

Conferences unite world's Indigenous peoples in Chickaloon

by Tricia King

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From north and south, they came, united in a single struggle. Maori, Inupiaq, Mayan, Yupik, Seminole, Athabaskan, Dine, and dozens of other peoples, speaking in different languages, yet with a common voice, gathered recently on a mountainside near Palmer, sharing both ancient wisdom and contemporary strategies for reversing the destruction of their homeland environments and traditional cultures.

More than 600 people, ranging from elders to small children, camped on the mountain for a week, to attend back-to-back conferences sponsored by two organizations, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and the International Indian Treaty Council.

It was not uncommon to see tears streaming down the faces of listeners, as one by one, individual speakers told of environmental destruction, once-healthy peoples deci-

dated by poisonous industrial practices, and human rights violations wreaked on indigenous peoples by harsh conquering governments. But throughout the sharing of painful truths, a strong resolve was evident, that through unity and shared commitment, indigenous peoples can take back what they never gave away, the right to a healthy, beautiful future for the coming generations.

"We don't need anyone's permission to be who we are," said Harold Napoleon of Hooper Bay on the opening day of the gathering. "It's time we quit asking permission from other people to do what we need to do for ourselves."

The underlying factor beneath destructive environmental practice and disrespect of peoples is the mistake viewpoint that money is a higher value than the earth itself, which should be held sacred, in keeping with traditional indigenous values, speakers said. The erroneous thinking on the parts of not only

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governments and industry, but in some cases, Native corporations and tribal councils as well, have put the future health and traditional lifestyles of Native peoples in jeopardy, said speaker after speaker.

"If we, as Native people, had a history of clear cutting and strip mining, there would be nothing left here," said Eyak Dune Lankard.

Although United Nations treaty study expert Miguel Alfonso Martinez was unable to be present as planned, due to a heart attack, the International Indian Treaty Council

conference still featured a day of testimony from Alaska Native representatives. The presentations were videotaped, and will be forwarded to Martinez for his inclusion in an evaluation of agreements between international governments and indigenous peoples, to be presented to the United Nations during the coming year. Comments from Alaska Natives unable to attend the conferences may still be submitted to Martinez. Questions about the treaty study can be answered by IITC Executive Director Andrea Carmen, at (907) 745-4482.

In between the serious discussions of the week, there was much sharing of songs and stories, and the clear voice of the drum spoke of the common heritage of all indigenous people of the hemisphere. Conference attendees were enriched by an explanation of the ancient Mayan calendar, and treated to a concert by well-known musician and actor Floyd Westerman. Give-aways honored the hosts of the conferences, the Athabascan people of Chickaloon Village. And the people came away strengthened and renewed, in their continued commitment to the conference theme, "Nana Soo Nenna Nat Ska Gon Den,"—"We are the ones who repair the land."



Athabascan children from Arctic Village and Chickaloon dance to honor the caribou, traditional food and cultural center of their lives.

Photo by Tricia King

Watch for details of specific issues presented at the IEN and IITC conferences, in future issues of the *Tundra Times*.