

Conference on Water Rights Understanding Climate Change and Its Impacts on Tribal Communities

Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change, and the adverse effects will fall disproportionately on them. And even though their contributions to the problem are usually very small, indigenous communities are showing they can be a significant force in changing the course on climate change. One recent example: On October 24 and 25, the Center for Water Advocacy, the Squaxin Island Tribe, and the Indian Law Sections of the Washington and Oregon State Bars sponsored the Fourth Annual Northwest Tribal Water Rights Conference at the Squaxin Island Tribe's Little Creek Casino Resort in Shelton, Washington. The theme of this year's conference was *Climate Change: Impacts to Water, Fish, Culture, Economies, and Rights*.

The conference provided a regional forum for tribes to unite in confronting climate change and protecting tribal fisheries, instream flows, treaty rights, and water quality. Conference presenters shared a wealth of information and perspectives on the state of the climate and the science of climate change, the impacts of climate change, and strategies and solutions for addressing and adapting to climate change.

Science of Climate Change

In his presentation on the science of climate change, Mr. Kyle Dittmer, a hydrologist and meteorologist for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, posed the question, "Did Al Gore get it right?" Mr. Dittmer reviewed the science and conclusions from Mr. Gore's recent film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and concluded, as most scientists agree, that the film got all the major points correct. Not only is global warming already occurring, but recent evidence suggests that changes are occurring faster than anyone predicted. To find out more about the science behind *An Inconvenient Truth*, visit climate crisis at www.climatecrisis.net/thescience/.

Armand Minthorn (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation), Caileen Sisk-Franco (Winnemem Wintu Tribe), Billy Frank, Jr. (Nisqually Tribe), Terry Williams (Tulalip Tribes), and others spoke about the impacts of climate change to their lands, communities, and cultures—from changes in the timing of spring snowmelt, to receding glaciers and shrinking ice sheets, to the loss of culturally important plants and animals, to the availability of clean, fresh water.

As leaders in the need to address climate change, native communities are taking a variety of actions: Northwest tribes are working with the U.S. Geological Survey to assess tribal water resources in Western Washington; indigenous communities in the Arctic are sharing their traditional knowledge with university researchers studying changes to Arctic ecosystems; and firms like NativeEnergy are providing ways to reduce and offset carbon dioxide emissions—the primary cause of climate change—by funding renewable energy projects on tribal lands.