

NRF Report

Opening Session

Wednesday, September 24, 2008

Rapporteur: Tristan Pearce

The 5th Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum (NRF) opened with a prayer from a Tlingit elder and a powerful drumming, dance, and singing performance by Lepquinm Gumilgit Gagoadim, a Tsimshian group from Anchorage. The sound of the drums, the voices of the singers, and the movement of the dancers, cloaked in blankets adorned with their clan symbols resonated throughout the opening session providing life to the room. The speakers in the opening session contributed a variety of perspectives on several issues affecting northern regions and some common themes emerged. (1) Environmental changes that are occurring in northern regions have implications for the people who live in these regions and also for the global community. Melting sea ice is already affecting coastal communities in northern regions and it is expected to affect coastal communities elsewhere who are sensitive to sea-level rise (e.g. Bangladesh). (2) The reduction of sea ice in the Arctic Ocean will provide increased opportunities for new shipping routes with implication for business, security, and cooperation among northern countries. Increased shipping potential will also require on-land infrastructure such as ports, railways, and roads to transport goods to markets before shipping through the Arctic Ocean will be economically and logistically feasible. (3) Northern regions are a reservoir of untapped energy resources: how do we harness these resources in an environmentally friendly and people friendly manner?

Several reoccurring statements concerning the described themes were also identified. These included: the need to take an interdisciplinary approach and to engage multiple stakeholders when addressing issues affecting the northern regions; base policy decisions on sound knowledge and science - this includes both scientific research and the traditional knowledge held by the indigenous peoples who live in northern regions; the importance of 'collective action' among northern communities to address global challenges such as climate change; and the need to challenge conventional state politics

and legalities and recognize the inherent rights (e.g. ownership of the land and resources) of indigenous people. The speakers stressed that the NRF is an ideal forum to address these critical issues because the NRF transcends disciplinary and political borders.

The speakers described the NRF as an ‘open village square’ for dialogue on issues that are relevant to northern regions. The NRF is a place to ‘test’ your ideas with actors from other countries, backgrounds, and academic disciplines and to develop an interplay between politics and science. A goal of the NRF is to move from dialogue to the implementation of ideas but it is also recognized that this is a ‘process’ and it is the task of the participants of the Open Assembly to seek ways of meeting this goal. The NRF has and continues to invest in human and social capital through the involvement of young researchers and the engagement of stakeholders from both scientific and political communities. This opening session marked the opening of the 5th NRF Open Assembly and did so by setting a precedent for the inclusion of multiple stakeholders, political, academic, and indigenous, to enter into dialogue on some of the most pressing issues affecting northern regions today.