

Indigenous people describe real perils of global warming

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NUSA DUA, INDONESIA — Indigenous people, including Canadian Inuit and Indian leaders, are emerging as some of the top stars of the Bali climate-change conference.

From the Arctic to the South Pacific islands, indigenous people said they are among the first to suffer the worst effects of global warming.

They drew connections between the planet's north and south, describing how the melting glaciers in the Arctic are jeopardizing the existence of small island states in the Pacific, and how severe ocean storms are imperilling people in both regions.

When the indigenous leaders spoke at a side event at the Bali conference this week, the room was packed with a standing-room-only audience of environmentalists and others. The leaders also spoke at other conference events, giving accounts of how global warming is threatening their traditional ways of life.

Arctic aboriginal villages are facing erosion, fragile ice is endangering their hunters, caribou herds are at risk from shifting weather and severe storms are becoming more frequent in the north and the south, they said.

"Some Inuit have already made changes to the traditional times of the year which they travel on the land," said Violet Ford, a Canadian Inuit leader from northern Labrador and a vice-president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council.

"Some find themselves collecting their winter wood and other supplies in the spring when they only used to do so in the fall. Why? Because the fall freeze-up is later and more dangerous."

The shifting climate is interfering with ancient hunting patterns, Ms. Ford said in an interview. "We can't predict the weather any more, so it's very difficult to plan our hunting. It puts a lot of stress and fear into our communities."

Similar threats are faced by the aboriginal people of the Western Arctic, who depend on caribou as their main source of food. "Over the last few years, the caribou have been very unpredictable," said Cindy Dickson, a member of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in a remote corner of the Yukon.

"Their migration routes are all over the map," she said. "It has led our people to go up river, down river, sometimes hundreds of miles, to look for the increasingly elusive herd."

Aboriginal leaders were not consulted when the Kyoto treaty was negotiated in 1997, but they are insisting that they must be consulted in future negotiations on how to cope with global warming.

"We bring a unique knowledge to these discussions," said Patricia Cochran, an Alaskan Inuit who is chairwoman of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. "We have to make sure that our voice is heard."

Because of global warming, Inuit people no longer feel safe travelling on ice where they travelled for centuries, and some Inuit communities are sliding into the sea, forcing their relocation to new sites, Ms. Cochran said.

"It's a very frightening thing for all of us. It's the loss of our culture and livelihood. How can we remain intact as aboriginal people?"

Dave Porter, a Kaska Dene leader from northern British Columbia, came to Bali to tell delegates that his people are under massive pressure from a climate-induced infestation of the mountain pine beetle.

"We are faced with our greatest threat ever," he said in a speech to a conference side event. "The area of dead trees in British Columbia is the size of Portugal or South Korea. It rivals the destruction of the Amazon and Indonesian rain forests. More than 100 First Nations communities are directly impacted. If the epidemic eats its way across Canada, the impacted communities could be in the thousands."

Because winters are not cold enough to kill the beetle infestation, millions of hectares of pine trees have died, Mr. Porter said.

"It dwarfs any other insect epidemic ever seen before in Canada. The interior of British Columbia is now filled with immense regions of dead and dying forests, creating a massive tinderbox just waiting for a spark to literally set it ablaze. Left unchecked, this devastation could spread through Canada's boreal forests from coast to coast, a distance of nearly 9,000 kilometres."

For centuries, aboriginal people were able to adapt to the environment, he said. But they have never faced anything like the current threat. "Now in a very short period of time, the industrial society has put us at risk."