indigenous peoples. Free market economies are based on human greed, Muntingh said, and must be curtailed.

As Muntingh sees it, the free market system responds so slowly to excess or abuse that by the time regulatory action is taken, "the harm has already been done."

Dave Cline, vice-president of the Audubon Society, was one of several environmentalists scheduled to speak at the assembly. He praised indigenous people the world over as leaders in good stewardship of the land. He said Audubon recognizes that subsistence is the cornerstone of indigenous culture.



Stanton Katchatag of Unalakleet listens to discussion at the ISI meeting

Cline explained that Audubon does not focus so much on animal rights as on human responsibilities. He urged a closer alliance between environmental groups and Native people to reverse the "tragic trends" now destroying the planet.

According to Cline, one of the important battlefields in the struggle for a stronger environmental ethic is in the cities, where the money and the votes are located. By modeling their own ethics and concerns, indigenous people can help urban dwellers, who have become so alienated from the land.

"They haven't had their hands in the dirt, they haven't had their hands in blood. They don't really understand the natural functions of our world,"

Cline said.

Cline also addressed the impact of the elephant ivory issue on the Native arts and crafts industry. He said there are now two key problems. First, will the ban on importation of elephant ivory simply shift pressure to walrus populations in the Arctic?

Second, will public concerns about elephant ivory depress the market for walrus ivory carvings, jewelry and other artwork?

Cline said the involvement of Native people in these issues is crucial to achieving a more lasting and workable solution. He recommended that ISI and other Native groups, such as the Alaskan Eskimo Walrus Commission, assume leadership in a comprehensive

strategy which would include the following elements:

- An international walrus management plan which would address harvesting, habitat protection, prevention of waste and other issues.

- A local walrus allocation system similar to the bowhead harvest quota system now in place.

- Meaningful local participation in all levels of walrus management, including allocation, law enforcement, research and education.

- Better labeling of Eskimo ivory products to more clearly distinguish them from elephant ivory products.

"I would urge you, don't wait for the government," Cline said. Taking responsible initiatives is the best way to counter negative public perceptions and protect Native livelihoods.

Cline concluded by saying that Audubon would support and assist such efforts.

"We stand ready to help in any reasonable way possible," said Cline.

Other ISI discussions were scheduled on fur trapping, high sea fisheries, reindeer herding, caribou management and wild fowl management.

Perhaps the mood of many participants was best summed up by Clarence Alexander, chief of Fort Yukon, who noted the fears of many indigenous people about the effect of global pollution and industrialization on Native lands and ways.

"Living off the land, that's what I do best. In my country, we feel we're in paradise. (But) the pollution is coming in, we can see it with the fish; we can see it in the animals."