

Gwich'in gathering opens in Arctic Village

About 350 Gwich'in Athabascan people from northeast Alaska and northwest Canada are gathering in Arctic Village for five days, beginning today.

The Gwich'in will celebrate their culture and consider actions to protect the Porcupine Caribou Herd from proposed oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The Gwich'in are the northernmost Indian tribe in North America. One of the last tribes to encounter Europeans, they are among the most traditional and threatened Native American societies today.

While the primary focus of the

gathering is the celebration and preservation of Gwich'in language and culture, events in the Middle East are forcing the communities to gear up for a fight to preserve their way of life.

Proposed oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge threatens the health and survival of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, endangering the very basis of Gwich'in culture and life, according to Gwich'in leaders.

According to Gwich'in Sarah James:

"This is a simple issue. We have the right to continue our Gwich'in way of life. We are caribou people. We still do caribou dance, sing caribou song,

wear the hide, use bone for tools and tell the story.

"Caribou is how we get from one year to another. Oil development in their calving and nursery grounds would hurt the caribou and could destroy our culture and way of life."

Members of the gathering are expected to renew their commitment to protect ANWR and will discuss how to counter oil industry efforts to use events in the Middle East to force development.

Chiefs, leaders and elders from 15 communities, many of whom have also been discussing the creation of an international "bio-cultural reserve,"

are expected to attend.

In 1988, for the first time in generations, the Gwich'in Nation was called together by their chiefs to Arctic Village to discuss what must be done to ensure their future.

Results of that meeting include the formation of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, which was established to "protect our people, caribou, land and water."

Objectives of the committee, composed of eight tribal members, include establishing Gwich'in cultural survival as a central issue in the debate over proposed oil development in ANWR.