

Gwich'in Council International
“Knowledge in the Next Generation”
Major Challenges Regarding the Sustainability of Indigenous Cultures
Trip Report

Traveler

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Funding

Gwich'in Council International

Dates

September 29 – October 2, 2004

Purpose of Trip

To provide representation for Gwich'in Council International and the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation

Background Information

In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly declared 1995 to 2004 to be the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples. This decade would offer opportunities to improve general conditions and protection of indigenous rights, for the indigenous peoples of the world.

On September 29 to October 2, 2004, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, held a conference in Tromso, Norway to look at the major challenges in the year to come: cultural diversity and traditional knowledge systems, education for all and information for all – all in an indigenous perspective. This conference was to aim at assessing the results achieved during the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples.

What I learnt from the United Nations conference

Mililani B. Trask, an Aboriginal from Hawaii, did an impressive presentation that hit an interest with me. She spoke with passion of her people and their view of traditional knowledge. She speaks of how now they protect their traditional knowledge from the hands of researchers because for years researchers have taken their knowledge for profit of their own. Today, in her community this giving of knowledge has stopped and now is only taught by her people to their children, in their schools.

A person from the audience stood up and presented his case of how he works with Indigenous people in a third world country, by assisting them with planting their medicine plants so they may be of abundance for their people. Not knowing everything to preserve this, he asked for help from a company in the Western world, only to find

later that plant ingredients were stolen by the company, made into medicine for the Western world and sold to buyers like me and you. To him this was disrespectful to what he was trying to do and for the Indigenous peoples he worked with. Which brings me to wonder, when researchers/people come to our community wanting to know about our traditional knowledge, being Indigenous we give freely this information because we want to share with others. In the meantime, the researchers/people go back to their cities, write their paper and receive academic titles for our words?! Does this make sense? At least now at the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation level, we have gained control of this through the First Nation's establishment of a Heritage Committee, where they review all researchers/people request to visit and document our cultural, traditional knowledge and life styles.

I quote, Sven-Roanld Nysto, President of the Saami Parliament, “ Traditional knowledge refers to knowledge and skills developed outside formal educational systems, and it is widely identified with indigenous peoples. Traditional knowledge is dynamic; it is passed down orally from generation to generation, and it enables communities to survive...Preserving the lifestyles and cultures of indigenous peoples will help preserve biological diversity and vice versa. A language mirrors its surroundings. And the way in which a culture classifies nature, is an important part of understanding that culture. Thus there are close ties between language, nature and culture”.

I learnt a lot from the conference and discovered more how important our Traditional knowledge is to our lives as Gwich'in people, it is the base of our identity as Gwich'in across the North in Canada, the Northwest Territories and Alaska. Material I gathered from this conference, I have shared with the Heritage department of my First Nation and with others who want to educate themselves on these resources.

Contact Information

Below are web page addresses of organizations that presented papers at the conference:

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

<http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/index.html>

Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS)

<http://www.unesco.org/links>

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

www.unesco.org

The World Heritage Committee

www.wcmc.org.uk/whim