

Press Release

First Nations Development Institute

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Indigenous Aquaculture Network Holds Second Convening April 12-14th, Camp Indianola, Washington

First Nations Development Institute, The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, and Heifer International recently joined efforts to hold the second Indigenous Aquaculture Network Convening from April 12-14th at Camp Indianola, Washington. The Suquamish Nation graciously hosted this convening that brought together a diverse group of Native American fisheries and cultural resource specialists to address pertinent issues pertaining to past, present, and future practices in Indigenous fisheries and aquaculture. Representatives from ten Nations attended and came from as far away as Massachusetts (Wampanoag), and Louisiana (Atakpa), complementing a strong contingent of Puget Sound area tribes.

The Pacific Northwest gathering was a unique opportunity for tribal members, Indigenous fisheries experts, and nonprofit organizations to share cultural, environmental, and human health concerns, and to discuss hatchery enhancement of wild stocks, capture fisheries, and ecological restoration, among other topics. Participants also undertook a careful examination of developments in aquaculture operations in Indian Country. The call for maintaining the integrity of cultural and environmental resources as related to the water world was the overarching theme of all presentations and ensuing discussion. In this sense, aquaculture was seen as an activity that holds promise for Native peoples but only if it is done in a manner that is sustainable across generations and is consistent with Indigenous sovereignty and standards related to fish practices.

Meeting Discussions

Merle Hayes, Suquamish Fisheries Policy Liaison, welcomed the group at the opening session with insight into the historical and current impacts of shellfish on the people of the Puget Sound, and Pacific Northwest Indian people in general.

Merle shared his communities' concerns regarding the introduction of fast food into the diets of the tribes of the Pacific Northwest. With these drastic changes in diet, record numbers of Indian people are now battling diseases historically foreign to them, like diabetes, and other complications from unhealthy food sources. Merle emphasized that traditional food sources are integral in maintaining health and therefore should be restored, protected, and maintained. Shellfish and wild salmon were deemed essential to the continued survival and well being of Native communities in the Pacific Northwest, but culturally appropriate aquaculture projects were considered worthy of further examination.

Other recognized threats to the vitality of shellfisheries and finfish in the Pacific Northwest come from pollution originating from rapid ex-urban growth in the Puget Sound region and industrial development. These adverse impacts have resulted in the designation of some tribal fishing as “unhealthy” due to elevated levels of certain bacteria, toxic chemicals, and persistent organic pollutants (POPs), which have further been linked to negative impacts on human health. Joint efforts between tribes and government agencies to clean up, enhance, and re-certify Native fishing areas most affected by pollution and degradation of habitat, are progressing, and remain a key long-term goal.

Issues

In the coastal areas of the Pacific Northwest, salmon and shellfish are still the primary source of the traditional diet. In this regard, industrial scale aquaculture was seen as a threat to the overall cultural and ecological integrity of the “salmon people” of the Pacific Northwest. At the same time, certain sustainable forms of aquaculture may hold promise in the region. Participants took a cautionary approach towards any form of future aquaculture development.

Discussions explored the meaning of Indigenous aquaculture such as ecological impacts, economic viability, as well as cultural and spiritual elements. Questions also offered for consideration were the feasibility of cultivating various species and aquatic plants.

Another issue brought up for consideration by participants was the growing consumer popularity with “organic” labeling and other schemes. In some cases, the standards used for these designations are not always legitimate. However, Indigenous aquaculture and fisheries may be able to market fish and shellfish identifying it as sustainable, supported by cultivation and business methods based on cultural knowledge and commitment to delivering a balanced and healthy product.

The IAN and Future Directions

Most participants agreed that aquaculture could make a contribution to healthy food supplies in Native communities. The goals of the IAN are explore to the many ways in which this network of practitioners can bring their expertise to Indigenous aquaculture projects, expand the dialogue, and strengthen the network.

Future IAN efforts include: cultural exchange programs with Indigenous Latin American counterparts; exploration of ways to involve tribal colleges; convening of regional meetings to keep people connected and engaged in an active process of information sharing; establishment of technical advisory teams to assist with member projects; and maintenance of databases and communication channels.

For more information contact: Dr. Michael Skladany, (612) 870-3402, or visit <http://www.nativeaquaculture.org> for the history of the Indigenous Aquaculture Network, a document repository, and other information on Native fisheries and aquaculture.