

Yukon News

Inuvik youth summit calls for climate action

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Robin Urquhart already knew plenty of climate-change trivia before he attended a youth summit on the warming world held in Inuvik this week.

But the 27-year-old Whitehorse resident found himself captivated at the meeting by the stories of Inuit in attendance who knew hunters who had drowned when their snowmobiles crashed through prematurely thawed sea ice.

"It was mind blowing," he said. "It really brought it home."

The big challenge now faced by Urquhart and the rest of the 60 youth from all corners of Canada who attended the meeting is to see whether their enthusiasm rubs off on others.

Time is of the essence. Negotiations between the world's richest countries to strike an agreement that will be the sequel to the Kyoto Accord, which expires in 2012, are expected to wrap up in Copenhagen in December.

Canada and several other G8 countries have already pledged to reduce emissions by mid-century by a total of 80 per cent. This would match the European Union's existing commitments to prevent global temperatures from rising 2C° above pre-industrial levels.

But Environment Minister Jim Prentice has drawn criticism for saying that Canada is only able to reduce its own emissions by 60 to 70 per cent.

Urquhart, who is completing his master's degree in Environmental Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia, sees plenty of small ways to curb emissions. For example, Inuvik has a bylaw that prohibits residents from leaving their vehicles idling unattended, but the rule is rarely enforced, he said.

And he's hopeful that Canadian politicians may be able to put aside partisanship on the climate-change issue. He spent part of Thursday chatting with Dennis Bevington, the Northwest Territory's NDP Member of Parliament, and left with hope that perhaps the MPs from Canada's three territories - Yukon's Liberal Larry Bagnell and Nunavut's Conservative Leona Aglukkaq - could hold a joint press conference to speak about how climate change is altering Canada's North.

"Inaction is no longer an option. We really need to do something about this," said Urquhart.

"This transcends politics."

Meghan Hajash, a 25-year-old from Teslin, believes artwork could help ramp up public support for climate-change initiatives.

She put to use skills built up from her art education program at Concordia University by organizing work on a mural at the Inuvik meeting. She hopes the mural will later be on display at the Yukon Arts Centre, where she interned this summer.

"I think it will mobilize people," she said.

Why should people care what youth think about climate change? Because they're the ones who will have to live with the dramatic changes produced by greenhouse gas emissions.

"It's going to affect our way of life," she said.

Melting permafrost has already caused buildings to teeter and roads to buckle in northern Quebec. But many of the changes are gradual.

Hajash likens our lot to that of a frog sitting in a pot of water that's slowly allowed to boil: the frog doesn't know it's boiling to death.

The meeting is organized by a cluster of First Nation organizations and environmental groups: the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council International, Climate Action Network Canada, the Pembina Institute and Ecology North.

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