

# National Tribal Subsistence Workshop

Report online at  
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April 13-15, 2003  
50 tribal representatives



# Purposes

- 1. Identify issues and concerns regarding contaminants in Traditional Foods
- 2. Discuss issues, resources, and gaps regarding contaminants and how they affect tribal ways
- 3. Share stories, information, and knowledge to develop the process and structure to protect traditional ways of life

# 1. Identify issues and concerns regarding contaminants in Traditional Foods - Summary



- PCB levels in fish
- Oil & Gas development
- Mining activity
- Pulp mills
- Superfund sites
- Sewage discharge
- Air pollution
- Herbicides & Pesticides
- Long term exposure
- Replacement foods

# Issues & Concerns (cont.)



- Is the food safe to eat
- What is a “safe level”
- Reliability of risk assessments
- Effect on culture and traditional lifeways
- Inability to control contaminants & future
- Tribal rights and jurisdiction

## 2. Discuss issues, resources, gaps regarding contaminants and how they affect tribal ways



"In 1987, I went to Pt. Hope. The people there lost everything up there due to toxins seeping into the earth from tanks rotting. Now they are having problems in St. Lawrence Island, too. I just came from the toxin conference in Fairbanks. Maybe it's too late to clean up, I don't know. All we have to do today is teach our younger people that are going to be Elders too, teach them - tell stories to each other. Gather your Elders and let them tell you about life. Respect. Because you notice everyone notices; greed always gives problems. You have to learn to understand yourself first and then share. That's what our Elders used to tell us, all of us, everyone knows that, but do something about it."

*Rita Blumenstein, Elder, Alaska.*

# Sites & Specific Contaminants



“My community has had environmental contamination problems since at least the 1970s. The St. Lawrence Seaway opened in the late ‘50s followed by the Sanders Moses Power Dam which brought cheap hydroelectric power and three to four industries settled in the area. Since then we have had several sources of environmental contamination. Three sites have superfund issues. My community mobilized in the mid-‘70s to start remediation of the problem.”

*Doris Cook, Elder, Akwesasne.*

- Contaminated grounds and leaching from old military sites
- Fuel dumps, hazardous waste from plane crashes
- 50’s & 60’s radar bases on reservations
- Storage tanks leakage
- Superfund sites
- Power dams and hydro-power industries
- Paper and pulp mills
- Logging
- Uranium mines and water contamination

# Sites (cont.)



“Today we are trying to deal with impacts to the land because of the policies along the Mexican border. As the customs and border patrol clamp down on the major avenues of traffic along the border, it is forcing more and more people across our land. We have two million acres. Sixty-five miles of our southern boundary is shared with Mexico. We have a problem with the people and substances coming across that land. You have more and more vehicles whether it's the smugglers or government agents tearing up that land.”

*Angelo Joaquin, Elder, Tohono O'odham Nation.*

- Boundary connection to Mexico
- Open dumps
- Abandoned mines
- Bombing ranges
- Cruise ships
- Drilling rigs and muds
- Old communication cables
- WWII dumping sites
- Exxon Valdez oil spill
- Radioactive contaminants



# Animals, Fish, Plants



“There are numerous ways Basketweavers and their families may be exposed to herbicides in plant materials that have been sprayed. Weavers may be exposed during gathering, processing or weaving. Baskets may be used for cooking, for acorns, for baby rattles and baby baskets, and for ceremonial use.” *Vivian Parker, California Indian Basketweavers Association.*

- Seal & seal oil
- Plants & berries
- Moose liver
- Species decline – diversity, quality, quantity
- Drought
- Endocrine disruptors
- Plant roots
- Discolored plants
- Basket weaver grasses
- Mercury in fish

# Other Concerns



“We are also working to halt the use of pesticides in forestry. While fire suppression has led to unnatural fire hazards from fuel build-up in our western forests, we are concerned that we are seeing proposals now to use herbicides to kill vegetation supposedly in order to prevent fire. This can actually lead to *increased* fire hazard, because the openings in the forest and the dry conditions on the ground caused by herbicide use increases the conditions for devastating fires to occur.”  
*Vivian Parker, California Indian Basketweavers Association.*

- Commercial products (everyday products like soap)
- Lead shot
- Long distance sources – trans-boundary, arctic sink
- Indoor environment – carbon monoxide, air quality, molds, mildew
- Natural environment – sediment in lakes, contaminants, fire suppression, drinking water, groundwater, air, soil
- Human health

# Other Concerns



“Some of us, like myself, believe that development is going to happen. There’s not a lot we can do to stop it, but there are things we can do. On the North Slope, the North Slope Borough and oil companies have developed a conflict avoidance agreement for exploration in the Arctic Ocean to avoid whaling conflict and habitat conflict as ships and drilling moves. When oil companies come in and say, “we want to develop this area” they have to understand it’s a critical habitat. They impact the tax base for the North Slope Borough, so what we do to try to counteract that is to say, “if you ever impact our ecosystem off the shore here you will pay.” It’s an understanding with the developers.” *Rex Snyder, Alaska Native Harbor Seal Commission.*

- Regulation - Is there such a thing as an “acceptable level” of contaminants?
- Monitoring of pharmaceutical traces
- Critical habitat
- Conflict avoidance agreements

# Spiritual & Traditional Practices

- Respect plants & earth
- Bring Native tradition to science
- Use traditional knowledge wisely
- Patience in teaching our children
- Health of the people depends on health of the culture
- We are only as healthy as Mother Earth
- Maintain oral tradition in teaching children
- Religion changed who we are
- Sanctity of ceremonies are compromised by contaminated elements
- Circle of life includes all plants, fish, animals, insects, humans

### 3. Share Stories, information and knowledge



“I mentioned the sacred circle of life. If you can imagine a circle, in that circle are the people, plants, animals, birds, fish, and insects. The Native belief is that if you damage anything within that sacred circle of life, eventually you damage yourself. If you take any one of those items, animals, out of the sacred circle of life--everything would die. If you take out the insects, eventually everything will die. If you take out the plants, eventually everything will die. If you take out the fish, eventually everything will die. What would happen if you take the humans out of the sacred circle of life? What would happen then? Nothing. We are the least important in that sacred circle of life. The ancient beliefs are that we were the last to come along. The animals, plants, fish, birds and insects didn't depend on us. Our lives depend on a harmonious relationship with everything within the sacred circle of life. That's the basis of Native spirituality. It's not a worship of animals. It is a relationship, a strong feeling with the natural world.”

*Butch Phillips, Penobscot Indian Nation.*

# Sharing stories (cont.)



"For me, as a young person and hunter my Elders and parents made it fun. It's a responsibility, but you have to do it in a way that means something. I grew up around a table with the stories of my Elders. There was no TV in Huslia. The way we think now, to go back to that oral tradition is important to maintain what you're calling subsistence. It's more than that out there. I can't say it's just food, when it's the wolf skin I'm dancing with in my hand signing my Native song my Grandmother taught me, and it's part of taking care of the land. It's part of the responsibility we have as Native people. I have to get those young warriors to think the way I was brought up."

*Orville Huntington, Huslia, Alaska.*

# Sharing Stories (cont.)

“There were two radars in the Pacific and one was on Harbor Mountain above Sitka. To communicate with the outposts they laid miles and miles and miles of lead cable in the water and its still there. We found our answer. Some of these islands had observation points. It was a secure line that couldn't be tapped. They didn't want to transmit with radio because it could be intercepted. It's everywhere in the environment. “We're still assessing what can be done with the lead. They may yet take it out. It lies on the bottom but is sometimes suspended. Anemones and seaweed are growing on it. The anemones are absorbing it--it gets worked back into the environment. One of the professors at Sheldon Jackson College said that although fishermen lose lead leads, that lead is inert and should react and degrade. The lead from the cable is in an active surf zone. The electrolysis on the lead is turning it into a white powder--unfortunately you want to pick it out now while it has form and before it dissolves and shows up as a reading.”

*Jack Lorrigan, Sitka Tribe of Alaska.*

# Sharing stories (cont.)

"Cattle grazing has been occurring in the valley for 100 years. All riparian vegetation had been completely wiped out except for a few very old willow trees. Water flow in the channel was restricted to a few weeks a year. . . .

"In 1992, the Campo Band applied for funding under the Clean Water Act. By the end of 1992, there were four structures in place along a one-half mile stretch of the Diabold drainage. When the winter rains hit in 1992-1993 the structures all filled with silt to the top. The following spring, thousands of willow saplings began to emerge from the silt. Campo Environmental Protection Agency supplemented the natural resurgence with hundreds of cottonwood cuttings. All types of riparian plants began to emerge: watercress, nettles, tules, cattails, wire grass, and so on.

"By 1995, some of the willows were topping 15 feet in height. Bobcats, red winged blackbirds, ducks, raptors, and deer were common sights at the area. An open water habitat has been created in a portion of the project area that is fed by the groundwater seepage. This habitat has, in turn, attracted herons, egrets and other water fowl. Some tribal members dropped bass and catfish into the pond and it has become a favorite spot for kids to fish."

*Tonya Largo, Campo Indian Reservation.*



# Sharing stories (cont,)

"I feel that I am my ancestors. In our culture, in Yupik and Aleut culture we are told that all of our ancestors and their spirits walk with us; celebrate life with us; and dance with us. I feel like that at times. You know, it's like déjà vu. As a child I used to sit and listen on the edge of the lake and my favorite sound in the spring was the robin. I would sit there and eat snacks in the dark and wonder why no one wanted to sit with me and wonder at this land and the robin starting to sing in the morning. I always feel close to my relations."

*Lydia Olympic, Native Village of Igiugig.*

# Sharing stories (cont.)

"My dad would tell me stories at night while mom was working. He used to get tired of reading me the same books; so he started telling me hunting stories

from when he was younger. It was then I realized there was a big difference between who he was and who I was. "He was talking about his heroes in these stories: Uncle Louis and Uncle Ted and how they were hunters and providers of meat. They risked their lives to bring home the food that sustained us as people. When he first used the word

hero, I remember thinking 'Spiderman' or 'Batman' or 'Captain Cook'. But then I realized my definition of hero was wrong. When I went to school we

learned about Captain Cook. Later, when I was a tour guide for the Alaska Railroad as I talked to tourists about Cook Inlet and Turnagain Arm and how

Captain Cook and his people thought they had discovered the Northwest Passage, it came to me that "we" weren't "discovered" by Captain Cook. We

always knew we were here."

*Shawna Larsen, Alaska Community Action of Toxics.*

# Workgroup Summaries

- Capacity building – training, information clearinghouse, labs, coalitions, legislation, QAPPs, resources, funding, national organizations, gov't-to'gov't relations
- Agency – interagency communications, lead organizations, resources available, education, immersion in Native communities

# Workgroup summaries (cont.)

- Structure
- Organization – communications, meetings, participation, continuity, appreciation
- Communication – raising awareness, tribal communication, state/federal agencies, native liaisons, United Nations, Permanent forum/working group, publicize issues, use media, PSAs, public educational channels, national Native groups

# Workgroup summaries (cont.)

- Education – educate all worlds, use and value western and traditional cultural ways, use traditional knowledge appropriately
- Outreach – develop action plan to reach all levels, use existing resources, establish Native liaisons in gov't agencies, use culturally appropriate methods and protocols

# Workgroup summaries (cont.)

- Define subsistence
    - customary & traditional use
    - traditional lifeways
    - sustenance for mind, body & spirit
    - Native lifeways
    - protecting cultural resources
- Need a new word or symbol

# Recommendations

- Use “customary & traditional use” instead of subsistence
- Remember the 7<sup>th</sup> generation in assessment of environmental impacts
- Develop seed banks as a tangible connection to our ancestors
- Litigate regarding Clean Water Act
- Tribal commitments to communities and to educate agencies
- Continue Indian General Assistance Program
- Priority list for Native lands for superfund sites
- Incorporating TK into hazarding ranking

# Recommendations (cont.)

- Use precautionary principle – to err on side of caution
- EPA funds could be more like 638 funds
- Include smaller tribes
- Rewrite Indian histories
- Toxic cleanup of air quality
- Use environmental enforcement officers
- Train our own as scientists, samplers
- Standardize QAPPs
- Establish “Native American Traditional and Wild Food Security Act” in Congress
- Establish national database to track contaminants



# Learning the Yupik Caribou Dance

