

Aboriginal Delegates to UN Conference on Climate Change: 'We're the Experts'

Giuseppe Valiante
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MONTREAL (CUP) — With 80 per cent of their community suffering from asthma or other respiratory problems, Faith Gemmill and Wahleah Johns from aboriginal communities in the North Slope region of Alaska and Northern Arizona attended the recent UN climate change conference in Montreal with a clear message to deliver to other delegates.

"We're the experts on climate change since we're hit first and we're hit the hardest," said Gemmill.

Both women are part of different organizations working to bring alternative and sustainable practices to their territory. They also aim to reverse laws and acts that hinder the self-determination of their people.

Gemmill and Johns acknowledge that heavy industry is a major contributor to rising global temperatures. The consequences can be seen with melting permafrost which forces Alaskan coastal communities to settle inland and some caribou meat to turn a stained yellow, as the animals live around oil fields.

Gemmill is a member of the group RED Oil which stands for Resisting Environment Destruction on indigenous lands. She explained how in 1968 the Prudhoe Bay oil field was discovered that currently emits 70 thousand tons of nitric acid into the air annually—twice that of Washington, D.C.

The Prudhoe Bay discovery also paved the way for the Alaska Native Claim Settlement Act which spawned the legal rights for multinationals to exploit Alaskan territory.

"[The Alaska Native Claim Settlement Act] is an illegitimate infringement on the self-determining right of the aboriginal people of Alaska," said Gemmill.

Gemmill explained how the act created 13 regional for-profit native

corporations that took control to the rights of the Alaskan landscape. She said that there was a clause in the act that stated that the land must yield profit—if not, the land would be bought out by the multinationals exploiting the territory.

"They were forced into negotiations," said Gemmill, "they were told that if they [didn't sign] they wouldn't get any land at all.

Worse, according to Gemmill, is the fact that her own people are allowing this exploitation. The native corporations are made of local people who broker the negotiations with the industries.

"We have people who used to survive on the land and live that way," explained Gemmill.

"They then put on a suit and became corporate leaders. They have become disconnected with the land and therefore it's easier for them to go into these deals."

Gemmill recounted a story about a community on the North Slope of Alaska that was home to a multinational called Alpine. Gemmill explained how the oil patches were turning into killing fields.

"[In this community] in the 80s, there were few cases of asthma, today 80 per cent of the community has asthma or other respiratory illnesses like pneumonia because they are breathing oil field air."

Johns is from the Black Mesa region of Northern Arizona, and is a member of the Black Mesa Water Coalition which is resisting the use of their scarce land water reserves as a transportation means to get coal to the southern states.

Since 1965, Peabody Western Coal Company has been pumping 3.3 million gallons a year of pristine Mesa water to be used to be mixed with coal, called "slurry," and transported through

a pipeline to urban areas like Nevada and California.

"We live in a high desert region," said Johns. "There is less than seven inches of rain each year, why is [Peabody] using this water?" she asked.

"It is sacred to us, why are we letting them use it as a transportation means?"

Johns has learned that organizational pressure can work to help address these issues.

Johns and the Black Mesa Coalition have successfully pressured the Peabody company to sign a resolution agreeing to cease using the Mesa water reserves to transport coal. The resolution went into effect Dec. 1, 2005.

Johns proved that small groups can make a difference. The problem is getting the message across to the larger public.

Manon Tremblay is enjoying her 10th year as coordinator of the center for Native Education at Concordia University. She believes that these aboriginal issues need to be talked about and be taken more seriously by the Canadian public.

"One of the problems in Canada," said Tremblay, "is that [Canadian] don't seem to care all that much, as long as it's not happening in their backyard and it doesn't affect them that specifically."

Tremblay does not see a bright future for the issue of climate change in their local communities.

"I definitely see [climate change] getting worse," declared Tremblay, "I don't think the world is ready to actively reverse the tide."

Johns believes all Canadians have a stake in the future of their land.

"This responsibility needs to be shared with everyone around the world," said Johns.

"We all have a responsibility as a human race to address these issues.

New Brunswick Decides to Extend Daylight Savings Time

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SACKVILLE, N.B. (CUP) — More Canadians will be getting an extra hour of daylight as more and more provinces move to extend Daylight Savings Time by one month. The province of New Brunswick announced its intention to join the U.S., along with several other provinces, in extending Daylight Savings Time from the beginning March until the beginning of November.

Prince Edward Island, Ontario, and Quebec have already announced that they will take part in the shift.

Currently, the Time Definition Act states that Daylight Savings Time is between the last Sunday in October and the first Sunday in April. The new bill would see New Brunswickers move their clocks ahead on the second Sunday in March and "fall back" on the first Sunday in November. The bill will come into effect in 2007.

But contrary to the environmental reasons cited for the shift in the U.S., New Brunswick is moving ahead with the change for more economic reasons.

"Our first concerns are due to our trading relationship with the United States," said Mathieu Picard, a spokesman with the Office of the Premier.

The U.S. introduced the change in August as part of an energy bill designed to cut the energy consumption throughout the United States.

With more sunlight in the evenings, they argued, there would be less need for electric lighting in those peak hours.

The rest of the provinces are still looking at the possible impacts of the shift. With major trade relations south of the border and between provinces, however, it is likely that more provinces will sign on to the switch.

The province of Nova Scotia is currently examining the impacts of a change in Daylight Savings Time. But since Nova Scotia premier John Hamm is retiring from office next month, no announcements will be made until after the leadership convention scheduled for February 11, 2006.

"Nova Scotia is likely to adopt the change," said Hugh Fraser, with the Nova Scotia Premier's Office.

Saskatchewan is the only Canadian province that remains on Standard Time all year round.