

UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
United Nations, New York
May 20, 2002
Council of Katmai Descendants
Presentation by
Andria Agli



Mr. Chairman:

My name is Andria Agli and I am a Sugpiaq Aleut from the small village of South Naknek on the Alaska Peninsula. I am still an infant to the world of indigenous issues, but my blood is seasoned with thousands of years of ancestors who came before me. I speak to the human rights of indigenous peoples which includes the rights of those who have passed on.

Specifically, I am here on behalf of the Council of Katmai Descendants. The council formed in 1994 to address issues and concerns within the area of land that is now Katmai National Park. The Council represents Native descendants of the people of Katmai country who were displaced from their traditional villages after the volcanic eruption of Mt. Novarupta in 1912.

The lands in this park are the homelands and spiritual resting-place of my ancestors and are considered sacred to my people. The area is home to many ancestral remains and almost 1,000 semisubterranean houses dating back from 2500 BC to historic times. The land is very rich with salmon, a variety of berries, birds, small mammals, moose, caribou and grizzly bear. It is very easy to see why my ancestors chose this as their home. I cannot describe the peace and comfort that is felt knowing that there are many spirits that protect and watch over you as you visit this beautiful place.

The area is also an increasing popular tourism location for the U.S. National Park Service. Our concern is a site in the park where National Park Service and concessionaire construction have disturbed cultural remains. The impact is of two kinds ~ disturbance on the surface and disturbance well below the soil. Fortunately, when the volcano blew in 1912, it provided a protective layer of ash to the land.

There are buildings that have been erected on piers that are grounded in the soil no deeper than the top portion of volcanic ash. However, the erection of fences, leachfield construction and installation of underground utilities have been more destructive.

The most destructive project, done without consultation with my people or with archaeological professionals, was the installation of an underground utility system through prehistoric gravesites by the National Park Service. As one report stated, "some remains were accidentally removed by backhoe" during the construction and addition of utilities.

Mr. Chairman, our organization as well as our tribal councils and Native corporations have invited and participated in discussions with the National Park Service and federal administration to relocate the lodge and camp to an identified location of less impact to our ancestors. The National Park Service agrees that this new location would halt the ongoing damage and preserve the rich cultural heritage of this area.

The concessionaire believes the lodge should stay where it is. It is an outdated site of thirty years with diesel seeping into the ground and corrupting the record of thousands of years of life on these lands. We have lobbied our congressional delegation for support to provide the necessary funding for the National Park Service to relocate the lodge and other quarters. However, we were firmly denied by Congress. Currently, federal agencies are under no obligation to protect cultural or sacred sites, especially if it is on public lands. Part III, Article 12 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states (I only quote part of it), "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites...". Article 13 says that, "States shall take effective measures in conjunction with the indigenous peoples concerned, to ensure that indigenous sacred places, including burial sites be preserved, respected and protected".

Mr. Chairman, we have approached our government for help and now seek the assistance of the Permanent Forum and its distinguished members. I join several of my indigenous brothers and sisters in asking that an effective advocacy or resource be established so that Native people and Native organizations may utilize the Permanent Forum as a means to preserve the human rights and protect the remains and resting places of our ancestors just as they continue to watch over us.

Thank you for this opportunity.