

# **Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change\***

## **Anchorage, Alaska**

Welcome people of the Arctic, of the Americas, of the Pacific, of Africa, of the Caribbean, to the Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change. We thank the Ahtna and the Dena'ina Athabascan Peoples in whose lands we are gathered.

Mother Earth is no longer in a period of climate change, but in climate crisis. Rising oceans, thawing permafrost, larger storms, expanding deserts, dying coral reefs, and declining forests threaten the stability of Indigenous Peoples around the world.

While the wealthier nations of the world debate the best way to limit the effects of climate change in the future, we face the immediate destruction of our homes, our lands, our traditions, and our cultures. As Patricia Cochran, chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council said, "Indigenous peoples have contributed the least to the global problem of climate change, but will almost certainly bear the greatest brunt of its impact."

We meet here today because we will not stand by and witness the destruction of our way of life. We represent only a few of the 5,000 groups of Indigenous Peoples in more than 70 countries. Together we have a global population of 350 million, representing about six percent of humanity. We have persisted through 500 years of invasion, genocide, land theft, and now environmental destruction—we will outlast this threat as well.

We honor our solidarity as Indigenous Peoples living in areas that are the most vulnerable to the impacts and root causes of climate change. We reaffirm the unbreakable and sacred connection between land, air, water, oceans, forests, sea ice, plants, animals and our human communities as the material and spiritual basis for our existence.

In fact, the world desperately needs the wisdom of indigenous perspectives, perhaps now more than ever. Because of our long cultural and spiritual connection to the land, oceans, and wildlife, Indigenous Peoples have a lot to offer the rest of the world as it considers how best to deal with the climate crisis.

The goal of this Summit is to develop a list of action items to present to the rest of the world at the United Nations climate change treaty meeting, held in Copenhagen this December. Because of the stakes posed by climate change, the Copenhagen meeting has been called the most important global gathering in human history, so it is essential that Indigenous Peoples be given full participation. Today we start that process of participation.

**\*Adapted from the original, [www.indigenoussummit.com](http://www.indigenoussummit.com).**



## **Kiribati People – Pacific Islands**

You represent the people of Kiribati (pronounced KEER-ih-bahs), a group of islands located in the tropical Pacific Ocean, to the north and east of Australia. The chain of 32 islands is home to over 100,000 people, all of whom live only a few feet above sea level.

Kiribati is expected to be one the world's first countries to lose its territory as a result of sea level rise from global climate change. Within the last ten years, two of the smallest islands have already disappeared underwater. As Americans debate whether rising sea levels will someday affect cities like New York and San Francisco, you're watching the effects right outside your front door. This is not some future scenario for the people of Kiribati; your neighbor must decide soon whether or not to move her grandmother's grave when the rising seas force her to move her home.

Your ancestors have lived here for thousands of years, but now you might lose your home because of a problem that you didn't cause. But you know who's to blame. People in the wealthy countries of Europe and the United States have caused greenhouse gases to increase in the atmosphere, by burning so many fossil fuels, like coal, oil, and natural gas, for the last 200 years. These people claim the right to drive their cars, but how can this compare to your right to a secure home? These wealthy countries must immediately begin to dramatically reduce their use of fossil fuels.

As sea levels rise, salt water from the ocean has polluted the fresh water sources that the people and plants of Kiribati depend on for survival. As a symbol of things to come, one Kiribati island, Tepuka Savilivili, no longer has any coconut trees—killed off by increasing levels of salt water in the ground. Coconut trees are the backbone of traditional Kiribati culture, ranging in use from food to building materials. Because of its importance, your people refer to it as “the tree of life.”

Kiribati's land and coconut trees are not the only things threatened by climate change—the traditional island culture is also at risk of disappearing with the rising ocean. For thousands of years, your ancestors have lived here, building their culture in relationship with the natural environment. If you are forced to leave Kiribati, forced to migrate to Australia or New Zealand, certain parts of Kiribati culture will be lost forever. This is why many Kiribati will choose not to leave their homes.

However, Kiribati president, Anote Tong, is already planning for the migration of your people. Here is part of an address he gave to the United Nations last year:

Ultimately, low-lying island countries like Kiribati will have to face up to the reality of their islands being unable to support life, and plan accordingly. The relocation of the 100,000 people of Kiribati cannot be done overnight. It requires long term forward planning and the sooner we act, the less stressful and the less painful it would be for all concerned. We must provide them with the education and training to make them competitive and marketable in international labor markets. This strategy provides our people with an option so that when they choose to migrate, they will migrate on merit and with dignity. They will be received by their adopted countries not as burdens, but as worthwhile members of the community.

But so far, the so-called “developed” nations have agreed to no plan for climate refugee migration. Do they expect you to drown in the ocean as they continue to pollute the atmosphere?

# Inuit People

You are Inuit and live in the Arctic. You have a close relationship with nature and notice even small changes in the environment. Recently, you have been very worried because the climate has become unpredictable and the landscape has changed.

The permafrost is dying—and that means your way of life is threatened. You depend on hunting and trapping on the tundra: polar bears, walrus, seals, caribou, and reindeer; and harvesting fish from the sea. Less snowfall is making sled and snowmobile transportation more difficult. Creeks are freezing later, and the ice is too thin to carry heavy loads. Lakes are drying up. In 10 years, the number of caribou in one part of Alaska has dropped from 178,000 to 129,000. Calves drown when they try to cross rivers that are usually frozen. Your elders remember vast numbers of caribou moving in waves near their villages during spring and summer. No more. The environment is in chaos. The hunters find it harder and harder to find the caribou that feed your people.

Autumn freeze-up occurs up to a month later than usual and the spring thaw seems earlier every year. The multi-year sea-ice is smaller, and now drifts far from your community in the summer, taking with it the seals upon which your community relies for food. In the winter the sea-ice is thin and broken, making travel dangerous for even the most experienced hunters. In the fall, storms have become more frequent and severe, making boating difficult. Thunder and lightning have been seen for the first time.

Hot weather in the summer is melting the permafrost and causing large-scale slumping on the coastline and along the shores of inland lakes. The melting has already caused one inland lake near you to drain into the ocean, killing the freshwater fish. Even the foundations under buildings are shifting.

The village of Newtok, about 800 kilometers east of Anchorage, is one of several villages in need of relocation due to climate change. Because of higher average temperatures, intensifying river flow and melting permafrost are destroying homes and infrastructure. Over 300 residents have been forced to relocate to a higher site 15 kilometers west. This will cost tens of millions of dollars. What will become of your people? And why should your people suffer so that other nations can continue burning more and more coal and oil and living comfortably? This is so unfair.

The Arctic is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the world. Scientists think that summer ice could vanish in the next 10 to 20 years. Oil companies say that one quarter of the earth's untapped fossil fuels, including 375 billion barrels of oil, lie beneath the Arctic. They can't wait for the ice to melt. They call this the new "black gold rush." So as your people try to hang on to your land and culture, oil companies profit from your suffering and become richer and richer.

It's urgent that you join with other Indigenous Peoples to stop climate change and to demand justice for your people.

## Bambara People – Sub-Saharan Africa

The Sahara Desert is growing—you know, because you've seen it with your own eyes. Some measurements show the desert growing by up to 30 miles per year, taking over grasslands and trees in its path. It's starting to feel like you might be next. Your ancestors have lived near the desert for hundreds of years, farming special varieties of maize, millet, and sorghum adapted to the warm temperatures and dry climate of your homeland. But as temperatures all over Sub-Saharan Africa get warmer, farming that was already difficult to begin with has gotten much worse.

The Bambara live in countries like Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Niger—all countries that were named in a recent study that warned of the challenges facing African farmers as temperatures increase from global warming. The best estimates are for temperatures to rise five degrees Fahrenheit by 2100, but many scientists now say this is too optimistic, and that warming might be closer to 10 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century.

The Bambara have been good at adapting to the changing climate of the Sub-Saharan region, but these changes may be insurmountable. Even the hardiest varieties of the region's three main crops—maize, millet and sorghum—would probably not tolerate the conditions forecast for the coming decades. Droughts in the 1970s and 1980s killed 100,000 people in the region, but this would be much worse. Without immediate solutions, food security across all of Africa could be threatened.

Malnutrition has become more common among your people. It is common to see children with a reddish fuzz on top of their heads—a sign of malnutrition. Half the Bambara children die before their first birthday. For some, the climate crisis is in the future, but for your people it is happening *now*. Poverty and malnutrition have many causes, but the changing climate is a big one.

Urgent measures must be taken to stock seed banks and develop new varieties to stay a step ahead of Africa's shifting agricultural map. Over 40 percent of Africa's population lives on less than a dollar a day, and 70 percent of these poor are located in rural areas and largely dependent on agriculture for survival.

One of the reasons you made the trip to this Summit is to make sure that the rest of the world is aware of the food security issues faced by your people as a result of climate change. Right now, the rich nations of the world are debating the international climate change agreement to be negotiated this December in Copenhagen, but they seem to focus mostly on how to regulate the carbon emissions of people in rich countries. That's important. It is long overdue for Americans and Europeans to start limiting their carbon emissions. But you want to be sure that December's climate talks also consider how to help people like the Bambara continue to feed themselves. Cutting emissions is important for the long run, but your people need assistance right now.

# Taíno, Caribs, Arawaks: Indigenous Peoples in the Caribbean

Over 500 years ago, your ancestors greeted the first European in the Americas: Christopher Columbus. Columbus called you “the best people in the world.” He also took hundreds of you as slaves and sent you to Spain. In your own land, he forced you to hunt for gold and to work on plantations. Today, the wealthy countries of the world continue to exploit your people, but in different ways. Now, because of their greenhouse gas pollution from their cars, and coal plants, and deforestation, they are changing the climate, and threatening your way of life.

Coral reefs are often referred to as “rainforests of the sea.” Home to more than 25 percent of all marine species, reefs are highly biologically diverse. They provide a habitat and breeding ground for local and commercially important species of fish, shrimp, and lobsters. Reefs also act as natural buffers, protecting vulnerable coastal areas from bearing the full brunt of storms. An analysis conducted between 1969 and 2008, showed the most complex types of reef had been virtually wiped out across the entire Caribbean.

Coral reefs currently face two major—and growing—threats:

**Acidification:** The oceans are a major carbon sink, absorbing between 30 and 50 percent of all human-created CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Scientists project that the pH of the ocean will drop from 8.2 (its pre-industrial level) to 7.8, by the next century. This would be the largest such change in more than 20 million years. Several studies have suggested that reef-forming coral cannot survive at pH levels less than 7.6.

**Coral bleaching:** The harm to Caribbean reefs is not only linked to climate change; a second period of coral destruction is now under way. Other human impacts such as over-fishing and coastal development cause the tiny organisms that build the coral reefs to become stressed and abandon their colonies, resulting in “coral bleaching.” Bleached corals are weaker and more prone to disease. The combination of increased sea surface temperatures and ocean acidification has led to mass bleaching, with temperature increases as low as 1°C. With increases of 2°C to 3°C, the corals may die.

For thousands of years before Columbus accidentally bumped into your islands, the sea provided life for your people. And Columbus’s ancestors continue to find ways to harm your people. You need to tell the wealthy countries that we all have to share this world, that they have no right to destroy the oceans through greenhouse gas pollution.

And it’s not just the oceans. Scientists reported in a new article in *Nature* magazine that hurricanes in the Atlantic are more frequent than at any time in the last 1,000 years. Other scientists say that as the earth warms, along with more severe hurricanes in the Caribbean, you will experience more summer droughts. Another scientific report just said that because of climate change, 56 different bird species in the Caribbean are threatened. Well, it’s good to have the scientists trying to figure out what’s happening, but you know that things are getting worse from your own oral traditions and from how close to the land and sea you have always lived.

Indigenous elders have been warning about these changes for decades. It’s time

for the world to stop ignoring the lives—and the wisdom—of Indigenous Peoples.

## **Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon**

Your people live in rainforests in the Amazon basin. The Amazon region is the largest rainforest in the world and consumes about one-fifth of the carbon dioxide produced from burning fossil fuels. The Amazon's role as a "carbon sink" that sucks global-warming carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere may be hurt. During a major drought in 2005, the fires that broke out in the western Amazon region put more carbon into the atmosphere than it soaked up. This may occur again as savannas (grasslands) replace rainforest, which will have a huge effect on your livelihood and the other 60 million Indigenous People in the region.

Climate scientists predict that higher worldwide temperatures caused by increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will reduce rainfall in the Amazon region, which will cause widespread local drought. With less water and tree growth, "homegrown" rainfall produced by the forest itself will decrease, as well, as this depends on water passed into the atmosphere above the forests by the trees. The cycle continues, with even less rain causing more drought, and so on. This cycle puts the whole Amazon region at risk, which puts the whole world at risk.

Tropical rainforests have long been home to Indigenous Peoples who have shaped civilizations and cultures based on the environment in which they live. Living from nature, Native Peoples have learned to watch their surroundings and understand the intricacies of the rainforest. Over generations your people have learned the importance of living within your environment and have come to rely on the countless renewable benefits that forests can provide. You believe "The earth is our historian, our educator, the provider of food, medicine, clothing and protection. She is the mother of our races." This is something Indigenous Peoples have to teach the entire world.

When most people think about greenhouse gas pollution and climate change, they think about burning fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas. But every year, cutting down forests is responsible for 20-25 percent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. You know the unique role the Amazon Basin plays in regulating global climate. You also know how loggers, miners, oil companies, pipeline builders, and ranchers continue to steal your land and kill your people. If the so-called developed world really wants to stop climate change, then they have to take serious action to protect the rainforests where you live. The survival of Indigenous Peoples in the Amazon will contribute to the survival of everyone on earth.

Moving out of your forest homes is not an option. Your people have lived in and with the forests for millennia. You're not going anywhere.

## Dine (Navajo) People of the American Southwest

You come from the “painted” red-rock deserts of the American Southwest, homeland of the Dine People (known as Navajo in English). The Dine/Navajo Nation is home to the largest Native American population in the United States, more than 180,000 people. In some ways, your hometown of Shiprock looks like any other small town in America—gas stations, motels, a few restaurants and grocery stores—but it’s very different in other ways. Over half the Navajo population lives below the U.S. poverty line.

Many people on the reservation still speak the traditional Dine language (in addition to English), and across the desert farmers still practice traditional “dry-land” methods of agriculture. But the entire American Southwest is ten years into a deep drought that shows no sign of letting up, and even the traditional methods that Dine have used to grow food in the desert for the last thousand years are starting to fail. As the rate of global climate change increases, farming will likely get even harder for your people. One Dine farmer, Charles Chi, describes it this way: “People are messing with Mother Nature. And just like my forefathers—my grandpa used to say one of these days, there’s only going to be two weathers—fall or summer. Today, I think that he was telling the truth.”

Farming is not the only way that the Dine are connected to climate change. As energy companies look for ways to make electricity that release lower greenhouse gas emissions, some people are talking about nuclear power as a solution to our climate problems. They say that nuclear power can produce all the electricity we need, and not release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

But where is the uranium mined that fuels the nuclear plants? From your land. While Dine people are some of the poorest in the U.S., the Dine land is rich with uranium resources. You grew up hearing stories of the Dine men who worked in the “yellowcake” uranium mines, from the 1940s to the 1980s. You want others to hear these stories about family and friends who came home each day with clothes covered in yellow uranium dust. The companies that ran the mines told workers not to worry about the dust—that it was safe—but people now know that the mines exposed workers and their families to high levels of radiation.

The contaminated dust made its way into people’s lives in other ways too—hundreds of abandoned uranium pit mines filled with water and then became watering holes for Dine sheep herds. When families like yours butchered their sheep, they ate the uranium-infected meat. Today, the Dine suffer from high cancer rates and respiratory problems. One study found that cancer rates among Dine teenagers living near mine tailings are *17 times* the national average.

In 2005, the Navajo Nation banned uranium mining on its territory. But Hydro Resources Inc. (HRI) has been working with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to try to get approval for mining near Navajo communities in New Mexico. The company estimates that nearly one hundred million pounds of uranium exists on those sites, worth

millions of dollars. The group Eastern Navajo Dine Against Uranium Mining has fought HRI for over a decade.

So Indigenous Peoples need to speak with one voice and say that not only do we have to support *real* solutions to climate change, we have to oppose *false* solutions—like nuclear power, that just leads to more poisoning of Indigenous People.

## Pre-Conference Meetings

**Group Names**

**What the world  
needs to know.**

**What the world  
needs to do – Action Items**

