

Alaskan activist recounts battle to protect land, native ways

Former fisherman's efforts stem from Exxon oil spill

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Dune Lankard, from Alaska's Copper River Delta, named one of Time magazine's "Heroes of the Planet," gave a talk at North Idaho College on Tuesday. He was a commercial fisherman in Prince William Sound when the Exxon Valdez crash spilled 11 million gallons of oil.

Dune Lankard was a commercial fisherman in Prince William Sound when the Exxon Valdez spilled millions of gallons of oil in March 1989.

A native Athabaskan Eyak of the Eagle Clan from Alaska's Copper River Delta, Lankard was spurred to activism that day, to protect the rights of native peoples and preserve the land.

"That was the day that the water died and something inside me came to life," Lankard told about 100 people at North Idaho College Tuesday. "When the spill happened, I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to live up to my Eyak name, which is Jamachakih, which

means the little bird that screams really loud and won't shut up."

Lankard spoke as part of a Human Rights Education Institute series examining the impact of globalization on human rights. This segment of the program asks people to consider the impact of environmental threats on human rights.

Following the Valdez spill, Lankard said, native governments made a move to develop land in the spill zone, which would have led to the clear-cutting of millions of acres. Lankard ended up fighting his own people to protest the plan, embarking upon a long legal battle to put the question of preservation versus development to a vote of native people.

Some 49 law firms turned him down, so he appealed to law schools, who loaned him student interns. He read reams of legal documents and finally filed a lawsuit in 1992. He lost, but appealed to Alaska's Supreme Court, which eventually ruled in his favor.

"All I was in the courtroom for was to allow a vote of the shareholders to decide the fate of their forest," he said. "So they decided if it was going to be clear-cut or they decided whether it was going to be preserved for the rest of time.

"I wanted to see habitat protection because I believed if we could save the habitat, we have preserved the fish, we have preserved the traditional way of life," he said. "Therefore the traditional people could keep doing what we've done for thousands of years."

In the first vote, 87 percent voted in favor of conservation. The vote was repeated 13 times, with 13 native corporations, representing different tribes. The result was the preservation of 765,000 acres of land in the spill zone, he said to applause.

"All I have ever tried to do is keep it the same ... and I'm called a radical?" he asked. "I don't think so."

Now Lankard is setting his sights on preserving the 17 million acres of the Copper River Delta and the 5.5 million acres of Prince William Sound.

“We have the ability to change the way things are happening on this planet,” he said.
“And the only thing is, we can’t do it alone. We need each other. We need to figure out how to network. We need to collaborate.”

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