

**OPENING TRIBAL COMMENTS REGARDING
TRIBAL FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT**

TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

JUNE 3, 2003

WASHINGTON D.C.

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It is a great pleasure to appear before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs today to present an overview perspective on Tribal Fish and Wildlife Management. I am honored to have been asked to speak to you on behalf of tribes across the country, all of which have long held traditions, beliefs and needs associated with a healthy environment and a vast variety of natural resources.

Wise natural resource management is very important to the Indian people. Now, as always, the tribes depend on these resources to sustain our economies, our cultures and our very existence. The Creator has provided these resources for these purposes, whether they be animal, plant, mineral or water.

Tribes know the bountifulness of these resources that existed in years past, and are keenly aware of their diminished status today. We are aware of the need for effective management to protect and restore these resources. And we hope Congress is aware that the ability of the tribes to continue traditional harvests of these resources is integral to that management, as well as to the federal government's trust responsibility to the tribes.

We work hard to sustain natural resources. Whether it's the salmon of the Pacific, the cedars and elk of my home land, the sea otters and caribou of Alaska, the bison of the great plains or the walleye, wild rice and sapwoods of the Great Lakes, tribes are good natural resource managers because we understand how important these living things are to all people, Indian and non-Indian, and we understand the meaning of the responsibility and accountability we all share in protecting them.

As people who have fought and sacrificed much to protect this country, we also realize that the bounds of the greatness of the United States are forever linked to the willingness of the nation to keep its word and abide by its own laws. Tribal rights are not a thing of the past, but a living

mandate in the doctrine that maintains this nation in the course of history. Tribes have rights because we have retained those rights under the dictates of our heritage and in the pages of the United States Constitution. Among these rights are full access to the traditional gifts of nature, the ability to live in dignity with our fellow man and the liberty to realize both the challenges and the benefits of our inheritance. We ask no exclusive quarter. We take no special accommodation. We do, however, demand the freedom to exercise our legacies and the wherewithal to exercise our inherent rights as people with legitimate, functioning governments, and with rights to self-determination. We will never recognize any court decision or presidential decree intended to deprive us of these things. Our government-to-government relationship is most directly with the Congress. That is the law of the nation. We turn to you to support our rights, our treaties and our existence.

For the sake of all tribes, for the sake of good national conscience and for the sake of all living things, we support the development of fish and wildlife legislation which would more fully embrace our view of tribal resource management on a government-to-government basis. This legislation has the potential of leading to a better understanding by all the citizens of the United States of tribal resource management. Because everyone, everywhere, depends on natural resources for happiness and survival—no matter who they are or what they do in their every day lives—we ask you to support our right to exist, as Indian people, with an inalienable right to the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

As you know, the tribes have endured a long history of being misunderstood by many non-Indian residents of this continent. It is a history of theft, repression and broken treaties. Unfortunately, it sometimes seems there has been little progress in turning the tide on this infection of the American spirit. But part of our message is that there has, in fact, been progress by tribes and tribal/non-tribal governmental partnerships across the country, earned with foresight and fortitude. These relationships do suffer occasional setbacks and they do require vigilance and congressional support to succeed. But succeed we will. Our achievements and signs of progress will constitute part of the message from the tribes you will hear over the next few days. We will share our hopes, and aspirations for continued progress. But we will also share our challenges, problems and limitations to our opportunities. We will, as always, be truthful with you, and hope that our honesty will continue to earn your respect and support.

All we ask for is that which is already ours—those rights and resources which we have always retained. We ask for due consideration in the face of expanding population, for the legal and financial means to pursue our natural destinies and for recognition of the sovereign status which has been formally recognized, but frequently ignored. We ask for an end to such ignorance and for your commitment toward that end. We ask for your support in helping us achieve our potential as Indian nations, forging forward at the commencement of the 21st century.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts with you over the next few days, and wish to express our heartfelt regard for Senators Campbell and Inouye, and others who have supported these hearings.