

World Environment Day in Barrow, Alaska : Inupiat Gathering Puts a Human Face on Climate Change

Barrow, Alaska, 11 June 2007— “We don’t grow vegetables”. With these simple words, spoken during UNEP’s June 5th World Environment Day Climate Change Forum, Inupiat Elder Wesley Aiken epitomized the unique challenges faced by the native community of Barrow, Alaska, situated 340 miles north of the Arctic Circle, and dependent on hunting, fishing and subsistence whaling, all activities which have changed considerably over the past decades due to evolving weather conditions.

As the nation’s northernmost community, Barrow was a logical choice to host UNEP’s North American World Environment Day (WED) festivities, which centered around a town hall meeting on climate change to celebrate this year’s theme: “*Melting Ice, A Hot Topic*”. Brennan Van Dyke, Director of UNEP’s Regional Office for North America, set the tone by orienting the day’s activities: “We know that even if it were possible to stop green house gases today, the average temperature of the earth would continue to rise significantly for decades to come, precipitation patterns would continue to change, and sea levels continue to rise, all due to the inertia of the climate system. Therefore, adaptation to climate change is key, said Ms. Van Dyke. “We are looking forward to hearing from you, the residents of Barrow, as you share your observations on the evolution of climatic conditions, and your suggestions on adaptation, since all over the globe, communities can learn from Barrow’s experiences”.

Barrow Mayor Nathaniel Olemaun Jr., co-hosting the event with UNEP, said: “In Barrow, we know about adaptation. Inupiat hunters at every single outing on the land or sea ice, base their behavior on the conditions of the day. We are looking forward to sharing our experiences during today’s Climate Change Forum”.

Welcoming messages were sent by video from Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski, Honorary Patron of the Barrow event, and Helen Bjornoy, Environment Minister of Norway, the country that hosted this year’s global World Environment Day celebrations a continent away.

The Climate Change Forum provided an opportunity for the residents of Barrow to share their observations with members of the scientific community in the interests of advancing the dialogue between traditional knowledge and scientific research. On the side of community-based knowledge, Elder Wesley Aiken, Hunter Hubert Hopson, Subsistence Provider Ida Olemaun, and Whaler Lloyd Leavitt brought a unique perspective to the discussion on the impacts of climate change. 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.

When the public was invited to participate, many volunteered their stories of the changes they had witnessed due to climate change: 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.

One of the volunteers, 83 year old Inupiat elder Jenny Ahkivgak, delivered her testimony in a native dialect, translated by Ida Olemaun, wife of Barrow Mayor Nathaniel Olemaun. She spoke of her parents who long ago had predicted that “winter would turn into summer and summer into winter” due to climate change, and marveled that their prophecy concerning scientists coming together to discuss climate change seemed to be coming true before her very eyes with the Barrow gathering.

Representing the scientific community, Hajo Eicken, Associate Professor of Geophysics at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, presented some disturbing statistics concerning the thinning sea ice and the warming ocean, which has been absorbing 5% more heat per year since 1982. He demonstrated how scientific data could 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, in part to support the International Polar Year, running from 2007 to 2008. Copies of the report were distributed to the participants, who have experienced first hand the impacts outlined in the report, of the decline in snow cover, sea ice, glaciers, permafrost and lake ice, all linked to climate change,.

According to Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, “...the report underlines that the fate of the world’s snowy and icy places in a climatically challenged world should be cause for concern in every ministry, boardroom and living room across the world.”

Next on the programme, 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 because of climate change, and have chosen to band together to amplify their voices in global negotiations.

This message of solidarity was well received by the residents of Barrow, who cope daily with the isolation of a community, like many other locations throughout Alaska, that has no roads connecting it to other communities.

“There are many strong voices in the Arctic and the Small Island Developing States,” said John Crump. “When we discuss adaptation to climate change, these voices need to be heard – at the local, regional and international levels”.

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 their interests during international symposia, national policy debates, congressional hearings, etc.

Mayor Itta emphasized: “Global discussion on the effects of climate change must start and end with the people that experience it every day”. He spoke of the traditional knowledge of the elders as more than just “window dressing”, encouraging the Inupiat to identify ways of documenting this valuable source of information, in order to facilitate a more widespread utilization, and to promote scientific studies for Barrow’s youth.

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 celebration ended with a demonstration of native Inupiat dances and an award ceremony honoring Camille Elisabeth Heubner, the 9 year old Alaskan winner of UNEP’s 16th International Painting Competition, sponsored by Bayer Corporation.

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.”

Notes to Editors

Details concerning UNEP’s World Environment Day celebrations around the world can be found at www.unep.org/wed/2007.

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