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Arctic peoples must be consulted on adaptation to warming, says UN-backed group



Melting sea-ice in the Arctic

13 March 2009 – Indigenous Arctic peoples must be consulted on ways to preserve their ways of life and boost employment opportunities as the northern ice retreats due to climate change, a group of experts convened by the United Nations cultural agency has agreed. “Action formulated to address Arctic issues must begin from an understanding that many of the peoples of the Arctic have self-governing institutions,” according to recommendations issued by participants at the meeting organized by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

“These peoples and their institutions have immense creativity and seek to advance the self-determination, prosperity and aspirations of their communities and their regions,” they added.

According to UNESCO, rapidly changing climate in the Arctic is putting pressure on hundreds of thousands of indigenous people in the circumpolar north.

The agency noted that for decades they have been witnessing a dramatic shift during the Arctic Ocean’s open water season, as sea ice retreats further and further from coasts. Industrial development and shipping are expected to rise in its place.

The four-day meeting hosted by Monaco in early March sought to address the concerns of the Arctic communities and identify strategies for the sustainable development of the

region, bringing together experts in the social and natural sciences, ethics, education, and international affairs with representatives of indigenous peoples.

The recommendations of the group include establishing “a working/advisory group to develop dialogue and strategy on the challenges of climate change for circumpolar indigenous peoples, including safeguarding intangible heritage and building synergies between indigenous and scientific knowledge.”

Other objectives range from promoting employment opportunities through the conservation of traditional activities to improving the access of researchers to exclusive economic zones in the Arctic area.

Participants at the meeting included representatives of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), the Saami Parliament, the Arctic Council, UNESCO and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

In addition, all Arctic States (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States) were represented as well as other concerned States, some from Europe but some from as far south as New Zealand, South Africa, and Japan.

The Director General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, opened the discussions, applauding the bold mandate of the meeting. “Adaptation and response have become an unavoidable necessity. The development of appropriate adaptation and response strategies has therefore emerged as a central preoccupation of all actors, including the UN system,” he said.

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