



Alaskan students use their language and culture skills to raise awareness about the effects of climate change.

Ground Zero

By Carissa Landes and Megan Haller, Students at West Anchorage High School

Students at West Anchorage High School in Alaska use their Russian language and cultural skills to protect the environment and forge lasting friendships with peers in Anadyr, Russia.

In fall 2007, West Anchorage High School students wrote a proposal to the National Park Service. The project, named Ground Zero, outlined a three-year plan of cultural and informational exchanges centered on raising awareness about climate change in the Arctic Beringia region, the area between the Russian region of Chukotka and Alaska. Russian and Alaskan students had noticed severe changes in their common Beringian climate. The

students from both countries conducted research and interviews in preparation for their two-week long group effort in Anadyr.

Alaskan students interviewed people exceptionally informed on the political, scientific, and sociological aspects of arctic climate change such as environmental scientists, ecologists, native elders, and the commissioner of the environment in Alaska. The interviews with the Anadyr and Anchorage mayors, Andrei Shchegolkov and Mark Begich, led to the discovery that these local leaders held coinciding viewpoints on environmental policy. Both strongly believe in taking action rather than merely discussing the issue and

writing reports. The mayors wish to see results from their citizens' direct action to improve the environment.

The Chukotkan students also conducted interviews with longtime citizens about the changing climate of Anadyr. The permafrost on the tundra is melting at a considerable rate, and ice caves below ground are now caving in, destroying infrastructures built above. Although the warming temperatures may make everyday life more comfortable for the citizens, it remains a major environmental concern.

The Alaskan students traveled to Anadyr to collaborate with their Russian peers. The students exchanged interviews and discussed problems

specific to their environments, such as melting permafrost and changing migration patterns of animals crucial to a subsistence lifestyle. Using their language skills, the students pooled their research to create an informative presentation in Russian and English on Arctic climate change for the 2008 Beringia Days Conference in Fairbanks.

During their trip to Anadyr, students participated in an ongoing cultural exchange. The Alaskans learned Chukchi, Yupik, and traditional Russian dancing. Master artists taught Alaskan students the art of crafting sun necklaces out of fur, leather, and beads. The Russian students showed the Alaskans their town and explained

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the history of various landmarks. The visiting students gave a presentation on Anchorage and West Anchorage High School. Students also went on two excursions to the local museum, where they learned about the culture and history of Chukotka. The students from Alaska were also fortunate enough to experience the festivities of Russian Independence Day. During the celebration, the entire Ground Zero group danced in the cultural square. Over the two-week trip, students learned much about each other's culture and way of life, furthering a sense of international cooperation and friendship.

As a group, the students dedicated

their time to improving the environment. Both groups took the first step by cleaning up their local areas. The Chukotkan students improved local parks, and the Alaskan students cleaned up creeks in the Anchorage area. At West Anchorage High School, members of Ground Zero are also a part of the youth organization Green Team, Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, and Anchorage Waterways Council. Ground Zero participants pledged to volunteer a minimum of five hours of environmental community service, and they agreed to take other actions such as recycling, reducing energy consumption, and exploring vegetarianism. A more challenging

pledge aims to create cleaner energy laws and policies by writing to government officials.

Ground Zero fosters an informational exchange and lasting international friendships. The 2008 Beringia Days Conference in Fairbanks will further improve the shared environment. The level of commitment of each participant will lead to the project's success, and Ground Zero stands to inform the world about the changes occurring in the Arctic climate while protecting the environment. 