A PERSPECTIVE FROM AN ALASKAN NATIVE

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Abstract

Earl Kingik, an Inupiat subsistence whaler and hunter from Point Hope, voices the concerns of many of the native people of Alaska. He discusses how Arctic development policies have impacted and continue to impact the indigenous people. He advocates sustainable, responsible development of resources that does not harm the garden that is the Arctic and that is respectful of the native populations.

I was invited to give a presentation on very short notice and wasn’t really prepared, but I will give you a little perspective about my area and my community. I come from Point Hope, Alaska. It is thousands of years old. Our population used to be four thousand people before commercial whalers came in. We’ve been hunting in Point Hope for thousands of years. We are not nomads—we live in our community year round. We consider the ocean our garden, the garden that provides food for my community, the garden that provides unity for my community, the garden that keeps our cultural way of life together in my community.

It is a great honor to speak in front of lawyers. When I first started fighting offshore and climate change I was always looking for lawyers to help us. Now I see a lot of them. Where were you when I needed you? I heard about the Manhattan going through the Northwest Passage. I was studying to be an archaeologist and anthropologist in those days. We heard about the Manhattan going through the Northwest Passage over in the archaeological field in Nome (1969). We thought they couldn’t do it, but that a friend and I could do it. But the Manhattan made it and we didn’t make it. We started off from Nome, Alaska, all the way to Cambridge Bay with a skin boat 32 feet long with 50 horsepower. We are the only people who went in a skin boat from Nome to Canada. I was worried how I was going to make the trip, but my father gave me assurances. He said,
“You aren’t out there alone, there are always animals out there to teach you where to go.” My father said to me, “When you reach Cape Blissford you don’t have to go through that long bend, just follow the walruses. The walruses will take you to Wainwright.” And yes, they did take me to Wainwright. I reached Barrow and I called my father. I was going to follow him, but he said, “Make your own mind, make your own decision about what you are going to do.”

So I have experienced traveling in the Arctic. I have experienced seeing all the different species. I have relatives all the way from Nome, Alaska, to Canada. I couldn’t believe how many relatives I have. My uncle in Copper Mine, he is blind and has never seen me before. My cousins took me over to visit him. We started talking and he wanted to feel my face. He said, “Yes, you are my cousin’s son. I haven’t seen my cousin for 55 years.”

So it’s good that we as Canadians and Americans and Russians are beginning to work together and realize what could happen in the Arctic. I started witnessing climate change about 15 years ago. Our ice was getting thinner and the weather was changing and we were beginning to see different species of wildlife, mainly fish. Where are these sharks coming from? We never had sharks before. Where are these narwhales coming from? We never saw those before. We had different species of fish that we had never seen before. When I first caught my king salmon it was so big my mother said, “Well, we have enough to feed us for one week.” But she was proud that I got the fish.

Climate change is a big thing in Point Hope right now. It is creating erosion problems. It is bringing different species of animals that come to our area to feed off of food that our local species eat. It has a lot of effects. And development does too. We have a history of climate change that will result in trees in my area. We have a history that tells us development is going to happen in our area. When I heard that they are going to do some offshore development in my area I started thinking about the stories—that when oil development happens in my area we will lose our way of life, we’ll lose our food source, and we’ll lose our cultural way of life. It was sad when we heard about the oil development coming to my community. We had our government come to my community to have meetings. Mineral management people came. They brought these thick books, I think they call them EISs. They brought them and said “We want this approved; we want community support; let’s go out and do some development.”