

First Stewards Symposium: Coastal Peoples Address Climate Change

Therefore Be It Resolved, that the First Stewards call on the United States government to formally recognize us and our expertise and to consult with our tribal governments and indigenous communities for guidance in all policies that affect our way of life and to support our management efforts, which will strengthen America's resiliency and ability to adapt to climate change, and that this resolution be sent to the President of the United States and appropriate Congressional committees and government agencies..."

Resolution of the First Stewards Coastal Peoples Address Climate Change Symposium. National Museum of the American Indian. Washington, DC, on July 20, 2012

Native people are experiencing immediate and disproportionate impacts from climate change. This is occurring because of geographic isolation of native people, their dependence on the landscape and marine ecosystems and a lack of support from governmental agencies. Coastal native peoples are especially at risk because of the rapidly changing ocean temperature, sea level rise and ocean acidification, as well as changes in weather patterns and storms.

Four coastal treaty tribes from Washington State, the Hoh, Makah, and Quileute Tribes and Quinault Indian Nation, hosted the First Stewards Symposium in recognition of the rapid changes coastal tribes are experiencing from climate change and changes in marine ecosystems. The Symposium convened coastal people from across the United States to discuss the impacts of climate change and strategies for mitigation and adaptation.

Tribal leaders, governmental and non-governmental agency representatives, academics, and non-profit indigenous advocates came together to demonstrate the impacts of climate change in regions throughout the U.S. and its territories and how indigenous adaptations to climate change can guide society moving forward. The Symposium emphasized strategies to promote actions in society-at-large to adapt to climate change and discussed the opportunity for native people to be leaders and provide models for other native and non-native communities. The First Stewards Symposium led to a resolution illustrating the impacts of climate change on traditional ways of life and culture and calling for the formal recognition and inclusion of indigenous communities in the formation of policies, management and other government action.¹



Lino Olopai, from the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, opens the Pacific Islands panel with a traditional dance.
www.firststewards.org

About the First Stewards Symposium

The Symposium included panels for the West coast, Alaska, Pacific Islands, and a joint panel from the East Coast, Gulf of Mexico and Great Lakes. Each panel dealt with regional climate change issues and indigenous adaptation strategies. Speakers described challenges facing indigenous communities, current approaches to adaptation, and strategies to prepare for future changes. Each panel emphasized how regional tribal solutions have the potential to guide national and international efforts.

¹ <http://firststewards.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/First-Stewards-Resolution-July-20-2012-signed.pdf>

Conference goals focused on bringing together tribal leaders, with the support of scientists and government agencies, to move tribal strategies to the forefront of climate change adaptation and mitigation in the United States. A recurrent theme of the First Stewards Symposium was the importance of Traditional Knowledge (TK) and the potential for native peoples to act as leaders in the challenge of adapting to climate change and to educate the public at large about climate change issues, and how to move forward.

West Coast Panel

The West Coast panel focused on impacts to traditional food species posed by climate change. As David Troutt described, the Nisqually Tribe is actively working to maintain the health of salmon populations in light of warming waters. As the Nisqually River and its tributaries warm they deprive salmon of valuable cold, freshwater habitat. In response, the Nisqually Department of Natural Resources has undertaken extensive work to compensate for increasing river temperatures. For example, they have worked with a neighboring community to improve rainwater treatment in the town, so that it cycles more quickly and is filtered through natural swales. This leads to cooler water, which may counteract increased temperatures resulting from climate change.



Ed Johnstone, Quinault Indian Nation tribal member and fisheries policy spokesperson, addresses the First Stewards gathering. www.firststewards.org

Another concern articulated in the West Coast Panel was erosion and loss of traditional lands. For the Hoh Tribe and Quileute Tribe, loss of coastal land has become an immediate problem. The Hoh are in the process of relocating their community, after having secured 37 acres of National Park Service land. Their community is literally being washed into the ocean, as sea levels continue to rise along the Washington coast. The Quileute have been forced to examine relocation as well. Rising sea level is pushing the coastline closer and closer to their community. A key message from this panel was that native peoples are historically resilient to change, and that continuing to inform decision-making with Traditional Knowledge will assist in adapting to climate change.

Alaska Panel

For Northern Alaska communities such as the Yup'ik, climate change is having immediate and drastic impacts. Mike Williams, a Yup'ik member who sits on the National Tribal Environmental Council Executive Committee, described how in his home of Akiak, a community of 350 people, permafrost is quickly thawing. The loss of permafrost has several negative consequences. It leads to the warping of the landscape, the literal ruffling of the landscape; this results in severe damage to village infrastructure. In Akiak, this has meant that people constantly have to move their homes, smokehouses and other vital structures.

Numerous coastal Alaska Native villages are being forced to relocate because of the severe erosion. According to Stanley Tocktoo of Shishmaref village, more than 120 feet of land can be lost in a single storm event. For residents of Shishmaref, this has meant forced relocation of their village. This is an expensive process, made worse by a lack of government support. Alaskan villages rely in part on government subsidies. These subsidies often end once a community begins planning for relocation; this policy operates along a line of thought that doesn't see the use in supporting infrastructure that is soon to be uprooted. For villagers, this means that in addition to erosion, they have to deal with inadequate sewage, water supplies and other support. A major theme of the Alaska panel was the urgency of climate change. Climate

change effects are very immediate in the North. However, this panel also articulated a strong vision of finding ways to adapt to climate change, in order to recreate self-sufficient communities.

Pacific Islands Panel

For native Pacific Islanders, the stakes of climate change are very high. Sea level rise can mean the total submersion of their communities, or drastic changes to ecosystem and landscape that pose drastic threats to public health. Beyond this, climate change is also appears to be increasing the severity of tropical storms. For American Samoa, this has led to the worst tsunami in their history, which in 2009 killed 33 and devastated the island. In Guam, this has meant unpredictable and extreme rainfall. Typhoons, while always an aspect of climate in Guam, seem to be increasing in intensity. However, for both Samoa and Guam, cultural knowledge represents the basis of resiliency. In Samoa, community-led restoration and conservation is working to provide more stable ecosystems, in order to increase resiliency to climate change events. In Guam, people are drawing on their history as typhoon-surviving people to survive disaster. Although the threats posed by climate change are substantial, tradition and culture provide a powerful tool for Pacific Islanders to adapt to changes in climate.

Drawing on traditional management philosophies was a major focus of this panel. Governor Fital of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands suggested that drawing from ancient lessons, such as using every part of plants and animals gathered, and working together despite adverse conditions, are the keys to combating climate change. Governor Fital's message suggests using traditional teachings to guide modern solutions to climate change. Similarly, Paulokaleioku Timothy Bailey, manager of Haleakala National Park, argued strongly that in order to be good resource managers, native peoples must follow in their ancestor's steps. For Hawaii, this means using complex ecosystems to guide cultural attitudes, and then using cultural knowledge to manage and adapt to change. This forms a loop, in which environment and people are supporting one another. The Pacific Islands Panel was rich in examples of how TK can be used to inform modern management and climate change adaptation.

Great Lakes, East Coast, Gulf of Mexico

This panel discussed the importance of preparing tribal government for the changes brought on by climate change. Jeff Mears of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin described how his tribal government is integrating climate change into all tribal government programs. Instead of creating a new office or department to deal with climate change, the Wisconsin Oneida are integrating climate change into all levels of tribal government. Doing so results in plans for how climate change will affect not only environmental and cultural aspects of tribal wellbeing, but also economy and health. Viewing climate change as having varied impacts will allow the Wisconsin Oneida to better prepare for the diverse effects that climate change may have on their community. Similarly, tribal governments must prepare for climate change effects beyond environmental effects, so that they can continue to exercise their sovereignty and effectively serve their tribal membership. An emphasis of this panel was on how to be proactive moving forward. Adaptation can be reactionary at times, as noted by John Daigle of the University of Maine, and anticipating future changes can lead to better adaptation strategies.



Vi Riebe, Hoh tribal member, talks to Lillian Rivas' mother off camera while the 10-year-old weaves a cedar bracelet as demonstrated by Riebe and her daughter, Judy Cathers. www.firststewards.org

Considerations for the Future

“What does it mean to be a good ancestor? What does it mean to become a good ancestor?”

Micah McCarty, chairman of Makah Tribal Council

The First Stewards Symposium centered questions and dialogue around finding ways to adapt to climate change that benefit not only current generations, but also ensure the ability of our descendants to continue to live in accordance with traditional values. More broadly, these solutions apply to society-at-large, to ensure that future generations are able to enjoy the natural world and their lives within it. As part of this vision, the First Stewards emphasized that indigenous people must unite in order to create a strong message that they are able to help the world adapt to climate change with indigenous solutions that are time-tested, low-impact and sustainable. The First Stewards hope to ensure that this generation can be “good ancestors” by working together to provide a robust planet for future generations.

In August 2012, First Stewards became a 501(c) 3 non-profit corporation and have elected officers, including Micah McCarty, President; Kitty Simons, Vice President; Ann Marie Chischilly, Secretary; Ed Johnstone, Treasurer; and Board members Mike Williams and Jeff Mears. First Stewards includes a Circle of Wisdom, a Circle of Youth and a Circle of Friends. Additionally, First Stewards is in the process of creating a science and policy council. Board members sent the resolution² from the First Stewards Symposium to the President and Congress in August 2012.

Resources

- First Stewards website: <http://firststewards.org/>
- First Stewards Resolution, 7/20/12: <http://firststewards.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/First-Stewards-Resolution-July-20-2012-signed.pdf>
- Video recording of Symposium: <http://firststewards.org/videos/>

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Tribal Climate Change Profile Project:

The University of Oregon and the USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station are developing tribal climate change project profiles as a pathway to increasing knowledge among tribal and non-tribal organizations interested in learning about climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Each profile is intended to illustrate innovative approaches to addressing climate change challenges and describes the successes and lessons learned associated with planning and implementation. For more information about the initiative, visit: <http://tribalclimate.uoregon.edu/>.

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² <http://firststewards.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/First-Stewards-Resolution-July-20-2012-signed.pdf>