

Indigenous youth take global stage in Madrid to voice climate change worries

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Nanieezh Peter (left) and Quannah Chasing Horse Potts (right) took part in a rally outside the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Fairbanks in October 2019. The two successfully lobbied Alaska Native leadership to declare a climate change emergency during the convention. Photo by: Emily Schwing/The World

Young people are leading protests. They are joining with people around the world. They are talking about climate change.

Climate change means the Earth is warmer. Scientists think that it is because of the fuel that people use. People burn these fuels to make energy. Many things from cars to electric lights run on this energy.

Burning the fuels creates greenhouse gases. The gases become trapped in the air above. They store heat, making the world hotter. Scientists call this global warming.

A group of young Indigenous, or Native, people from around the world went to a climate meeting. It was held in December by the United Nations. It is called the U.N. for short. The United Nations is a group that helps countries work together.

Young people also were at a meeting of the Alaska Federation of Natives. It was in October.

Taking Steps To Save Our Future

Nanieezh Peter is 15 years old. She said they see that leaders are not taking the "steps to save our future." So young people have to do it, she said.

Nanieezh and her friend, Quannah Chasing Horse Potts, are both Alaska Native. Quannah is 17 years old. They got leaders to declare a climate change emergency in Alaska. An emergency means the state will do some things differently. New laws could come from it.

In the past, leaders have not listened to Indigenous people. For many years, they were forced to give up their traditions and sometimes their homes. Those who spoke out were often punished. Their grandchildren are speaking out now.

Ben Charles is also Alaska Native. He said young people are no longer afraid to speak up.

Charles will be at the U.N. climate meeting. It is in Spain. He will help people to understand Inuit plans. Inuit are among several groups of Indigenous people at the meeting.

Other Views

Speaking out sometimes brings up other views.

Crawford Patkotak works for the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation. He said new laws could cause problems in Alaska. It could hurt Indigenous people. Some of them make money when oil sells. Oil is a fossil fuel.

There are not many jobs in parts of Alaska.

The right balance is needed, Patkotak said. They need to protect their people, he said. Still, they do not need laws that would limit using their own oil, he said.

Nanieezh said that they want to protect Indigenous rights.