

Session plans research, action to save Arctic life

by Tricia King

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FAIRBANKS — The alarming decline of some Arctic and sub-Arctic plants and animals prompted urgent international meetings in Fairbanks earlier this month.

Scientists and political leaders from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russian and the U.S. - all signers of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) of 1991 - met to discuss future research and action plans.

Alaska Native representatives joined the closed sessions as observers. The talks were sponsored by the U.S. State Department at the University of Alaska.

"We have no choice but to take action together now to head off a potential ecological disaster in the Arctic," said John Turner, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in his opening speech to the annual work planning session of the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) branch of the AEPS.

"We are seeing warning signs throughout the Arctic that the habitat of many species is being harmed, whether from pollution, climate change, large-scale economic development, fisheries and forestry practices, growth of human populations in the north, surface oil pollution or any of a number of other problems," Turner said.

Caleb Pungowiyi of Kotzebue, representing the Arctic Marine Resources Commission at a conference held just prior to the CAFF

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meeting, expressed his hope that the international discussions of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy would be a positive step in "protecting the resources for future generations."

"I think in this process we'll wake them up that we can't be gobbling up everything and leaving nothing behind," Pungowiyi said. "I hope that it's something that in the long run will benefit mankind and the future generations."

As Native people and other longtime residents of the northland know, the face of the Arctic is changing. Entire rookeries of sea lions have vanished, and other species of animals and fish which used to be abundant now seem to be in decline.

Modern research scientists, sharing the concerns of the people who live on the land, have begun to investigate the reasons for these declines and changes. The results of their investigations thus far begin to paint an alarming picture of invisible contaminants, some produced in the Arctic itself by industrial development and some trans-

ported by air and water currents from regions far to the south.

Leaders of Arctic governments are concerned about these findings, and have agreed that steps must be taken to not only inventory the plants and animals which now exist, but also to join in attempts to protect Arctic resources. This determination led to the AEPS, which has two working groups that are planning specific measures they hope will halt or at least slow further degradation to fragile Arctic ecosystems.

Official observers at this year's CAFF Working Group meetings included delegates from German, The Netherlands, Inuit Circumpolar Conference, U.S. Arctic Network, International Arctic Science Committee, International Worldwide Fund for Nature, and Northern Forum.

"We feel we are a part of the Arctic," said Dr. Ko de Korte of the Netherlands. "Over one million Arctic geese, and 2-3 million ducks winter in the Netherlands annually," he said, noting that neither migratory species nor contaminants in the food chain honor international political boundaries.

Integration of indigenous people and their knowledge into all phases of the international research and conservation strategy negotiations continues to be one of the major topics of discussion by CAFF delegates, who recognize that the direct experience of Native peoples is a valuable adjunct to modern science in providing a more complete understanding of what is happening to Arctic ecosystems.

The direct experience of Native peoples is a valuable adjunct to modern science.

Ben Nageak of Barrow, the only Native person seated as an official delegate of a member nation at this year's CAFF meeting, said, "It behooves the member countries to involve their indigenous people as delegates to CAFF." Nageak added, "I'm pretty hopeful that we'll get more involvement. If not, we'll have to keep pushing, because they need our support."

Paul Oongtooguk of Fairbanks, representing the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, issued strong reminders to meeting delegates that the areas under discussion are the personal homes of Native people, who should therefore have the right to be fully included in all phases of discussion and planning.

"Our role in this organization is to continue to remind and hold people to the fact that as they are making determinations about U.S. or international Arctic policy, that they pay attention to the fact that they are making decisions about the home of the indigenous people," he said.

ICC was also represented by Lorraine Brooks of Montreal, Canada.

"The main goals of ICC when they came to this meeting was to insure first of all that sustainable use stayed as a high priority on the agenda, and I think basically it's reflected in the work plans. We're

quite satisfied with that," she said.

"We also came with the intention to get a pilot project going to develop a map series to reflect indigenous knowledge, in an attempt to garner a wider acceptance of this knowledge base as something useful for CAFF, and we succeeded in achieving that in the work plan, so I'm very pleased about that."

ICC also called for governments to provide funding over

of habitat, cataloging of seabird populations, and development of a murre conservation strategy, as the first individual species to be targeted for specific conservation measures.

A separate organization under the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program, is charged with providing continued research into the presence of contaminants and their effects on Arctic food chains.

Work plans developed by the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working groups will be presented to officials from the eight Arctic Countries at the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy Ministers' meeting at Nuuk, Greenland, in September. Next year's CAFF meeting will be held in Iceland; Russia will host the CAFF working groups in 1995.

"We certainly want to work toward conservation of these natural resources," said Flore Lekanof, chairman of the Rural Alaska Resource Association, "to make sure that they are not wiped out, and that they be conserved and used in a wise manner, so that it would be an ongoing kind of a thing that future members of our different ethnic groups will enjoy."

The newly formed U.S. Arctic Network, whose membership consists of representatives from several Native organizations as well as environmental groups, was one of several non-governmental organizations allowed official observer status for the first time at this year's CAFF meeting. Sitting at the negotiating table on behalf of the Arctic Network were Polly Wheeler of Tanana Chiefs Conference and Bob Childers of the Gwich'in Steering Committee.

Childers was among those concerned that the meeting had largely overlooked the Arctic marine environment.

"We urge governments to take positive action to fully protect the Arctic Ocean, which is under increasing threat, and to undertake a study of toxics in the human food chain there," he said.

Native peoples of all countries to more effectively participate in international discussions involving the health of the Arctic.

"By effective participation, I mean being able not just to attend these meetings, but to do all the work that's required in preparation for the meeting, to come prepared and to properly reflect people back in their home regions," said Brooks.

This item has not yet found agreement among the negotiating countries. "It's a point that we're going to have to state and restate," said Brooks noting that the countries must consider their responsibility to indigenous peoples as "obligations; otherwise, they're meaningless."

In addition to Inuit, other Arctic native peoples recognized by the eight nations are the Saami people of Norway and the Small Peoples of the North in Russia. Neither group was represented at the Fairbanks meeting.

Plans being prepared by CAFF working groups include extensive listing and mapping projects of existing species of Arctic flora and fauna, including knowledge of indigenous people relating to locations and traditional uses, developing lists of species considered endangered in one or more Arctic countries, setting aside protected areas for the preservation