

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY 2007 CELEBRATIONS

Alaska Report

Barrow hosted UNEP's North American World Environment Day 2007 celebrations, focusing on the theme: *Melting Ice - A Hot Topic*. The main event centered around a town hall meeting on climate change. Brennan Van Dyke, Director of UNEP's Regional Office for North America explained that the event would focus on the residents of Barrow, who would share their observations on the evolution of climatic conditions, and how they were adapting. Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski sent welcoming video messages. The forum provided an opportunity for the residents of Barrow to share their observations with members of the scientific community in the interest of advancing the dialogue between traditional knowledge and scientific research. Elder Wesley Aiken, Hunter Hubert Hopson, Subsistence Provider Ida Olemaun, and Whaler Lloyd Leavitt brought a unique perspective to the discussions. Unlike the usual focus of climate change's impacts on human populations and the infra-structure thereto, Barrow residents stressed its impact on Arctic wildlife, and its potential to accelerate the loss of the traditional Inupiat hunting culture.

Changes witnessed due to climate change were highlighted: shorter hunting and fishing seasons under unusually precarious conditions; riskier winter travel on lakes and rivers; abnormally aggressive polar bears; skinny and parasite-ridden caribou; and unhealthy fish, resulting in food shortages, scarcity of skins for whaling boats and traditional clothing and overall stress, strain and anxiety over constantly changing ice conditions and weather patterns.

Hajo Eicken, Associate Professor of Geophysics at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks presented disturbing statistics concerning the thinning sea ice and the warming ocean. He showed how scientific data can be combined with traditional knowledge to propel the Arctic to the forefront of climate adaptation research.

A tour of the newly inaugurated Barrow Arctic Research Center, managed under the auspices of the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium (BASC), was also part of the day's activities. BASC is committed to helping scientists interact with the local community and in transferring knowledge between researchers and the people of the North Slope.

John Crump, UNEP's Polar Issues Co-ordinator, presented the publication *Global Outlook for Ice and Snow*, compiled by UNEP and a network of 70 of the world's best experts. The report was distributed to the participants, who have experienced first hand the impacts outlined in the report, e.g. the decline in snow cover, sea ice, glaciers, permafrost and lake ice, all linked to climate change.

Images of stranded polar bears on shrinking sea ice gave way to slides of balmy Caribbean beachscapes, as John Crump introduced the recently formed alliance *Many Strong Voices*, representing Arctic communities and small island developing states (SIDS) from the Caribbean and the Pacific. These islands are experiencing similarly

disruptive problems as the Arctic due to climate change, and have chosen to band together to amplify their voices in global negotiations.

Edward Itta, Mayor of the North Slope Borough, presented the political perspective as Chair of the Alaskan Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC). The ICC represents over 160,000 Inuit living in the Arctic Region of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia, advancing inter alia their interests during international symposia, national policy debates, congressional hearings, etc.

At mid-day, participants were treated to a Community Pot Luck, sponsored by the Barrow City Council and Barrow Blue Ribbon Commission, featuring caribou, fermented whale and duck soup. The day's celebrations ended with a demonstration of native Inupiat dances and an award ceremony honoring Camille Elisabeth Heubner, the nine-year-old Alaskan winner of UNEP's 16th International Painting Competition.

Summing up the positive feedback generated by the day's gathering, Richard Glenn, President of the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium and Moderator of the Climate Change Forum, said: "When you have participants good-naturedly vying for the microphone, you know that they have a vested interest in the subject at hand, and that they appreciate the opportunity that has been provided by today's forum to have their voice be heard."