

Canadian Inuit ally with tropical islanders to fight climate change

Bob Weber, Canadian Press

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(CP) - Canadian Inuit from the icy Arctic are working with governments from the sunny tropics at a conference in Belize this week in an attempt to force faster international action on climate change.

Although sandy island beaches may not seem to have much to do with sea ice, both groups at the United Nations-funded event say they face the same urgent threats to their way of life.

"We share the same sorts of effects with the developing island states," Stephanie Meakin, a Canadian science adviser to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, said Tuesday from the central American country.

"It's the same types of concerns - the relocations of communities; the changes in marine resources the communities depend upon."

Other climate change effects shared by the Arctic and the tropics include changes in the timing, severity and frequency of extreme weather. Most communities in both areas are along coasts, which makes them vulnerable to rising sea levels.

The Inuit Circumpolar Conference represents about 155,000 Inuit living in Canada, Alaska, Greenland and Russia.

The conference has brought four of the six Arctic aboriginal groups found around the world together with officials from small island governments such as Fiji, French Polynesia and some Caribbean countries. The three-day event is funded by the United Nations Environment Program.

Small island states, where climate change affects almost everyone directly, are much more sympathetic to concerns than larger, mainland countries, said Arctic consultant Terry Fenge, a Canadian observer at the conference.

Allying themselves with those island states can give aboriginal groups a voice at international conferences where they would normally only have observer status. The island states can ask questions or propose motions on behalf of Arctic aboriginals.

"(Small island states) working with Arctic interests is almost a back-door entrance to the policy systems of the United States, Canada and Scandinavia," Fenge said.

Fenge points to a 2003 conference in Italy during which Samoa raised climate change concerns on behalf of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference after the Canadian delegation declined to do so.

"They go to the international meetings as a state," said Meakin. "We, being part of Canada, do not have that position at the table."

"If we can use small-island developing states and their voice at the table to bring our common issue forward, I think that's a very good tool for Inuit to use."

Working together could give both small island states and Arctic aboriginals greater clout on the international stage, said Joan Eamer, polar program manager for the United Nations program.

"They often get left out."

Meakin said the Inuit continue to work with the Canadian government.

"We continue to advocate on the Canadian position to strengthen it," she said. "We would like the Canadian government to be a leader on climate change."