

DRUM article – September 22, 2010 – Gaile Whelan Enns

Indigenous Peoples on Climate Change ‘Frontiers’

It seems every new risk that comes along affects those least able to defend themselves or their communities. Dramatic food price increases in Asia and Africa affect the poor first, while more families slide into poverty. Those food price increases during the last year have many causes, including climate change. Countries are starting to block food exports due to these price increases.

Signs of Global Warming

Hundreds of people dying in Moscow this summer during weeks of extreme heat and smoke from forest fires sounds like a science fiction story. Except it happened this year. It was the elderly living alone, small children, and those whose health was already compromised who died. Indigenous people in Columbia and western Amazon are seeking help to block more Amazon forest being turned into grazing lands for cheap beef. And Indigenous peoples in Peru are demonstrating to stop an industrial, foreign-owned irrigation project that will leave their villages and town without water. Climate change increases impacts and can be among a set of causes for these situation.

Risk to Canada

Canada, from ocean to ocean, US border to the Arctic, is at great risk due to climate change and global warming. First Nations and our Aboriginal communities are mostly located in northern Canada, in boreal regions. All 600 First Nations will be impacted by climate changes.

Climate change impacts on Canada, especially northern regions are growing so the risks to Aboriginal communities are also growing. Sounds like a generalization, eh?

Well, sometimes generalizations are too true. Canada’s climate scientists, and academics, even Environment Canada have been telling us a some climate change facts for a while now.

Some climate facts are:

- 1) Increases in temperature in Canada will be above global average temperature increases,
- 2) The farther north you are in Canada, the greater the temperature increase due to global warming will be. Imagine 5 – 8 degrees Celsius increases.
- 3) Impacts, starting with movement of species, changes in their habitat, food sources, and ability to reproduce and be healthy are starting across Canada’s north. Plants and trees are also expected to move north.
- 4) The greater the temperature increase in your region, the greater, more varied, and quicker your region will experience climate impacts.
- 5) Length of time and thickness of winter ice are varying, affecting safety for people and equipment, length of winter road season, ability to move supplies, equipment, building materials, fuel etc into northern communities.

- 6) Many isolated communities that do not have all season roads are facing transportation uncertainty, increased travel costs, loss of lives on poor winter roads, and planning frustrations.
- 7) Severe weather events are worsening, with less ability to predict temperature changes or snow/rain. Forest fires and flood events also increase costs to northern communities.
- 8) Permafrost is and will continue to melt. The intermittent permafrost across northern provinces and territories needs study, with planning for the future. Existing infrastructure, and roads, plus any future projects all need to take melting permafrost into account.
- 9) Traditional territories, especially in forest and tundra regions, will undergo significant changes due to climate change. (Not enough attention is being paid to risks to country food, ability to exercise aboriginal rights on the lands and waters, and economic consequences.)
- 10) It is also generally true that anything that affects lands and waters also affects the people, and the communities. Anything that affects the natural world will also affects the economy, money and non money based.
- 11) Most of the intact carbon in Canada is in our northern forests, and waterways (including muskeg!). Stewardship of these lands and waterways will keep the carbon where it is, and reduce impacts from climate change.

Original Environmentalists

Aboriginal Peoples are Canada's original environmentalists. Well, traditional knowledge, seasonal rounds for land use, and stewardship of the forests, waters, and species will be needed to be ready for climate change, and able to adapt, and stay well. Traditional knowledge and legend of course go back to the end of the last ice age, when ice runners went to the ice every summer to see where it has retreated.

So Canada's original environmentalists are not only likely to be most affected by climate change. It also means our First Peoples may well hold knowledge essential to preparation, adaptation, and solutions in the face of climate change. Elders have been identifying the signs of air pollution, and climate change for a long time. Perhaps those who saw the destruction of world war two were more tuned to seeing risks of future dramatic changes. Land users and hunters, fishers also have pointed to changes in the wildlife and fish while observing the weather and climate changes in their gathering, hunting and fishing places.

Some Questions

Do solutions lie with those most affected? Should communities start to consider their decisions with climate change included in basis for decisions? What can be done to ensure that country food will be available in the future? How can communities take care of and keep carbon in their traditional territories intact? Will First Nations be compensated for ensuring that forests, waterways and carbon all stay intact? What changes in the health of northern people link to climate change? Will community planning and funding include climate change risks, solutions?

Indigenous Peoples Climate Declaration

The People's World Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth convened in Cochabamba, Bolivia, from 19-22 April 2010. The conference provided a forum to discuss the causes of climate change and propose measures for the well being of mankind in harmony with nature.

A 10-page Conference declaration calls on developed countries to take measures such as:

- committing to quantified emission reductions that will limit global temperature increase to a maximum of 1°C;
- bear the costs and ensure technology transfer necessary to compensate developing countries for lost development opportunities due to a compromised atmosphere;
- take responsibility for climate change migrants, through conclusion of an international agreement.

The declaration also urges approval of a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol in which developed countries commit to reduce domestic emissions by at least 50% against 1990 levels without resorting to market-based mechanisms. It further calls for recognition and integration of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in climate change negotiations.

The final declaration foresees a second People's World Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in 2011 to discuss results of Conference of the Parties (COP) 16 in Mexico City, December 2010.

To view a full copy of the Declaration go to: <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/30/final-conclusions-working-group-n^o7-indigenous-peoples/>

There are 18 recommendations. Canada's National Chief Shaun Aletto attended, as did many of Canada's First Nation leaders and activists, who work to reduce climate change impacts on Mother Earth.