



Indigenous Peoples Lead an International Polar Year Project to Monitor Changes in the Economically and Culturally Important Bering Sea

Indigenous peoples in coastal communities around the Bering Sea have received a grant to help them set up a monitoring network to track changes in the critically important Bering Sea marine habitat. The National Science Foundation awarded a \$650,000 grant to the Aleut International Association (AIA) to launch the Bering Sea Sub-Network (BSSN) as part of its Arctic Observing Network initiative.

The Bering Sea is one of the most productive seas in the world and includes globally important habitats for many biological resources. U.S. commercial fisheries in the Bering Sea are worth close to \$1 billion per year, and make up more than half of all annual domestic fish landings. In Russia, the fishery is worth about \$600 million a year, and makes up about a third of the country's fish harvest. The marine resources of the area are now being impacted by climate and other environmental changes.

"This monitoring project is critical to the future of the region and of the peoples who live there," says Michael Zacharof, the president of the AIA, "People in our communities notice even the slightest changes in nature but they do not have resources and tools to document them properly and to conduct research. This project gives us the capacity to use the experts on the region, our own people, to do the necessary research to better understand and track the threats to their livelihoods."

The health, economic well-being, and ways of life of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in the region are connected to the Bering Sea and its natural resources. The socioeconomic development of coastal villages along the Bering Sea, on both the Russian and United States sides, is dependent on maintaining ecologically sustainable conditions in the region.

Six villages will form an initial network: Gambell on St. Laurence Island, Togiak and Sand Point in Alaska and Lorino, Tymlat and Nikolskoye on Bering Island in Russia. Observations will include the shifts in distribution and abundance of fish and other temperature-sensitive species, changes in ice patterns, and weather observations. Organizers hope to expand the project over time to include more communities, and potentially more regions in the Arctic.

The project, officially known as *the Bering Sea Sub-Network: International Community-Based Environmental Observation Alliance for Arctic Observing Network (BSSN)* is a collaborative research initiative by the Aleut International Association, the University of Alaska, Alaska Native Science Commission (ANSC) and the United Nations Environment Programme – Global Resource Information Database (UNEP-GRID). The project is part of the International Polar Year, a breakthrough massive scientific effort focusing on the Polar Regions in 2007 and 2008, and a component of the Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Programme of the Conservation of Flora and Fauna Working Group of the Arctic Council. It was recognized by the Honorable Paula J. Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, in her remarks at the U.S. launch of International Polar Year at the National Academies of Science in Washington, D.C. "...I want to underscore the important role played by indigenous groups. Alaskan natives are leading a number of projects for IPY. The Aleut International Association proposed the Bering Sea Sub-network, an initiative to monitor changes in the marine environment of the Bering Sea. Villagers on both sides of the Bering Sea will engage in community-based monitoring of the marine environment and fold their research into the larger Arctic Council Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program."

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Background Information

The Aleut International Association (AIA) is an Alaska Native not-for-profit corporation registered in the State of Alaska, United States, in 1998.

AIA was formed by the Aleutian/Pribilof Island Association, U. S., one of the thirteen regional not-for-profit Alaska Native corporations created as a result of Alaska Native Settlement Claims Act in 1971, and the Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the North of the Aleut District of the Kamchatka Region of the Russian Federation (AIPNADKR). AIA is governed by the Board of Directors comprised of four Alaskan and four Russia's Aleuts under the leadership of a president. The current president is Mr. Michael Zacharof of Saint Paul Island, Alaska, U.S. AIA's office is located in Anchorage. Ms. Victoria Gofman is the executive director.

The organization was formed to address environmental and cultural concerns of the extended Aleut family whose wellbeing has been connected to the rich resources of the Bering Sea for millennia. Russia's and American Aleuts are separated by distances, borders and the International Date Line but united by the great Bering Sea and the North Pacific. Today, not only does the Aleut community share the resources of the region but the environmental problems as well. The need to understand global processes, such as transboundary contaminants transport, impacts of climate change, effects of commercial fisheries on ecosystem of the Bering Sea to name a few, was an impetus in joining in the work of international fora where AIA is actively pursuing collaboration with governments, scientists, and other organizations in developing programs and policies that could improve the wellbeing of the Aleut people and their environment. AIA was admitted as a permanent participant of the Arctic Council in 1999.

AIA contributed to the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, one of the major Arctic Council reports, as well as to the Arctic Human Development Report, Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Programme and other projects of the Arctic Council.

Selection of developed and implemented projects:

1. Paralytic Shellfish Toxin Monitoring in Aleut Region in the U.S. and Russia (North Pacific Research Board award, 2006-2007)
2. "Aleut Ethnobotany: an Annotated Bibliography" (Funding from AK Native Research Partnership, UAA, and Conservation of Arctic Flora Fauna (CAFF) working group of the Arctic Council, 2005)
3. Non-profit Russian Aleut organizations' capacity building (USAID award, 2003-2004)
4. Testing for presence of contaminants in Aleut women on the Commander Islands, Russia (Funding by EPA, 2003-2005)

www.aleut-international.org



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