Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Fifty American Indian students in Bureau of Indian Affairs high schools carne to Washington, D. C. last week and discussed "What is being done to preserve nature?", "How can smoke from sawmills and paper mills be prevented?" and "How can natural resources be used without creating pollution?"

The occasion was an environmental awareness forum for key Bureau of Indian Affairs high school students. They met to help Bureau of Indian Affairs educators determine what should be included in the environmental awareness curriculum, now a part of the Bureau school system. I represented were Eskimos, Aleuts, and American Indians from 23 tribes.

Commissioner Louis R, Bruce addressed the visiting school students reminding them that "Environmental awareness is an area in which we American Indian people are more concerned than others some of the last we once owned, this is our land. We still call it ours. And we hope people will keep it as it is now.

The group met for five days beginning May 10. During that time they heard the Commissioner, Wilma Victor, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, Ed Coate, Pre Eident ' s Council on Environmental Quality, and James E. Hawkins, Director of Education for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, relate their education to the world around them.

The students toured Theodore Roosevelt Island Environmental Study Area in the middle of the Potomac River across from the Nation’s Capital. Their guide pointed out that the Anacostin Indians who inhabited the island used fire to clear trees, and that even today fire can sometimes be effective in maintaining the balance of nature in wooded areas.

He indicated other ways in which man had changed the environment, sometimes improving it, other times disturbing it. Early settlers to the New World, he said, brought English ivy. On Theodore Roosevelt Island it is choking native undergrowth of greater value to the ecology.

An early inhabitant of the island dammed the Potomac on the Virginia side of the island with a causeway and so slowed the water that it became a lake where malaria bred. Malaria drove him from the island.

The Indian pupils posed questions to a representative of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, and to Bureau of Indian Affairs resource specialists.

Ideas discussed included: Measures may have to be taken to force industry to decide ten years in advance where to place an industrial plant; by 1975 the pollution problem may be settled.

They also learned that grass doesn't know a buffalo from a horse steer, or prairie dog; that if grass is constantly chewed or stomped off it is replaced by a more vigorous species. If that is also destroyed, weeds and sagebrush may follow. This is the overgrazing cycle that has taken place on some Indian reservations.

The pupils were urged to remember that in order to keep a good grass cover on the land they must

"take half and leave half of the current year's growth”. A Bureau of Indian Affairs spokesman said that sometimes brush must be removed and the land reseeded into grass in order to get vegetation back on the land.

They learned that there are a dozen major forests on Indian reservations with a timber cut of 25 million board feet per year. First land on Indian reservations includes 13 million acres, 51/2 million of which is in commercial use.

One of the summary speakers, a student, asked that we "Don't litter for just one day ... and then for another day, because if nothing is done about pollution, in five years water will have to be rationed."

The Indian youngsters in grades 9, 10, 11, are taking back ideas gleaned from their forum in Washington D.C. to their schools, t10 provide background in environmental awareness the year ahead.

This forum ended a series of teacher workshops in environmental awareness throughout Indian county and in Washington, D. C. It will be followed by the presentation of environmental awareness awards in ceremonies that will conclude the school year. Indian school boards for Bureau of Indian Affairs schools will select projects to receive the awards.