

Opening Address by James Wah-Shee, President of the Arctic Peoples' Conference

Welcome brothers and sisters of the Arctic family.

Before I begin, I would like to express our thanks to the organizers for their great effort and dedication in preparing for this historic conference.

When members of the family encounter problems, these concern every one of the family.

As a group, we own our lands and resources. In the past, we have allowed those things which are ours to be administered by outsiders.

It is regrettable that we have not had the opportunity to meet over a long period of time. In the past, we have left too much responsibility for the management of our resources to outside administrators. Through lack of direction on our part, our resources have been mismanaged. Priority, until now, has been placed upon our resources rather than upon our family members.

The time has come when we, the family, must join together to decide what directions we should give to the tenants of our lands. For years, we have watched the colonial powers meet among themselves without including us, the landlords of the Arctic area.

In the past, the administrators were our respective states and the recipients of their services were the gas, oil and mining industries. Recently, we have begun to experience an energy crisis - a crisis which has resulted, in large part, from the short sightedness of our administrators and from over-expanding industries and modern facilities used throughout the world.

We are very conscious of the history of our people within the Arctic region. Once we were hunters and nomads over a vast northern region. We took pride in ourselves and our way of life. We were self-sufficient. For centuries, our lifestyle continued undisturbed by outsiders. We were proud to provide our families with what they needed. Nature gave us animals from the sea and the land. We took only what we required, never more. We respected the land. We loved it. We are, after all, a part of our environment. The land gave us not only food, but our clothing as well. It was the foundation, too, of our culture.

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As a nomadic people, we had our own forms of education, social and governmental structures and arts.

We taught our children what our forefathers taught us. We showed them how to live from the land. Through us, they learned to respect it.

We chose leaders who had the support of the group and who gave us direction and strength. We chose them not only for their ability to live well by the land, but for their courage to face our many problems.

We lived as one community. We cared for everyone.

Because of this sense of community, we have travelled thousands of miles to work together as a family once again. Unity, after all, is an important part of our culture.

In the western world, history has not treated kindly the story of the Arctic peoples. How ironic, it is, that history depicts us as a lost race, a people discovered by explorers who once depended on our knowledge and resources. The challenge to explore the world began when Christopher Columbus lost his direction while trying to find a route to the East Indies and ended up on the eastern shores of the Americas. We, the Arctic people, prefer to be known as hosts to those "explorers", rather than as a lost race anxious to be discovered.

In this period, news of the abundance of our resources reached the European world. The fur industry expanded into all areas of the Arctic region. The assumption then was that those lands which we occupied were there to be taken by outsiders. At one point, an English fur company, now called the Hudson Bay Company, claimed an area encompassing over two-thirds of western and northern Canada without negotiating a settlement with the area's inhabitants.

Soon after this contact was established between the Arctic aboriginal people and the fur traders, religious groups decided to convert our peoples. They paved the way for the states to lay claim to the Arctic regions. In doing so, they discouraged our peoples' religious practices.

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Since we are not a domineering people, we once again hosted them and tolerated their beliefs. As soon as these groups established themselves and imposed their values upon us, it was easy for the different states to force their sovereignty upon us. At that point, colonization began in our areas. It must be remembered that the European countries at that time were interested more in resources than in gaining more citizens for their countries.

Today, we feel the effects of that colonization. We now face many problems in areas of health, education, culture. We deeply regret our loss of independence and decision-making opportunities. For today, outsiders decide on the management of our resources and our way of life. We are told we should forget who we are and consider ourselves citizens of the state. We are told by outsiders, what is good for us in determining our future.

The states are more concerned with the extraction of our natural resources than with the wellbeing of our people. Amid the energy crisis, the sudden scramble for new resources poses a clear threat to our lifestyle.

Only recently, did we wake up and begin to organize ourselves to control our affairs in the best interest of our people. Within the last three years, we have seen the formation of native organizations to express our concerns. Many of us have begun to utilize legal and diplomatic channels. Some of our members have succeeded in settling a land claims with the states. Others are either negotiating or researching to lay a claim in the future. We have made great progress. Where once our organizations stretched no further than our villages, now they span many countries. And I would like to think that this conference is but the beginning of a future of co-operation and unity.

Although we have gone far in struggling for our rights, we all know we have a long way to go. Although we cannot change history, we can apply the experiences of the past to prepare ourselves for the future. And, given the proper resources, we can control our destiny. For the future, we want greater participation to manage our affairs. We want due recognition of our peoples' right to their lands. We want and demand the opportunity to settle our land claims with our respective states. We request necessary resources to prepare ourselves to obtain claims that will benefit our people for many generations to come.

We can no longer accept outsiders determining our destiny and our way of life. Token tolerance of our culture must change to full acceptance by the states.

We want full participation in regulating and managing the extraction of our natural resources. Since we live within the Arctic areas, we know so well how easily the balance of nature is upset by the slightest disturbance of the environment.

It is the intent of this conference to establish a close working relationship among the family members. Today, because of improved communication and transportation, we can no longer concentrate our efforts in isolation.

We have been in the Arctic for thousands of years despite the threat of outsiders, even despite cultural destruction and genocide. We intend to remain here for thousands of years to come.

What we are experiencing now as a people struggling for our rights is best put in the words of one of our great western Indian chiefs:

"We do not beg nor thank you for these God-given rights. We have paid and repaid with our land, culture and as a people, until we have become a poverty-stricken and beaten race."

In the future, it is in the best interest of the respective states to consider very seriously our opinions and decisions on the destiny of our Arctic regions.

-- November 22, 1973