



National Adaptation Forum 2013: A Dynamic Tribal Presence

In recent years tribes have recognized the urgent nature of addressing climate change and have organized numerous tribal conventions and symposia to gather and share knowledge on the impact of climatic shifts on Native communities.

Despite these vigorous efforts among Native American scientists and others, tribes have not always been so well represented at large-scale nontribal conferences. That was certainly not the case in early April, 2013, when more than 30 tribal representatives gathered at the inaugural National Adaptation Forum in Denver alongside nearly 500 nontribal city and town managers, water managers, government representatives and -non-tribal organization staff and others to grapple with ideas on how to adapt to climate impacts on a variety of fronts.

ITEP Climate Change Program Manager, Sue Wotkyns, conference organizer Lara Hansen, and others helped provide support for many of the tribal participants who attended the conference. The strong tribal showing and the perspectives that tribal environmental representatives added to the mix made a significant impact on nontribal attendees throughout the three-day event.

The NAF, organized by Lara Hansen and her group, Eco-Adapt, was created to explore climate adaptation, a topic that has received somewhat less attention than that of mitigation (reducing rates of carbon and other greenhouse-gas compounds that enter the atmosphere). Adaptation advocates have in recent years pressed their view more vigorously, insisting that although mitigation is crucial, climate change is already impacting communities and ecosystems and must be addressed now— even as sluggish governmental action continues as a result of hardheaded political and ideological barriers.



Seth Moore, of the Grand Portage Band of Chippewa Indians presented on impacts of climate change on local fish that are important to tribal culture and sustenance.

The conference featured an almost dizzying array of sessions dealing with water and infrastructure, urban planning, developing a community adaptation plan (there are literally dozens to choose from), coordinating services within a community, anticipating the climate-related weaknesses of a community system, and many others. Films on the topic were screened and attendees had many opportunities to network with others and develop action plans for their specific situations.

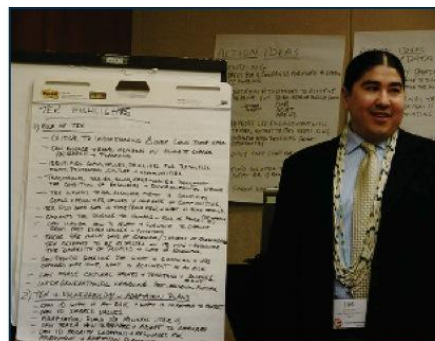
Numerous NAF participants expressed that they knew little about the emerging science/discipline of adaptation; a strong sense of enthusiasm for understanding adaptation strategies pervaded the event. Nearly as often, overheard comments related to the tribal presence and the unique perspectives that tribal members brought to the gathering.

Many tribal communities have been addressing adaptation for some time. Native people are among the groups most impacted by climate stresses, for a variety of reasons. Tied inextricably to the land in terms of both sustenance and spiritual/cultural links, tribes are often also located

in rural areas where infrastructural “cushions” such as piped-in water sources and easily accessible food are lacking. Subsistence and strong cultural ties to tribal ecosystems make the issue of adaptation crucial to the continuing vigor of Native communities.

Tribes in the northern-tier states, and particularly in Alaska, now suffer the most obvious impacts of atmospheric warming—a fact that surprised many nontribal participants. But tribes (and nontribal communities) across the U.S. have felt the impacts of rampant carbon combustion in the form of droughts, more frequent and more intense storms, loss of traditional food sources, incursion of exotic species, and other problems.

Along with their participation in general forum sessions, tribal members attended tribal-specific breakouts designed to deal with climate issues and their impacts on Native communities. The tribal sessions were notable for going beyond simply sharing information; several of those gatherings emphasized problem-solving, and a number of action items were developed by tribal participants. National Wildlife Foundation staff member Garrit Voggesser, who often works with tribes and helped organize tribal participation as well as presenting at the conference, followed up with coordinating emails to tribal participants to help carry the process of adaptation planning forward.



Joe Hostler of the Yurok Tribe presented on traditional ecological knowledge to a packed room at the National Adaptation Forum.

Integrating the efforts of tribal and nontribal scientists, technicians and ways of thinking offers the promise of improving strategies and stimulating broader perspectives on the issue. That exchange clearly goes both ways—during the conference numerous participants, many of whom had rarely interacted with tribal people in the past, repeatedly made comments such as, “There was a tribal person in my breakout session, and from her we got a completely new perspective on adaptation.”

Opening communication lines on climate change is a process that can’t help but benefit all communities. The organizers hope to see even more tribal reps at the next NAF, which is tentatively scheduled for 2015.

Resources:

- National Adaptation Forum: <http://www.nationaladaptationforum.org/>

Photos provided by Dennis Wall, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals.

This profile was developed by Dennis Wall, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Northern Arizona University. It was first published as an article in ITEP’s *Native Voices* newsletter, Volume XX, No. 1, Spring 2013.

The profile is available on the Tribes & Climate Change website: www4.nau.edu/tribalclimatechange/. The tribal climate change profiles featured on the website are intended as a pathway to increasing knowledge among tribal and non-tribal organizations about climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

For more information about the tribal profiles and the website, contact: Sue Wotkyns, Climate Change Program Manager, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, susan.wotkyns@nau.edu