

# ICC, AEPS declare importance of Inuit participation in Arctic environmental protection, development

Ministers of the eight Arctic countries met last month in Inuvik to review the progress of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) and to chart its course for the future. After lengthy discussions and negotiations, the Inuvik Declaration on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development in the Arctic was signed by the eight Ministers. The Declaration, and its accompanying report, acknowledge the importance of indigenous peoples in the work of the AEPS, and call for recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples in the course of environmental protection.

From the Inuit perspective, the Conference and its Declaration and Report were a qualified success. "The AEPS addresses many critical issues for Inuit today," noted ICC President Rosemarie Kuptana in her remarks to the Ministers. "The work undertaken by the AEPS, including the strong contributions by indigenous peoples, reflects the necessity of cooperation between nations and the fact that these issues cannot be addressed without including indigenous peoples as full partners in the process. We are pleased at what has been accomplished, and we know that more work lies ahead to im-

prove the lives of all Arctic indigenous peoples."

Kuptana noted the importance of removing trade barriers to allow sustainable development of local resources such as seals by Inuit communities. She also cited several of the projects ICC is undertaking to further the work of the AEPS and its programs. These include a review of the collapse of the seal skin market, a project on traditional knowledge of beluga whales, and writing a chapter of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program's Assessment Report, a comprehensive

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1

summary of what is known about contaminants in the Arctic Environment. The Ministers noted the ICC's contributions, and expressed their appreciation for the cooperation that exists between the AEPS countries and the indigenous peoples organizations who are Permanent Participants in the process.

ICC Council Member Caleb Pungowiyi of Alaska said, "I am pleased that the governments are implementing some of the recommendations of the Seminar on the Integration of Indigenous Peoples and Their Knowledge, such as the need for ethical principles for Arctic research and a review of co-management systems." The

Seminar was held in Reykjavik, Iceland, in September 1994 to provide recommendations to the AEPS and its programs.

While there was great support for the programs of the AEPS and for ICC's role in them, the conference had difficulty in preparing the Report and Declaration. ICC was disappointed that countries were not more forthcoming in their statements of support for the indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic.

In addition, Kuptana noted in her remarks that the ICC was particularly disturbed by the resistance of the United States to the term "indigenous peoples." The U.S. preferred the singular "people," but would only state that this was a re-

sult of positions being taken in other international fora. This usage ignores the great diversity of Arctic indigenous peoples and threatens recognition of their separate and collective rights to survive. The U.S. did not explain its position, but insisted on a footnote to express its reservations. ICC Council Member Kuupik Kleist of Greenland stated, "This weakens the document." ICC Vice President Ronald H. Brower, sr., of Alaska noted, "We cannot agree with the U.S. position, and we will address this when we return home."

The Arctic Environmental Protections Strategy was formed in 1991 by the eight Arctic nations (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the

Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States of America). It has five working groups addressing various aspects of environmental protection. In addition to the eight countries, there are three indigenous organizations recognized as Permanent Participants: the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Saami Council, and the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation. The Inuvik meeting was the third Ministerial Conference of the AEPS, succeeding the founding meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, in 1991 and the second conference in Nuuk, Greenland, in 1993. The fourth Ministerial is scheduled for Norway in the summer of 1997.