

Statement of Inez Webb  
Curyung Tribal Council Representative  
to the  
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues  
1<sup>st</sup> Annual Session  
13 – 24 May 2002  
New York, United States of America



Thank you:

My name is Inez Webb. I am Aleut from the village of Dillingham in Southwest Alaska. I represent the Curyung Tribal Council, the tribal entity for the Native people of the Dillingham area. I will speak about subsistence and its importance to my people and our way of life.

Subsistence in Alaska has many meanings, as varied as the mix of people that call Alaska home. To many it can mean the act of gathering food from the environment, as opposed to a trip to the local supermarket or "big box" store.

Subsistence is often referred to as an "economy" in sparsely populated regions of Alaska where cash jobs are few and unemployment rates are high. The "industry" is hunting and gathering food necessary for survival that would otherwise be purchased from a store with wages from a cash-paying job.

To me subsistence is spiritual. Not the put-on Sunday spirituality of ceremony, or some mystical ethereal sense, though it encompasses all that. It is the spirit of sharing in times of plenty and in times of hardship. Sharing knowledge among family and friends, adult and child. Subsistence is a morality of inclusion defining a proper behavior of sharing. Sharing laughter and sorrow, work and reward, a connection within the group binding all together. The celebration of life and death goes on, from day to day, intertwined with hunting, gathering, and sharing. In a very real, practical, and useful sense, subsistence is spiritual.

Subsistence is not a detachable part of Native existence, but rather the heart of it. Although some language and history is lost, there is resurgence among Native youth to preserve our way of life. For many who exist within the urban population, oblivious to hunting and gathering activities, subsistence can appear as a quaint but largely irrelevant piece of indigenous life. But among the indigenous people, the Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit, Yupik, Eyak, Athabaskan, Aleut, Alutiiq, or Inupiaq, it is the deep cultural root feeding the meaning of life itself. Not an activity, diversion, economy, right or issue, but the very meaning of life itself.

The subsistence lifestyle is essential to the spiritual health and well being of the Alaska Native indigenous people. Today the right of Alaska Natives to continue their subsistence lifestyle is at risk. There are enormous, political and economic pressures at work as the people of the state of Alaska debate whether the "right to subsist" has a constitutional or legal basis. The inability of the State of Alaska to resolve the issues surrounding the right of Alaska Native Indigenous peoples to continue to hunt and fish in a traditional manner has created a political impasse in my state.

I would ask that this body commit to monitoring the subsistence debate in Alaska. I ask that this organization support through resolution the right of the Indigenous peoples of Alaska to continue to hunt and fish in a traditional manner. I ask that this organization write to the Alaskan congressional representatives and let them know that others in the world are watching.

I will probably only have the opportunity to speak before this esteemed body once in my life but I am not here alone; I am speaking on behalf of my family, my children, my neighbors, my tribal organization, and every other Alaska Native. I ask you to remember us and to speak out in our behalf. "Subsistence is a human right."

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views.