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Sandra Newman

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THE ARCTIC AND ENERGY: EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION ISSUES; INDIGENOUS PEOPLES; INDUSTRY

Councilor Sandra Newman[†]
Canadian Speaker

Good afternoon. I have to get my time correct. I never know if I am in the east, west, north, or south sometimes. We are all over the place.

Outside, just before we did our presentation. We met a couple of people and they asked what city are you from? The Chief said, "Old Crow, Yukon." They said, "well, how many people in your city?" We replied 300; and I commented that it is hard to believe that we are taking on the government of the United States with that many people.

I want to thank you for allowing me to walk on your traditional territory as a native person, even though there may not be a native person here from Ohio, I still have to acknowledge from my people that we are on someone else's land and that we respect that land, in the same way that we hope that when you are on our land in North Yukon, you respect it also.

We are as you say, the only town in North Yukon, which has been a blessing for my people. Two weeks ago, it was minus 40 up there and when I left, it was about minus 20 or minus 15, which is almost a heat wave for us.¹

Nevertheless, it has been a blessing in a few ways. One, it has sustained our culture. Our culture compared to other First Nations people in Canada and the U.S., our culture is pretty much in tact.

I am not a Chair of anything, I am not a lawyer, and I do not have little letters under after my name. However, I am Gwitchin. For me to stand here and acknowledge that is one of the true strengths that I can have as a First Nation's person. That strength keeps my people doing this kind of work and in standing up in front of sometimes hundreds of people and relaying that

[†] Councilor Sandra Newman was born and raised in Old Crow, a small village at the heart of the Gwitchin Nation in northern Canada. After completing high school in Whitehorse, Yukon in 1984 and then attending the University of Fairbanks for Human Services studies, Sandra has returned to Old Crow with her twelve-year-old daughter. Deeply proud of her Vuntut Gwitchin (people of the lakes) heritage, Sandra is working for her First Nation Government as the Director of Government Services and Caribou coordinator. She is thankful to her past and present leaders for their strength and courage in preserving a culture and way of life for Vuntut Gwitchin people. She thanks her ancestors for their wisdom, courage and knowledge. "I want to thank my ancestors for taking care of this land for us, Mahsi Choo."

¹ Old Crow Temperature Averages, *available at*:
<http://www.weatherbase.com/weather/weather.php3?s=719681&refer=>

message. I come from North Yukon, way down here, I feel like a little insect in this whole United States. To try to ask people to help my people, and convey a message can be quite challenging sometimes.

You will have to excuse my voice; I have a bit of a cold here. That is another sort of strength to my people, is that every time we come down here, there is a chance we may take something home. There was the outbreak of SARS, there was the West Nile Virus, the sniper, you never know what you're going to go home with, even though, you know, you basically take the best care of yourself, you can, go back to 300 people, you come back with SARS. It is dangerous because you can virtually wipe out your community and the elders if you are not too careful, just to sum up the basic things we deal with when we come down here.

In Old Crow, my people have been there approximately 20 thousand years. Archeologists have found human bones up in that area that date back 20,000 years² and the caribou bones 30,000 years ago.³

Not many people could go up there and live there. We know that we were the people that came from that land. Just knowing about our culture, our ancestors and the animals that we live with gives us a strong sense of power within ourselves.

We live with the animals. We have caribou, moose, wolves, wolverine, salmon, white fish, pike, rabbits, bears, almost any type of animal that you can think of. We have them.

We live in a community and in an area that is virtually untouched by human beings, except us. That is one of the highlights of being so remote in Northern Canada. Another highlight was that when the first politicians of sorts started signing treaties with native people, they could not access our community very well. My grandfather told me the story of how politicians had come to our community once every few years, trying to get our community to sign a treaty, but we would not ever sign a treaty. That just shows how strong of a people that we are.

Jon Groetzinger mentioned somebody cannot have a conversation with a moose. Coming from a cultural perspective, a native perspective, coming from a First Nation's person, I can say that you can have a conversation with a moose. That is how we are connected to the land, and the animals, the rocks, the air, the fire, is through a spiritual connection. That is where we get our strength from, the animals and they get their strength from us.

Our connection to the Porcupine caribou herd is through our spiritual connection.

² D.E. Nelson Richard E. Morlan J.S. Vogel J.R. Southon C.R. Harington, *New Dates on Northern Yukon Artifacts: Holocene not Upper Pleistocene*, SCIENCE, May 9, 1986, at 749.

³ *Id.*

When our mother's are pregnant and they are starting to nurture and nourish the fetus, they eat caribou. It is just a natural sense. When the blood of the caribou goes into the blood of the fetus, we begin our spiritual connection.

When our elders are ready to pass over into the next world, we feed them caribou broth because it strengthens their spirit for the journey.

We had an archeological assessment on the mountain behind our community a few years ago for a rock quarry, and the area that we were assessing, they found two caribou horns. Tests were conducted to determine their age. One was 25 years old and the other was 500 years old. That was only five minutes from my house, I can go up there with a snow machine in five minutes, and the Caribou horn sat there for 500 years.

The Chief mentioned that many First National communities' tribes have been impacted by development and have been touched by other people that have invaded their home, taken away the food, the spirituality, the connection that sustains their tribe.

Around the world, it is becoming harder to find tribes. We are one of the last remaining people that still have this connection, that can still stand here and say, "Yes, I'm connected to this earth and I'm connected to this land, and plead with people to help my people just like our ancestors did for us."

I could walk up the mountain and go off on a trail and walk on a trail that is 500 years old that my great, great, great, great grandmother walked on. Our fight, our challenge, is to preserve that same trail for our children, my great, great, great, great grandchildren. Sometimes, it is hard to get that message across to people who are focused on economic gain, and that is my job.

Regardless of where we live in the world, we do have high-speed internet, we do have a website, and it is Oldcrow.yk.net. On that website, you can learn about the Gwitchin people, and can view a copy of our self-government agreement with Canada.

We understand that America needs energy. We know that, and like the Chief mentioned, we do not consider ourselves environmentalists, and we are only opposed to oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. However, we must take responsibility of the oil that we use.

A few years ago, they used this issue based on California's energy crisis. The fuel and the propane, I guess, went sky high in California. They said, "We need to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to help California." I was on tour that year in Arizona, and did a brief stop in Las Vegas. I could not believe that Nevada had so many lights. Nevertheless, California was said to have an energy crisis.

I was thinking, "Oh, my God, do these people know sometime in the future, there are great, great, great grandchildren that are coming and they may want to use some of those lights, they may want to have a warm home, and have this same type of comfort that we have? I couldn't believe it.

I'm sure many of you will be politicians in the future and are on that road; maybe you could cancel one of the Indy 500's for one year or so, and see what you can do with that energy that has not been used up at that time.

We use all parts of the Caribou, except the stomach. We bury the stomach. We give it back to the earth, or put it back in the water. We use the caribou head, we use the hoofs, we use the skin, and our connection is one of spirituality. It gives us food. It gives us clothing, gives us tools, gives us medicine, and, in return, we take care of the land for the caribou to continue to roam free as they are meant to be.

When the women tan the caribou skin in my hometown, they soak skin with the caribou brains. It does not cause a mad caribou disease. It makes the skin soft and easy to use.

My people have been living by these rules for thousands of years. That makes us who we are. We would not live our lives in any other way, even if we were presented with the option.

I have a good example. I do not know how many of you have ever tried to pluck a geese, have any of you ever tried? It is hard as is plucking black ducks. We eat the geese that fly up to Old Crow. When they migrate north, they come to see us; and we are happy when they come back. We are excited that they have another chance to visit with us.

There is this new invention, I am sure it has been around for a few years. You can put the geese in a wax and just peel the feathers off; also, there is a machine that takes the feathers off. We would not think of using innovations like those even though they are available.

We do need lawyers, however.

We live with the animals, trees, rocks, rivers, icebergs, insects, water ground, air and fire. If you saw our land, you would not believe how unspoiled it is, how pure it is. We have clean water and clean land. While we do have millions of dollars, yet we rely on the land to feed us and give us clean water to drink. It does not matter how many millions and billions of dollars if you have, if there is no food left in the world, your money is not going to buy you anything.

We have been learning about the economical and investment aspects of government.

I noticed on the pamphlet Bombardier and Pfizer was here. We have stocks in those companies; we watch those stocks on a quarterly basis; at the end of five years, we review that and then we make the changes depending on the type of the advice that we get from our investment company.

Therefore, we are quite prepared and quite willing to sustain our culture, our population, our spirit, and our identity for our children. That is what we do. That is whom we work for, the children in the future. That is who worked for me and that is who works for the Chief.

When our children are hungry, we cannot feed them oil. This is the story of my Gwitchin people in the land where I come from; I shared this with you so that you can understand me and hopefully teach other people about our connection with the Porcupine caribou herd.

I was walking through South Dakota. I was in Rapid City, South Dakota a few years ago. All I had to do was walk a few feet from the hotel to a convention center. Half way through my little journey, I felt feelings of pain and sorrow and agony; and I could not understand the source. I was going to a POW WOW, and we were doing the same type of presentation. During that walk, I just stood and looked around me. If you just stop, look around, and listen, you can hear what the earth is telling you. It is simple, and everyone has it in them. I was in middle of Sioux people. I was on the land that was once full of buffalo, and I can feel that pain and that agony of what the Sioux people went through to lose that important part of their culture and sustainability.

I went to see the one white buffalo that had recently been born, and she was in a fence. Nevertheless, it was a blessing to see the buffalo; and I thought of our caribou. I feared that 30 years from now my children might be viewing caribou in a fence. That is what will be taken from us. I fear that 30 years from now there were only going to be a few caribou left on this earth. They will be behind fences. Then, no one will be able to hunt them for sustain ably. The pain that native people go through when they lose that type of culture endures for countless generations.

I want to thank my past and present leaders for their strength and courage in challenging all levels of government to secure a better future for our children.

I want to thank my ancestors for their wisdom and vision in taking care of this land for our children tomorrow. I want to thank them for thinking about us when we are not even born yet.

I am sure a lot of you can remember when you were growing up the kind of house you lived in. I am sure a lot of you did not have running water, a lot you lived close to the land, and I can see it in your eyes that some of you connect with the message I am saying. We are in a new millennium where we have technology to do things differently. We can use corn to make oil to fuel our cars. We can bring up the standards of how many miles per gallon our vehicles can go. We can go to the moon. If we can go to the moon, I am sure we can develop new technologies to give our country energy.

Thank you for listening. I appreciate it and Mahsi' choo Kekwadhut. That means, thank you, Creator.

