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Ada E. Deer, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs and Joann Sebastian Morris, Director, Office of Indian Education programs attended the inaugural meeting establishing the Arctic Council in Ottawa, Canada on September 19, 1996.

"The Arctic is a particularly fragile ecosystem, and pollutants from elsewhere have entered the food chain in Alaska and acid rain falls on the native people," Ms. Deer said. "The Alaska Natives are very concerned about their health and the environment. The Alaska Natives depend on a subsistence system of hunting and fishing as a means to sustain livelihood and are therefore particularly vulnerable to environmental threats.

Ms. Deer likened the risk to Alaska Natives to those of the Miccosukee Tribe in Florida who depend on subsistence in the Everglades; quoting their Chairman, Billy Cypress who observed, "the snakes are dying, the turtles are dying, are we next?" Clearly we must take action in the Arctic today to avoid the near catastrophe that occurred in the Everglades ecosystem," Ms. Deer said.

The Arctic Council will provide a mechanism for addressing the common concerns and challenges faced by the governments that have land within the 60' Latitude, including the United States, primarily Alaska, and the people of the Arctic. 'The Council will develop rules of procedure, adopt terms of reference for a sustainable development program as a basis for collaborative projects, and ensure effective transition of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) into the Arctic Council, to be completed at the time of the 1997 AEPS Ministerial meeting in Norway.

Indigenous peoples of the Arctic have been included in the establishment of this new intergovernmental forum as an important milestone in a commitment to enhance cooperation in the circumpolar North. This inaugural meeting was attended by the leaders and senior representatives of three international Arctic indigenous organizations - the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Saami Council, and the Association of Indigenous Minorities of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation, as Permanent Participants in the Council. Also in attendance were senior representatives from countries with populations within the 60' Latitude, including the United States.

The Arctic Council Declaration was signed by the foreign ministers and senior representatives of Canada, Denmark on their behalf and for Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. Undersecretary Timothy Wirth, of the Department of State represented the United States, signing the Declaration.

“Attendance at this meeting by affect Arctic countries and their indigenous peoples is a giant step forward in the preservation of this very fragile environment," Ms. Deer said. "It will be-through joint efforts and international cooperation that the culture and lifestyle of the Alaska Natives will be preserved. It is imperative that the United States continue to take part in this Council and remain an active player."