



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

International Experts Meeting

**Climate Change
and Arctic Sustainable Development :
scientific, social, cultural and educational challenges**

3-6 March 2009, Monaco

ABSTRACT: CIRCUMPOLAR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Sharon McClintock

President/Alaska Native Claims Land Specialist,
McClintock Land Associates Inc.,
ALASKA

Indigenous land claims in Alaska

Alaska Native peoples have used and occupied lands in Alaska since time immemorial. Currently they occupy and utilise land based upon both private ownership rights and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). ANCSA is the largest land claims settlement in US history and was signed into law in 1971. It extinguished long held aboriginal title and compensated the Native Corporations with \$962.5 million for the land taken away. ANCSA provided for the formation of over 200 profit-making Village Corporations and 12 Regional Corporations who were vested with 44 million acres of land. Village Corporations received the surface estate while the Regional Corporations receive the subsurface estate. ANCSA had another purpose; to create a mechanism for economic development in Alaska, particularly in rural areas. The need for a land settlement was brought to the forefront by the desire by industry to develop the huge oil fields on Alaska's North Slope and the need to clear title to a corridor for an 800 mile oil pipeline to bring the product to market. Selection of ANCSA lands by the Native Corporations was based on several main values; First - for protection/control of culturally important areas, primarily for Subsistence use; Second - for control of coastal and transportation routes and areas; and Third – to control of areas of likely future development, primarily for subsurface mineral resources.

ANCSA lands located along Alaska's coastline realize serious threats to loss of their land base and subsistence activities due to erosion and flooding. Unseasonably warm weather, severe sea storms, and melting permafrost and the Polar ice cap is raising the sea water level, causing subsistence camps and some entire villages along the coast to be threatened by the sea. The sea-coastal villages of Shishmaref and Kivalina are built on sandy barrier islands or spits and are immediately dangerously affected. Attempts by the US Army Corps of Engineers to stabilise the erosion is a temporary fix bringing very stark revelation of

man's inability to control the results of this climate change. Gabions and seawalls designed to last 25 years may last 5 to 10 years or even be destroyed by the next storm. When a village decides to move their entire community, funds promised for the community improvement projects by the State and Federal government cease, leaving community to deal with social problems stemming from the lack of basic amenities such as sewerage, water and housing.

Relocation of villages requires coordinated efforts and tremendous amounts of money. It is difficult to find suitable sites that meet the minimal requirements of providing for subsistence activities while providing an area suitable for the development of modern "necessities" such as modern homes, water/wastewater facilities, schools, and airports. Obviously serious planning must be accomplished prior to a village relocation to make sure the society is sustainable. There is a general lack of understanding of how dramatically climate change is affecting Alaska villages and that third world conditions exist there. There is a crisis and a need to act quickly before the villages are wiped off the map, but there must also be adequate planning to make sure the new communities are sustainable. Land in Native control and ownership is the last hope for the survival of our peoples' identity, culture and economic viability.

Recommendations:

- The US Federal Government must enact special measures to ensure Alaska villages qualify for and receive federal assistance for erosion protection and relocation. Congress should also appropriate funding for villages to acquire lands from ANCSA Corporations or Native allotments for relocated village sites, since the most suitable lands are located on these sites.
- State and Federal Government agencies must fully coordinate efforts to plan and help Alaska villages establish a comprehensive relocation strategy and educate them on all of the necessary requirements. Planning should include the theme of "Sustainability" as a primary theme in all disciplines.
- Archeological studies of coastal historical sites and village sites must be performed to help document the past land use and culture of Inupiat people before they too disappear into the ocean.