



# Gwich'in Steering Committee

---

60 Hall Street · Fairbanks, Alaska 99701 · Office: (907)458-8264 · Fax: (907)457-8265

*"In no case may a people be deprived of their own means of subsistence."*  
International Covenants on Human Rights

Gwich'in Steering Committee Youth Council  
Statement for EMRIP Regional Meeting – North America  
June 25, 2021

"We, as Gwich'in youth, believe that the power of our ancestors runs strong in our blood. We have to work and get together to support our development of Gwich'in skills, knowledge and values. Our growing minds need positivity and support for our growth. We need to learn how to reach out to our resources. We live between two forever-changing worlds, and we need to find our own voice and have it be heard."

The Gwich'in Nation, situated in Alaska, the Yukon and Northwest Territories, has been striving to protect the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge which is deeply connected to the Gwich'in way of life. Our elders formed the Gwich'in Steering Committee in the 1980s to protect our lands and our way of life. We are joining now to have our voice heard.

In 2017, the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge was opened to oil and gas development. In January 2021, leases were sold to this sacred land. And although the Biden Administration has halted development in the Arctic, we are continuing to seek permanent protections for "Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit" (The Sacred Place Where Life Begins).

The Gwich'in believe youth are one of the most powerful resources and we are dedicated to sharing our story to protect our way of life. We want to teach the world in a good way about why we say no to oil. Drilling in the Coastal Plain puts the future of the Porcupine Caribou Herd at risk. The herd travel as much 3,000 miles in a year but rely on the Coastal Plain to birth and nurse their young. This is the only safe place they can raise their calves. Any impact to this land will impact the herd. Any impact to this land will impact the Gwich'in.

We are dependent on the caribou and this land for so much: for food, clothing, subsistence. We have cared for this land because it is part of us. For some, caribou are just one part of the ecosystem. But, to us, caribou are who we are. They are how we see this world. We have lived here since time immemorial and the caribou are part of that history.

Beyond the serious threats to the caribou, development on our land threatens many other rights – rights that are enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Development threatens our right to culture; our right to health; our rights to clean environment, water, and air; our right to be free from violence which often accompanies extractive industries and threatens Indigenous women and youth. We have not consented to this exploration, sale, or development and we call on the international community to support us as we ask for our rights to be respected. We want to ensure that this land is here for us, for the next generation, for seven generations ahead.

Over the last year, we have worked in coalitions to convince many others that the Coastal Plain deserves protecting. The lease sale brought in less than one percent of projected revenue. All major U.S. banks have refused to fund drilling in the arctic. And insurers are coming out and saying they won't insure this type of work. But the U.S. Government has not yet restored permanent protections. Until that is done, we cannot rest.

Gwich'in will stand together and safeguard our vision of the future and ensure its delivery into the world through us, the Gwich'in youth, with guidance from our Elders and Vit'eegwigwaach'yaa this will come to pass.