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Dune Lankard – Hero of the Planet

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COEUR D'ALENE, Idaho – Dune Lankard is an Athabaskan Eyak of the Eagle Clan who resides in Cordova when he isn't traveling around the world to share the remarkable story of his work to preserve and protect the natural resources of his homeland.

He had been a commercial fisherman before the 11 million gallons of oil spilled from the Exxon Valdez in 1989 into Prince William Sound. It's a day he refers to as "the day the water died." Life changed dramatically after that day and Dune did what he could to preserve and protect what was left of the salmon and other natural resources.

Dune recently shared his story at [North Idaho College](#) in a presentation organized by the [Human Rights Education Institute](#) at the college. A sizeable crowd of students and townspeople gathered to hear a presentation and response panel.

He told the history of the Eyak people who broke away from the Interior Athabaskan people about 3500 years ago and moved to the coast in the Gulf of Alaska and essentially became fishermen rather than dependent on caribou and other land animals.

The oil spill made him reflect on his life and he felt he was here for a greater purpose. "For me it was all about the land, and it was about the ocean, and it was about the salmon and the seals and the bears and the eagles. I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to live up to my Eyak name, Jamachakih, which means the little bird that screams really loud and won't shut up," he laughed. Thus began a life to fight for protection of these resources and to protect the forests from being clear-cut, sometimes in opposition to other Native people, but with the idea in mind of protecting the lands and in turn providing for the needs of the fish.

Realizing he needed legal representation, he began visiting law firms. He met with 49 and was turned down every time. He then began reading law books with the idea of representing himself in order to block some of the clear cutting he felt was harmful. Lengthy legal battles ensued. Before he was finished, the Alaska Supreme Court ended up hearing his case and ruling in his favor.

"I believed if we could save the habitat we could preserve the fish and could preserve the traditional way of life. Traditional people could keep doing what we've done for thousands of years." Thirteen Native corporations representing different tribes voted in favor of conservation. That resulted in the preservation of 765,000 acres of land adjoining the area of the spill.

“The reason I believe I was able to continue this work was because of my belief in myself,” he said. That belief has continued his success in subsequent endeavors with many more planned.

Dune spoke about the millions invested by the government which essentially proved that oil and water don't mix and how that money could have been better spent. He talked of how the herring still haven't returned in sizeable numbers, but received word \$6.8 million was now available for herring restoration. “If we can restore the herring, all the impacted species will recover because that was their main food source.”

He spoke of global warming, how glaciers are receding in Alaska and how that is affecting natural resources. He sees icebergs the size of aircraft carriers breaking off glaciers and going by as he fishes. He said that 50 percent of ocean currents are not working and fears that in 50 to 100 years salmon could disappear.

Dune encouraged people to get involved. “We each need to look in the mirror and be that change. We have the wisdom, the experience, the knowledge and the ability to change the way that things are happening on this planet. We can't do it alone, we need each other.”

Responding to a question about health effects resulting from the oil spill, Dune spoke of the change in lifestyle, essentially away from the former subsistence to shopping in stores and eating fast food. He said diabetes was very low when Alaska Natives had a subsistence lifestyle, “but now that rate is starting to climb.”

Dune is co-founder of RED Oil Network (Resisting Environmental Degradation of Indigenous Lands), is on the Eyak Traditional Elders Council, and founder of both the Eyak Preservation Council and Native Conservancy Land Trust. He travels extensively, speaking on activism, indigenous rights, why conservation based economies are the future, and the lessons and impacts of the Exxon Valdez disaster.

Because of his extensive work, Time Magazine named him one of its “Heroes of the Planet.”